

CHAPTER 02

WHO AM I?

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CHAPTER 02

WHO AM I?

Former President Lyndon Johnson once described himself as “a free man, an American, a United States Senator, a Democrat, a liberal, a conservative, a Texan, a taxpayer, a rancher, and not as young as I used to be nor as old as I expect to be” (cited in [Gergen, 1971](#)). Although not everyone thinks of themselves in such varied terms, everyone has a wealth of self-knowledge. They have ideas about their physical qualities and abilities, their social roles, their opinions, talents, and personality traits, and more. Collectively, these ideas comprise the **ME**.

In this chapter, we will examine the nature of the **ME**. Here we will be concerned with understanding how people answer the question “Who am I?” Our analysis will begin by reviewing the work of William James, who wrote extensively on the topic in Chapter 10 of his 1890 publication *The Principles of Psychology*. We will see that many of the ideas William James discussed over 100 years ago still apply today. At the same time, we will also see that recent research has extended and refined many of James’s ideas.

The second section of this chapter examines the affective and motivational aspects of the self. James devoted considerable attention to understanding the nature of self-feelings and the behaviors these feelings evoke. We will discuss his ideas and also examine recent research that has looked at the relation between various self-views (e.g., who you think you should be) and self-feelings.

The third section examines group differences in the self-concept. Here you will learn about cultural and gender differences in the way people answer the question “Who am I?” Afterward, we will examine factors that activate different self-views. People think of themselves in many ways, but only some of these self-views are active at any given time. In the final section of this chapter, you will learn about various situational factors that activate one or another of our self-views.

One more thing before begin. The study of the **ME** can be undertaken at several levels of analysis. First, we can talk about the **self-concept**, which includes all of the characteristic ways a person thinks of herself. For example, a person might say “I am a student” or “I am carefree.” Various names have been given to these specific characterizations, including self-conceptions, self-views, self-images, and self-descriptions. These terms are essentially interchangeable, as all refer to specific ideas people have about “who they are”.

We can also take a broader view and examine various **identities**, such as one’s gender identity, racial identity, or ethnic identity. These identities include a variety of organized thoughts about who we are, as well as their importance to us. For example, gender identity might include not only one’s sexual orientation, but also how central gender is to the person’s self-definition and the way the person evaluates his gender identity.

Finally, we can speak about **identity** in an even broader sense. Here we are referring to our ideas about who we are as a person. When used in this way, identity refers not to any specific thoughts or ideas in any one area or domain, but to an integrated

understanding of ourselves in general.

I. Who am I?

Before you read more about the nature of the **ME**, take a moment to reflect on how you think about yourself by completing the questionnaire shown in Table 2.1. Feel free to include aspects of your personality, background, physical characteristics, hobbies, things you own, people you are close to, and so forth. In short, anything that would help another person know what you are like.

Table 2.1. Who am I?

Imagine you want someone to know what you are really like. You can tell this person 20 things about yourself (e.g., your personality, background, preferences, physical characteristics). What would you tell them?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____
16. _____
17. _____
18. _____
19. _____
20. _____

A. **Three Components of the Empirical Self (or ME)**

William James used the term “the empirical self” to refer to all of the various ways people answer the question “Who am I?” His analysis is very broad.

The Empirical Self of each of us is all that he is tempted to call by the name of me. But it is clear that between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves. Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are, and arouse the same feelings and the same acts of reprisal if attacked. (p. 291)¹

James went on to group the various components of the empirical self into three subcategories: (a) the material self, (b) the social self, and (c) the spiritual self.

1. **Material self**

The material self refers to tangible objects, people, or places that carry the designation my or mine. Two subclasses of the material self can be distinguished: The bodily self and the extracorporeal (beyond the body) self. Rosenberg (1979) has referred to the extracorporeal self as the extended self, and we will adopt this terminology throughout the book.

The bodily component of the material self requires little explanation. A person speaks of my arms or my legs. These entities are clearly an intimate part of who we are. But our sense of self is not limited to our bodies. It includes other people (my children), pets (my dog), possessions (my car), places (my home town), and the products of our labors (my painting).

It is not the physical entities themselves, however, that comprise the material self. Rather, it is our psychological ownership of them (Scheibe, 1985). For example, a person may have a favorite chair she likes to sit in. The chair itself is not part of the self. Instead, it is the sense of appropriation represented by the phrase “my favorite chair.” This is what we mean when we talk about the extended self. It includes all of the people, places, and things that we regard as “ours.”

It is interesting to consider why James argued for such a sweeping definition of self. Prior to the time he wrote his book, psychological research on self was restricted to the physical self. Recall from Chapter 1 that the introspectionists had people report what they were thinking and feeling when exposed to various stimuli. Some of these reports concerned an awareness of one’s bodily states. For example, a person might report that “my arms feel heavy” or “my skin feels warm.” These are aspects of self. But James wanted to expand the study of self to include nonphysical aspects of the person. He believed that the self was fluid and encompassed more than our physical bodies.

¹ I will quote liberally from James throughout this chapter. It should be noted, however, that James always uses the male personal pronoun “he,” a practice inconsistent with contemporary standards. In this instance, I judged fidelity to be more important than political correctness, and have reproduced his words without editing them.

Given this fluidity, how can we tell whether an entity is part of the self? James believed we could make this determination by examining our emotional investment in the entity. If we respond in an emotional way when the entity is praised or attacked, the entity is likely to be part of the self.

In its widest possible sense, ... a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down,—not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all. (pp. 291-292)

Another way to determine whether something is part of the extended self is to see how we act towards it. If we lavish attention on the entity and labor to enhance or maintain it, we can infer that the entity is part of the self.

[All of the components of the material self] are the objects of instinctive preferences coupled with the most important practical interests of life. We all have a blind impulse to watch over our body, to deck it with clothing of an ornamental sort, to cherish parents, wife and babes, and to find for ourselves a home of our own which we may live in and 'improve.'

An equally instinctive impulse drives us to collect property; and the collections thus made become, with different degrees of intimacy, parts of our empirical selves. The parts of our wealth most intimately ours are those which are saturated with our labor. ... and although it is true that a part of our depression at the loss of possessions is due to our feeling that we must now go without certain goods that we expected the possessions to bring in their train, yet in every case there remains, over and above this, a sense of the shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness, which is a psychological phenomenon by itself. (p. 293)

In addition to underscoring the important role motivation plays in identifying what is self from what is not, James also makes an interesting point here about the nature of things that become part of the self. These possessions, James argued, are not simply valued for what they provide; they are also prized because they become part of us. "Not only the people but the places and things I know enlarge my Self in a sort of metaphoric way", James wrote (p. 308).

A good deal of research supports James's intuitions regarding the close connection between possessions and the self (see [Belk, 1988](#)). First, people spontaneously mention their possessions when asked to describe themselves ([Gordon, 1968](#)). People also amass possessions. Young children, for example, are avid collectors. They have bottle-cap collections, rock collections, shell collections, and so forth. These collections are not simply treasured for their material value (which is often negligible); instead, they represent important aspects of self. The tendency to treat possessions as part of the self continues throughout life, perhaps explaining why so many people have difficulty discarding old clothes or possessions that have long outlived their usefulness.

There seem to be several reasons for this. First, possessions serve a symbolic function; they help people define themselves. The clothes we wear, the cars we drive, and

the manner in which we adorn our homes and offices signal to ourselves (and others) who we think we are and how we wish to be regarded. People may be particularly apt to acquire and exhibit such signs and symbols when their identities are tenuously held or threatened (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). A recent Ph.D., for example, may prominently display his diploma in an attempt to convince himself (and others) that he is the erudite scholar he aspires to be. These functions support Sartre's (1943) claim that people accumulate possessions to enlarge their sense of self.

Possessions also extend the self in time. Most people take steps to ensure that their letters, photographs, possessions, and mementos are distributed to others at the time of their death. Although some of this distribution reflects a desire to allow others to enjoy the utilitarian value of these artifacts, this dispersal also has a symbolic function: People seek immortality by passing their possessions on to the next generation (Unruh, 1983, cited in Belk, 1988).

People's emotional responses to their possessions also attest to their importance to the self. A person who loses a wallet often feels greater anguish over a lost photograph than over any money that is missing. Similarly, many car owners react with extreme anger (and sometimes rage) when their cars are damaged, even when the damage is only slight in physical terms. Finally, many people who lose possessions in a natural disaster go through a grieving process similar to the process people go through when they lose a person they love (McLeod, 1984, cited in Belk, 1988).

Further evidence that possessions become part of the extended self comes from a series of investigations on the "**mere ownership effect**" (Beggan (1992)). In an initial study, participants were shown a variety of inexpensive objects (e.g., a key ring, plastic comb, playing cards). They were then given one object and told it was theirs to keep. Later, participants evaluated their object more favorably than the objects they didn't receive. A follow-up investigation found that this tendency was especially pronounced after participants had previously failed at an unrelated test. These findings suggest that once possessions become part of the self, people imbue them with value and use them to promote feelings of self-worth (see also, Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990).

The tendency to overvalue that which is "ours" even extends to letters of the alphabet. When asked to judge the pleasantness of various letters, people show enhanced liking for the letters that make up their own name, particularly their own initials (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002; Nuttin, 1985, 1987). This effect, has been observed in a variety of cultures (Hoorens & Todorova, 1998; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997), and may even influence important life decisions. In one study, Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones (2002) found that people are more likely to live in cities or choose occupations that match their name or initials. For example, people named Jack are disproportionately likely to live in Jacksonville, Florida, and people named Harvey are disproportionately likely to own a hardware store (see also, Gallucci, 2003; Pelham, Carvallo, DeHart, & Jones, 2003). A follow-up study found that people show greater liking and romantic interest in a person whose name is similar to their own (Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004). Pelham and colleagues have dubbed this tendency "implicit egotism," because people are generally unaware that their preferences are shaped by their liking for their own initials.

2. **Social Self**

James called the second category of the empirical self the social self. The social self refers to how we are regarded and recognized by others. As before, James's analysis was very broad.

... a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. ... But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. (p. 294)

James went on to make an additional point about these social selves. He posited an instinctive drive to be noticed and recognized by others. We affiliate, James argued, not simply because we like company, but because we crave recognition and status.

A man's Social Self is the recognition which he gets from his mates. We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably, by our kind. No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. (p. 293)

Building on James's analysis, modern researchers have proposed that we also possess a **relational self**, the self defined in terms of specific interpersonal relationships. The relational self includes all of the individuals we regard as "ours," such as our parents, siblings, romantic partners, close friends, and colleagues (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006). Evidence that these relationships represent important aspects of self-definition comes from a variety of sources. First, people spontaneously mention others when describing themselves, and include photographs of their family, loved ones, and friends when asked to prepare photographs that reveal something about "who you are" (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Dollinger & Clancy Dollinger, 2003). They also assume that other people share their thoughts and feelings, and sometimes confuse their own traits and attitudes for the traits and attitudes of others (Robbins & Krueger, 2005; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977; Smith & Henry, 1996; Smith, Coats, & Walling, 1999). Third, as we shall see in Chapter 4, people learn about themselves by comparing themselves with others and by seeing themselves reflected in other people's eyes. Finally, people describe themselves in relationship-specific terms. For example, they might say "I'm respectful with my boss" or "playful with my children." These relationship-specific identities are activated whenever we interact with the other person or are reminded of their presence (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996; see also, Baldwin, 1997; Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990).

Research on the relational self underscores that we are different people in different relationships (Roberts & Donahue, 1994). As James noted, sometimes these differences are minor and unimportant; other times they are considerable and consequential.

Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his 'tough' young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club-companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends. From this there results what practically is a division of the man into several selves; and this may be a discordant splitting, as where one is afraid

to let one set of acquaintances know him as he is elsewhere; or it may be a perfectly harmonious division of labor, as where one tender to his children is stern to the soldiers or prisoners under his command. (p. 294)

The tendency to be different “selves” in different relationships can create problems in some situations. This occurs when the same situation is relevant to more than one identity. For example, at a family reunion, one must reconcile the “self with my parents” identity with the “self with my children” identity. In a similar vein, we are surprised when we encounter people we typically see in only one role or situation outside of that usual setting. Students, for example, are often flustered when they see their teachers outside of the classroom (e.g., at a movie, restaurant, or sporting event). They aren’t accustomed to seeing their teachers dressed casually and acting informally.

The multiple nature of the social self raises an important question: Is there a stable, core sense of self that transcends these various social roles? Some theorists have answered this question with an emphatic “no.” They have maintained that the self is comprised entirely of our various social roles, and that there is no real, true, or genuine self that exists apart from these social roles (Gergen, 1982; Sorokin, 1947). Many (if not most) other theorists reject this position as too extreme. While acknowledging that people behave differently in different social settings, these theorists also contend that there is a common sense of self that runs through these various social identities. William James was one adherent of this position. James believed that our social roles are one important aspect of self, but they are neither the sole aspect of self nor the most important.

3. ***Spiritual Self***

The third category in James’s scheme is the spiritual self.² The spiritual self is our inner self or our psychological self. It is comprised of our self-perceived abilities, attitudes, emotions, interests, values, motives, opinions, traits, and wishes. Many aspects of the spiritual self are evaluative. People think of themselves as attractive or unattractive, intelligent or unintelligent, and honest or dishonest.

By the spiritual self ... I mean a man’s inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions. ... These psychic dispositions are the most enduring and intimate part of the self, that which we most verily seem to be. We take a purer self-satisfaction when we think of our ability to argue and discriminate, of our moral sensibility and conscience, of our indomitable will, than when we survey any of our other possessions. (p. 296)

It is interesting to note the close connection James draws between our possessions (which are aspects of the material self) and our emotions, attitudes, and beliefs (which are components of the spiritual self). As Abelson (1986) observed, this similarity is captured in our language. A person is said to have a belief, from the time the belief is first *acquired* to the time it is *discarded* or *lost*. We also say things like “I *inherited* a view” or “I can’t *buy* that!” Finally, we speak of people who have *abandoned* their convictions or *disowned* an earlier position. These terms imply that possessions and attitudes share an underlying conceptual property: they are both owned by the self (see Gilovich, 1991; Heider, 1958 for an

² In this context, spiritual means lacking material substance, not religious or mystical.

elaboration of this view).

Our tendency to treat our opinions as possessions can create interpersonal difficulties. When people find themselves in a disagreement, they often react as if they are being personally attacked, instead of simply acknowledging that different people have different perspectives (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005). In turn, this perception leads them to become belligerent and uncompromising. Mediators are often needed to broker solutions, in part, because they are not *invested* in holding one view or the other.

B. ***Extensions and Refinements of James's Theory***

1. ***The Collective Self***

James wrote at a time when psychology was the exclusive province of highly educated (and, by extension, well-to-do) males of European descent. His analysis is therefore somewhat parochial and narrow in scope. This limitation is apparent in the lack of attention James gave to people's ethnic, religious, and racial identities. These aspects of the **collective self** are of great significance to people, particularly those who occupy a minority status. For example, in America, people place great importance on being Irish, East Indian, or African American. Collective identities also includes various formal and informal group memberships (e.g., people identify themselves as a Democrat or Episcopalian).

Table 2.2 shows that collective identities vary along a number of dimensions (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Phinney, 1990; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). First, we can consider the importance of the identity. For some people, their racial, ethnic, or religious identity virtually defines who they are; for others, these identities are less self-defining and more peripheral. Individuals also differ with respect to identity salience. Some people think frequently about their collective identity, but others do not.

Evaluation is the next dimension, and here there are two subcategories. Private regard refers to the way an individual personally appraises a collective identity; public regard refers to the individual's perception of what others think of his group. For many people, these evaluations diverge. A person might privately hold his group in high regard, but simultaneously recognize that society at large has a more negative perception.

The next dimension is attachment to the group. Some people are highly invested in their group and feel a strong bond with other group members; other people are less invested in the group and do not feel strongly connected to other group members.

Involvement in group activities is the fourth element. Whereas some people immerse themselves in group activities and strive to learn as much as they can about their group's heritage and traditions, other people are less interested in interacting with other group members or learning more about their group's background and customs.

Finally, we can consider the degree to which people think of themselves as being a typical member of their group. This process is known as self-stereotyping (Hogg & Turner, 1987). Some people embrace group stereotypes and view themselves as being a typical group member, whereas others distance themselves from the stereotype and deny that they are characteristic of their group.

Table 2.2. Dimensions of Collective Identities

Dimension	Subcategories	Sample Items
Importance: The degree of importance the person places on being a group member	Importance to Self-Definition	My group is an important part of my self-image
	Identity Saliency	I frequently think of myself as being a member of my group.
Evaluation: The positive or negative attitude a person has toward the group	Private Regard	I am happy to be a member of my group
	Public Regard	I think other people value and admire my group
Attachment: The emotional investment the person feels with the group as a whole and with other group members	Interdependence	My fate is bound up with my group's fate
	Affective Commitment	I feel a very strong bond with other group members
	Interconnection	I feel as though other group members are part of ME
Involvement: The degree to which the person's day-to-day life is influenced by group identity	Social Embeddedness	I seek out other members of my group and often affiliate with other groups members
	Cognitive Immersion	I try to learn more about my group's heritage and traditions
Self-Description: The degree to which the qualities associated with the group are also seen as being descriptive of self		I believe I possess most of the traits and qualities associated with my group

As you might imagine, these various dimensions are not entirely independent. For example, the more important an identity is to us, the more likely we are to feel a strong sense of emotional attachment to other group members and seek opportunities to learn more about our background and heritage.

2. ***Self-Complexity***

Although everyone thinks of themselves in multiple ways, people differ with regard to how many identities they possess. Linville (1985, 1987) coined the term “self-complexity” to refer to such differences. People who think of themselves in many different ways are classified as being high in self-complexity and those who think of themselves in relatively few ways are categorized as being low in self-complexity.

Linville uses a card-sorting task to measure self-complexity. People are given a number of index cards, each containing a trait term or characteristic (e.g., lazy, outgoing, rebellious). They are then asked to group the cards into piles that describe themselves in various settings or relationships. The more groups the person forms and the less overlap there is among groups, the higher the person’s self-complexity score.

Table 2.3 depicts individual differences in self-complexity. The person in the top half of the table is high in self-complexity. This person thinks of himself in many different ways and there is little overlap among the various identities the person has described. The person in the bottom half of the table is low in self-complexity. This person thinks of himself in only a few ways and there is a good deal of overlap.

Table 2.3. Examples of Self-Concepts that are High In Self-Complexity and Low In Self-Complexity. (Source: Linville, 1987, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 663-676).

<u>High Self-Complexity</u>					
<u>With Men</u>	<u>With Family</u>	<u>With Friends</u>	<u>At School</u>	<u>Alone</u>	<u>At Parties</u>
outgoing	emotional	humorous	quiet	individualistic	humorous
playful	playful	relaxed	studious	reflective	playful
reflective	reflective	assertive	organized	industrious	outgoing
mature	mature	outgoing	mature	quiet	sophisticated
emotional	assertive	mature	reserved		affectionate
assertive	humorous	emotional	industrious		competitive
competitive	outgoing	reflective	individualistic		imaginative
relaxed	individualistic	soft-hearted			impulsive
humorous	unconventional	not studious			mature
affectionate		affectionate			
soft-hearted		individualistic			
individualistic					
sophisticated					
<u>Low Self-Complexity</u>					
	<u>With Friends</u>	<u>At School</u>	<u>Alone</u>		
	playful	relaxed	playful		
	relaxed	reserved	relaxed		
	assertive	organized	imaginative		
	individualistic	energetic	impulsive		
		secure	energetic		

Some investigations have found that people who are low in self-complexity experience more extreme emotional reactions to positive and negative events than do people who are high in self-complexity (Linville, 1985, 1987). To illustrate, suppose you are a single-minded lawyer and your entire life revolves around your law practice. When you win a case, you feel ecstatic, but when you lose a case, you feel devastated. Now consider the situation if you think of yourself in many ways (e.g., as a hard-working lawyer, but also as an understanding friend, a loving spouse, a caring parent, and so on). Because you have so many identities, your performance as a lawyer will have less of an impact on how you feel about yourself (see also Dixon & Baumeister, 1991; Niedenthal, Setterlund, & Wherry, 1992; Steele, 1988; Thoits, 1983).

Although multiple identities may generally be healthy, they may also get us into trouble. The problem, as William James noted over a century ago, is that we cannot be all the things we would like to be.

I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well-dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a *bon-vivant*, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher, a philanthropist, statesman, warrior and African explorer, as well as a 'tone-poet' and saint. But the thing is simply impossible. The millionaire's work would run counter to the saint's; the *bon-vivant* and the philanthropist would trip each other up; the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay. (James, 1890, pp. 309-310)

The point here is that each additional identity can be a burden as well as a blessing. Ultimately, it depends on whether these identities fit well with each other. We hear often in modern society about role conflict. Women, for example, are expected to be wage earners, wives, mothers, educators, athletes, chauffeurs, doctors, and more. These multiple social identities may create conflict. Women may also experience friction among their various personal identities. After the birth of a child, they may experience a conflict between a desire to be nurturing and caring versus a desire to be ambitious and competitive. In support of this view, [Settles \(2004\)](#) studied a group of women who were pursuing a career in the sciences. Women who experienced a conflict between their identity as a woman and their identity as a scientist reported more depression, lower self-esteem, and less satisfaction with their lives than did women who did not perceive a conflict between these two identities. Whether more is better, then, is likely to depend on whether the fit among the various identities is good (see also, [Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001](#); [Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993](#); [McConnell et al., 2005](#); [Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002](#); [Woolfolk, Gara, Allen, & Beaver, 2004](#)).

3. ***Self-Concept Certainty and Importance***

The certainty of people's self-knowledge is another facet of the self-concept. We hold some views of ourselves with great certainty. We are absolutely sure we are outgoing, and positive we are not mechanically inclined. Other views of ourselves are ill-defined and subject to equivocation. For example, we're not sure if we're intuitive or not. This issue is important because self-views that are held with great certainty are less likely to change than are self-views about which we are uncertain ([Pelham, 1991a](#); [Swann & Ely, 1984](#)). There is also evidence that the more certain people are of their self-views, the better they feel about themselves ([Baumgardner, 1990](#); [Campbell, 1990](#)).

In addition to considering the certainty of people's self-views, we can also consider their importance. Earlier we noted that people differ with respect to the importance they place on various collective identities. The same is true of our individual identities. Some people care a lot about being athletic, but don't care much about being artistic. Other people show the opposite preference. In general, important identities satisfy six important needs: They (1) promote feelings of self-worth; (2) provide a sense of belonging and connectedness with others; (3) give meaning to our lives; (4) confer a sense of continuity; (5) make us feel efficacious and competent; and (6) bestow a sense of uniqueness that distinguishes us from others ([Vignoles, Chryssochoou, & Breakwell, 2002](#); [Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006](#)).

Important identities are also relevant to our goals and ambitions ([Pelham, 1991](#)). To illustrate, a professional athlete might primarily think of herself in terms of her

athleticism and competitive drive, but an artist might think of herself chiefly in terms of her spontaneity and creativity. These differences influence people's emotional lives, as people show stronger emotional reactions to outcomes that touch important identities than to outcomes that implicate unimportant identities (Brunstein, 1993; James, 1890; Lavallee & Campbell, 1995; Pelham, 1991a).

Differences like these highlight a more general point about the self-concept. It is not simply what people think about themselves that is important; it is also the meaning people give to each identity element (Rosenberg, 1979). It is conceivable, though highly unlikely, that the self-concepts of two individuals could be comprised of exactly the same identities. But their self-concepts would still be different if the two people varied in how certain they were of these identities or in how important these identities were to them.

An appropriate analogy here would be to the relation between the notes of a song and the song's melody. If we rearrange the notes of a melody, we have a very different tune—even though the notes themselves remained unchanged. This idea can be derived from Gestalt principles of perception, which hold that “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” As applied to the self-concept, this principle tells us that in order to understand a person's self-concept, we need to know more than what the individual thinks of when she thinks of herself. We also need to know how these conceptions are related and arranged, and what meaning they hold for the individual.

II. **Self-Feeling, Self-Seeking, and Self-Preservation**

In addition to identifying the contents of the self-concept, William James discussed self-feelings and the motivational aspects of the self (which he called self-seeking and self-preservation). As concerns self-feelings, James believed there are certain emotions that always involve the self as a point of reference. These emotions, such as pride and shame, are distinguished from more general emotions, such as joy, and sadness.

To better understand the distinction between self-feelings and emotions that are not self-relevant, consider the emotions, happiness and pride. Happiness is a general emotion that does not necessarily involve the self as a reference point. For example, one can feel happy sitting in the warm sunshine or watching a toddler eat an ice cream cone. These experiences will not, however, evoke feelings of pride. This is because pride is a self-relevant emotion that arises only when people assume they have brought about a positive outcome or possess a positive characteristic (Brown & Weiner, 1984; Weiner, 1986).

James went on to consider the origins of self-feelings. Although he acknowledged that self-feelings develop with maturation, he believed the capacity to experience self-feelings is innate, and that the emotions themselves are

... direct and elementary endowments of our nature ... each as worthy to be classed as a primitive emotional species as are, for example, rage or pain. (pp. 306-307)

Finally, James believed that people have an innate drive to experience these positive feelings and to avoid experiencing these negative feelings.

We know how little it matters to us whether some man, a man taken at large and in the abstract, prove a failure or succeed in life,—he may be hanged for

aught we care,—but we know the utter momentousness and terribleness of the alternative when the man is the one whose names we ourselves bear. I must not be a failure, is the very loudest of the voices that clamor in each of our breasts: let fail who may, I at least must succeed. ... each of us is animated by a direct feeling of regard for his own pure principle of individual existence. ...Whatever is me is precious; this is me; therefore this is precious; whatever is mine must not fail; this is mine; therefore this must not fail, etc. (p. 318)

Throughout this text, we will refer to this drive as the **self-enhancement motive**. This term refers to the fact that people are motivated to feel good about themselves rather than feel bad about themselves. This emphasis on feelings differs a bit from how other theorists have defined self-enhancement needs. Other theorists have taken the term to mean that people are motivated to *think* of themselves in highly favorable terms (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979; Shrauger, 1975; Swann, 1990). It is certainly the case that in many situations and in many cultures, feelings of self-worth are promoted by thinking of oneself as highly capable or somehow *better* than one's peers. But this is not invariably so. In some situations and in some cultures, feelings of self-worth are promoted by thinking of oneself as ordinary or average, or even *worse* than others (parents, for example, may take pride in thinking their children are smarter and more talented than they themselves are). These sorts of differences mask an underlying similarity. In both cases, thoughts about the self serve to enhance feelings of self-worth. The universal need (which McDougall [1923] called the "master sentiment") is not a need to *think* of oneself in any specific way, but a need to maximize feelings of self-worth. This is what we mean when we speak of a self-enhancement motive.

A. **Self-Feelings as Basic Emotions**

Several strands of research support James's claim that self-feelings are basic emotions. First, although the specific factors that give rise to these emotions vary across cultures, self-feelings are experienced by people the world over (Scherer & Wallbott, 1994). Second, self-feelings are universally considered to be important aspects of human experience and to motivate a variety of behaviors. Anticipations of shame and guilt, for example, keep people from behaving in antisocial ways (Hynie, MacDonald, & Marques, 2006; Keltner & Beer, 2005). Third, self-feelings develop at an early age. As we will see in Chapter 3, even toddlers display pride in an accomplishment and children as young as four years old can recognize expressions of pride in others (Tracy, Robins, & Lagattuta, 2005).

B. **Self-Conscious Emotions**

All self-feelings involve some aspect of self as a reference point, but researchers have tended to focus their attention on a smaller class of self-feelings called self-conscious emotions (for reviews, see Tangney & Fischer, 1995; Tracy & Robins, 2004). These emotions include pride, shame, guilt, and embarrassment. In this section, we will examine differences between the three negative emotions (i.e., shame, guilt, and embarrassment).

1. **Shame and Guilt**

We will begin by comparing shame and guilt. Some theorists have argued that these emotions differ in terms of their public versus private nature (Ausebel, 1955; Buss, 1980).

Whereas shame is a public emotion that follows from public disapproval or opprobrium, guilt represents a more private response to the perception that one has failed to live up to one's own standards and ideals (see [Higgins, 1987](#), for a related view).

Support for this public-private distinction is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, feelings of shame are more affected by the presence of others than are feelings of guilt, suggesting that shame is a more public emotion than is guilt ([Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002](#)). On the other hand, both emotions are more apt to occur in public than in private, and neither requires that other people be present ([Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996](#); [Tangney, Niedenthal, Covert, & Barlow, 1998](#)). These findings suggest that the public-private distinction provides only a partial explanation for the differences between shame and guilt.

Shame and guilt have also been distinguished in terms of their generality, with shame being regarded as a broader emotion than guilt (e.g., [Barrett, 1995](#); [Lewis, 1971](#); [Lazarus, 1991](#)). The focus of guilt is behavior: People feel guilty when they believe they have done something wrong. In contrast, shame represents a global self-condemnation, arising from the perception that one is a bad person or is wholly inadequate.

Research has found strong support for this distinction ([Tangney & Fischer, 1995](#)). In one study, [Niedenthal, Tangney, and Gavanski \(1994\)](#) first asked participants to think of a time when they felt ashamed or guilty. The participants were then asked what they would do to rectify the situation if they were given the chance. Participants tended to undo guilt experiences by changing their behavior (e.g., If only I hadn't left the dog in the car with the windows closed), but undo shame experiences by changing more global aspects of themselves (e.g., If only I had more confidence in myself and could stand up to peer pressure). These findings support the claim that guilt involves a focus on particular misdeeds, whereas shame involves a sense that the entire self is bad. In further support of this distinction, self-esteem, which represents an overall evaluation of the self, is more closely tied to feelings of shame than feelings of guilt ([Brown & Marshall, 2001](#)).

Finally, shame and guilt differ in terms of their behavioral tendencies ([Barrett, 1995](#); [Lazarus, 1991](#); [Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994](#)). Guilt gives rise to a tendency to atone for one's (perceived) transgressions and to make reparations. In contrast, shame leads people to feel small and to hide from others in an attempt to conceal their (perceived) deficiencies and shortcomings. These differences have important social consequences. Whereas guilt promotes harmony in a relationship by defusing potentially volatile situations, shame is associated with a variety of negative interpersonal behaviors, including anger, blaming others, and displaced aggression ([Leith & Baumeister, 1998](#); [Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher & Gramzow, 1992](#); [Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996](#)).

2. ***Shame and Embarrassment***

Research has also revealed some important distinctions between shame and embarrassment ([Sabini, Garvey, & Hall, 2001](#); [Tangney et al., 1996](#)). Both emotions are more likely to occur in public than in private, but embarrassment is a milder emotion than is shame. In some cases, it can even induce laughter and mirth, which is never the case with shame. Furthermore, embarrassment develops earlier in life than does shame ([Lewis, 1995](#)). Finally, unlike shame, which arises from a moral transgression or a perceived

personal failing, embarrassment arises from a breach of social etiquette or the mere belief that one is being observed by others (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). For example, many people who sing in their cars are embarrassed when they realize they are being observed by other motorists at a stop light, but virtually no one is ashamed or feels guilty as a result of this social attention.

C. *Self-Feelings and Self-Standards*

Differences among self-feelings underscore that these emotions are influenced by ideas of who we could be, should be, or ought to be. We will call such ideas “self-standards,” as they represent the standards people use to evaluate and judge themselves. In this section, we will examine how these self-standards influence the magnitude of self-feelings.

1. *William James’s Formula For Computing Self-Feelings*

Not surprisingly, William James was the first psychologist to consider this issue. In an oft-cited passage from his chapter on the self, James offered the following formula for computing self-feelings.

our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do. It is determined by the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities; a fraction of which our pretensions are the denominator and the numerator our successes; thus, $\text{Self-esteem} = \text{Success}/\text{Pretensions}$ (p. 310).

In Chapter 8 of this book we will spend a great deal of time discussing self-esteem. At that point, we will have the opportunity to examine the merits of James’s formula. For now, let’s simply be clear on what he is saying.

James uses the term pretensions in two distinct ways. Sometimes he uses the term to refer to domains of personal importance.

I who for the time have staked my all on being a psychologist, am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am contented to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek. My deficiencies there give me no sense of personal humiliation at all. Had I ‘pretensions’ to be a linguist, it would have been just the reverse. (p. 310)

Here James is saying that his performance as a psychologist evokes a stronger emotional reaction in him than does his performance as a linguist. In more general terms, he is arguing that outcomes in domains of high personal importance produce greater emotional reactions than do outcomes in domains of low personal importance. To illustrate, imagine you are taking two classes. One is an elective that you are taking just for fun; the other class is in your major area of study. James’s formula suggests that your performance in the latter class (the one that is more important) will evoke a stronger emotional reaction than will your performance in the former class (the one that is unimportant).

In addition to using the term pretensions to refer to what is important to a person, James also uses the term to refer to a person’s aspiration level—to a minimum level of performance a person would be satisfied with.

So we have the paradox of a man shamed to death because he is only the second pugilist or the second oarsman in the world. That he is able to beat the whole population of the globe minus one is nothing; he has pitted himself to beat that one; and as long as he doesn't do that nothing else counts. Yonder puny fellow, however, whom every one can beat, suffers no chagrin about it, for he has long ago abandoned the attempt to 'carry that line' as the merchants say, of self at all. (pp. 310-311)

This passage treats pretensions in terms of one's level of aspiration. It says that how people feel about an attained outcome is not simply a function of the outcome itself—it depends on the standards people use for gauging success and failure.

By way of illustration, consider two students who both get Bs in a course. One student may be dissatisfied because he expected or wanted an A; the other student may be thrilled because she would have been satisfied with a C. Even though the objective outcome is the same, the two students have completely different emotional reactions. Why? Because as James notes, people's reactions to events are determined not simply by the event themselves, but also by the meaning they give to the event. This point was recognized by Shakespeare over 400 years ago. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare wrote, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (act II, scene 2, line 259). Whether we are elated or dejected to receive a grade of "B" depends on the meaning we attach to that grade. Does it represent a personal success or a personal failure? It is this perception, rather than the grade itself, that guides our emotional life.

This analysis suggests that there are two routes to feeling good about your performance in some domain. You can either raise your level of accomplishment or lower your level of aspiration. According to James, either one will suffice to make you feel better.

[Self-esteem] may be increased as well by diminishing the denominator as by increasing the numerator. To give up pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified. ... Everything added to the Self is a burden as well as a pride (pp. 310-311). ... our self-feeling is in our power. As Carlyle says: 'Make thy claim of wages a zero, then hast thou the world under thy feet.' (p. 311).

2. ***The Must Self***

James's analysis of self-feelings suggests that people are ill-served by holding lofty standards of success. This doesn't mean one should never have high aspirations for oneself. As long as these self-views are at least somewhat realistic, they can serve to motivate people to work hard and achieve success ([Marshall & Brown, 2004, 2006a](#)).

The problem arises when one's aspirations are so high they can never be reached. [Horney \(1945\)](#) argued that rigid, idealized self-views characterize the neurotic personality. According to Horney, the neurotic person cannot tolerate feelings of inferiority so she constructs an ideal self-image to hide behind. Such a person has an insatiable need to be the best at everything and to be liked, admired, and approved by everyone. It is impossible, of course, to live up to such rigid expectations, dooming the neurotic to disappointment and frustration.

It is important to note that it is not the possession of idealized self-images, per se, that distinguishes the neurotic from the normal personality. Everyone, to one extent or

another, fantasizes about being something they are not. The problem arises when this idealized self becomes a *must* self: It is when we *must* be the “perfect husband,” when we *must* be “a straight A student,” or when we *must* be the “most popular person in school” that idealized self-images become a source of psychological distress (Blatt, 1985; Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

3. **The Undesired Self**

People also think of themselves in terms of what they are afraid of becoming or do not want to become. One fears being “a failure at business,” “an over-the-hill actor,” or “dependent on one’s children.” Ogilvie (1987; Heppen & Ogilvie, 2003) refers to these images as aspects of the undesired self and has suggested that they play an important role in how happy and satisfied people are in their lives. The nearer we are to what we fear becoming, the less happy we are with our lives (see also, Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999). These potential negative self-images can also serve an important motivational function. If not too extreme, they can function as incentives. They can force people to work hard in an attempt to avoid these negative identities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

4. **Self-Standards and Regulatory Focus**

Psychologists have long recognized that people differ with respect to whether they are principally motivated to approach rewarding experiences or avoid aversive ones (Atkinson, 1958; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Gray, 1994; Higgins, 1999). Whereas some individuals are highly sensitive to positive emotions and eagerly seek rewards, others are highly sensitive to negative emotions and steer clear of painful outcomes. In less formal terms, people in the former group strive for success and people in the latter group try to avoid failure. Table 2.4 shows some sample items that have been used to assess these different motivational orientations.

Table 2.4. Sample Items Used to Measure Individual Differences in the Motivation to Attain Positive Outcomes versus Avoid Negative Outcomes. (Source: Carver & White, 1994, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 319-333).

Motivated to Attain Positive Outcomes	Motivated to Avoid Negative Outcomes
When I’m doing well at something, I love to keep at it	If I think something unpleasant is going to happen, I usually get pretty “worked up.”
When good things happen to me, it affects me strongly.	Criticism or scolding hurts me quite a bit.
When I see an opportunity for something I like, I get excited right away.	I feel worried when I think I have done poorly at something

Higgins (1999) has argued that these motivational orientations extend to self-standards and influence people’s emotional lives. As shown in Table 2.5, people with a promotion focus are primarily driven to approach positive self-standards. For example, they might wish to become a professional dancer or strive to become more thoughtful. These individuals experience happiness and excitement when they believe they are moving toward their self-standard, and sadness and dejection when they believe they are not moving toward their self-standard. People with a prevention focus are primarily driven to

avoid negative self-standards. For example, they might worry a lot about being a failure or believe they should never have any moral lapses. These individuals experience calmness and relief when they believe they are moving toward their self-standards, but anxiety and fear when they feel they are falling short of their standards.

Table 2.5. Regulatory Focus and Resultant Emotions

	Regulatory Focus	
	Promotion Focus: A sensitivity to reward, accompanied by a desire to attain favorable outcomes and move toward a positive self-standard	Prevention Focus: A sensitivity to punishment, accompanied by a desire to avoid negative outcomes and move away from a negative self-standard
Making suitable progress	Elated Excited	Calm, Relieved
Stalled or making only slow progress	Sad Dejected	Anxious, Afraid

D. Self-Feelings and Social Relationships

Because other people are part of the self-concept, they are also capable of evoking self-feelings. This tendency is most apparent with our loved ones (e.g., parents take great pride in the accomplishments of their children), but the effect also extends to less intimate relationships. Consider, for example, the wave of emotion that can overcome fans at a sporting event. After an important victory, it is not uncommon to see fans spilling onto the field chanting “We’re #1!” The use of the personal pronoun “we” implies that the victory is experienced in a personal way and that the feelings of euphoria are of a self-relevant nature. Cialdini and colleagues coined the term “Basking in Reflected Glory” (or BIRGing) to describe this tendency to vicariously experience pride or shame in another person’s performance (Cialdini et al., 1986). Interestingly, even young children experience this effect, as when younger siblings glow with pride at an older sibling’s accomplishments (Bennett, Yuill, Banerjee, & Thomson, 1998).

People also distance themselves from a loser by saying “They lost” when their team tastes defeat (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1995; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986). Of course, people cannot always dismiss their identification with a group, and this identification may lead them to experience negative emotions when their group does something blameworthy. The collective guilt many Germans feel for the atrocities their ancestors committed during the Holocaust provides a dramatic illustration of this effect. Even though they had nothing to do with the atrocities that were committed, they feel a sense of personal responsibility and remorse (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998).

E. **Summary and Synthesis**

Table 2.6 summarizes many of the ideas we have been discussing. Building on theoretical work by Brewer and colleagues, the table presents a three-fold classification of the empirical self (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The first row describes the individual self. Here, identity consists of those aspects of self that tend to distinguish us from others, such as our traits, abilities, and possessions. The second row describes the relational self, which includes specific individuals who are part of our self-concept. The final row describes the collective self. This aspect of self consists of social categories to which we belong, including our racial, religious, and ethnic identities.

Table 2.6. Three-Fold Classification of the Empirical Self

Classification	Description	Example	Relation to James's Analysis	Basis of Self-Feelings
Individual	Individual traits, abilities, and possessions.	I am blonde I am shy I own a Lexus	Spiritual self and aspects of the material self (body, possessions, initials)	Personal achievements; correspondence between current self-views and various self-standards.
Relational	Other people with whom we have a personal relationship.	I am Noah's dad I am Rose's son	Aspects of the social self	Pride in the accomplishments of particular others with whom we are joined.
Collective	Social roles, social categories, and social group memberships	I am a professor I am Irish	Aspects of the social self	Pride in the various groups of which we are members.

III. **Group Differences in the Self-Concept**

Earlier we noted that James's analysis was modeled after wealthy males of European descent. This raises an important question: Is his analysis applicable to women, and people of different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds? Recent research provides some clues.

A. **Cultural Differences in the Self-Concept**

We will begin by considering cultural differences in the self-concept. Culture is a difficult term to define and study. It operates in the background and affects so many things that its influence is often hard to detect (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). In this

text, we will define a culture as a shared system of values, behaviors, and understandings that are transmitted from one generation to another. Among other things, cultures offer an explanation for how humans came to exist, and how they should interact with the natural and social world.

1. **Individualism and Collectivism**

Cultures differ in so many ways it is hard to compare one with another. But one dimension—individualism-collectivism—has proven to be particularly influential in the field of cultural psychology. Individualistic cultures, such as those that characterize America, Canada, and the countries of Western Europe, emphasize independence and self-reliance. People raised in this cultural context value personal freedom, strive for self-fulfillment, and show qualified respect for authority figures, social institutions, and tradition. In contrast, collectivistic cultures, such as those that characterize India, the countries of East Asia and South America, emphasize loyalty to one's group, duty to one's family, and adherence to social traditions and institutions. People raised in this cultural context put the concerns of others ahead of their own, and strive to enhance their group's status and well-being (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995).

Markus and Kitayama (1991) outlined various ways in which these cultural differences affect the way people think about themselves (see also, Brewer & Chen, 2007; Wang, 2006). As shown in Table 2.7, people raised in an individualistic cultural context possess an independent self-view. They think of themselves as self-contained entities with unique qualities and characteristics that distinguish them from others and transcend particular situations and contexts. Moreover, they base their behavior on their own attitudes, values, and preferences, and believe their inner, psychological qualities reveal more about them than their overt behavior. Finally, they emphasize their virtues and publicly describe themselves in highly positive terms.

In contrast, people raised in a collectivistic cultural context possess an interdependent self-view that emphasizes their connectedness with others and the contextual and relational nature of self-knowledge. Instead of defining themselves in ways that distinguish them from others, they are more inclined to think of themselves in terms of their social relationships and group memberships. Moreover, rather than using their own values and attitudes to guide their behavior, they rely more on social norms and the behavior of others, and believe that their public actions are more revealing of their "true self" than are their private thoughts and feelings. Finally, people raised in collectivistic cultures tend to be rather modest when describing themselves. Instead of focusing exclusively on their virtues and ignoring their negative qualities, they think of themselves in more balanced terms and seek ways to improve themselves (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

Table 2.7. Comparing Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

Dimension	Individualistic Cultural View	Collectivistic Cultural View
Content	An independent self-view, with a focus on unique personal attributes that	An interdependent self-view, with an emphasis on relational identities that

	distinguish self from others.	express connections between self and others.
Generality	Tendency to describe oneself in broad, general terms that transcend the situational or relational context	Self-descriptions are more narrow, tied to specific situations and relationships.
Visibility	Emphasis on inner qualities, preferences, and traits that express the true, authentic self.	Emphasis on overt behaviors and public expressions of inner qualities.
Evaluation	A tendency to “blow one’s own horn,” and to describe oneself in highly positive terms.	A tendency to be modest, humble, and self-effacing, and to attend equally to one’s positive and negative qualities.

Keep in mind that these orientations are relative, not absolute (Fiske, 2002). People raised in individualistic cultures are capable of putting the needs of others ahead of their own, just as those raised in collectivistic cultures sometimes pursue their own self-interests. Moreover, the two orientations are somewhat independent, with some cultures scoring high on both dimensions and others scoring high on only one (Gelfand, Triandis, & Darius, 1996; Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996). For these reasons, the distinction is largely one of emphasis: In comparison with people from collectivistic cultures, people from individualistic cultures are more inclined to think of themselves in ways that distinguish themselves from others, believe their qualities transcend particular situations and relationships, base their decisions on their own feelings and values, and describe themselves in highly glowing terms.

2. **Cultural Differences in Identity Importance**

... men have arranged the various selves ... in an hierarchical scale according to their worth (p. 314). ... with the bodily Self at the bottom, the spiritual Self at the top, and the extracorporeal material selves and the various social selves between. (James, 1890, p. 313)

James argued that people place the most importance on their personal identities. Although this claim is supported in Western cultures (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Graetz, 1999; Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002), an investigation by Cousins (1989) demonstrated that this hierarchical arrangement does not characterize all cultures. In this investigation, American and Japanese college students completed a “Who am I?” questionnaire similar to the one that appears at the start of this chapter. Afterward, the students placed a check mark next to the five responses they regarded as most self-descriptive. Finally, the researchers classified each of the five responses according to whether it referred to a personal identity (a perceived trait, ability, or disposition), a social identity (a social role or relationship), or something else (e.g., physical characteristic).

Figure 2.1 presents the results of this investigation. The figure shows that the

American students listed personal identities (e.g., I am honest; I am smart) 59% of the time, but Japanese students did so only 19% of the time. In contrast, Japanese students listed social-relational identities (e.g., I am a student; I am a daughter) 27% of the time, but American students did so only 9% of the time. These findings support the claim that American students, who reside in an individualistic cultural context, think of themselves primarily in terms of their personal beliefs, traits, and attributes, whereas Japanese students, who are raised in a collectivistic cultural context, think of themselves in terms of their social roles, personal relationships, and group memberships (see also [Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991](#)).

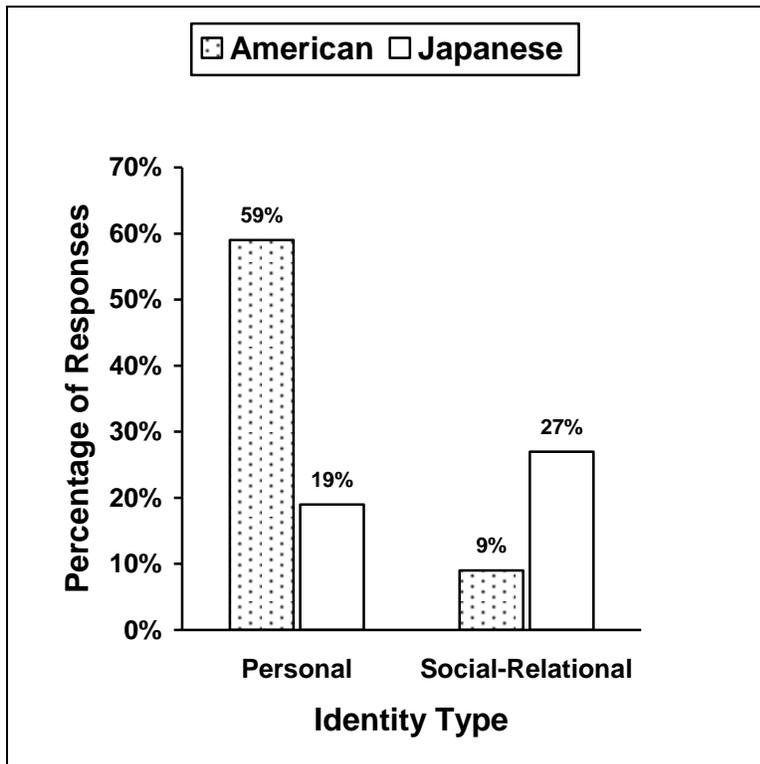


Figure 2.1. Identity Statements by American and Japanese students in Response to a “Who am I?” Questionnaire. **American students were more likely than Japanese students to describe themselves in terms of their personal attributes, whereas Japanese students were more likely than American students to describe themselves in terms of their social attributes. These findings document cross-cultural differences in the self-concept.** (Source: Cousins, 1989, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 124-131)

Cousins (1989) also found that the self-descriptions of the Japanese students were more contextualized. To illustrate, when asked to describe herself, an American student might say “I’m silly” or “I’m ambitious.” In contrast, a Japanese student would be more inclined to say “I’m silly with my friends” or “I’m ambitious at work.” The key difference is that the former response is unbounded by the situation, whereas the latter response specifies a particular relational or situational context (see also, [Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001](#); [Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995](#)).

Wang (2001) replicated these findings in a study that compared Chinese and European American college students. In addition, the participants in Wang's study were asked to describe their earliest childhood memory, and Wang noted whether the memory focused on oneself (e.g., "I was outside playing with a ball) or one's family (e.g., "My brother and I were outside playing with a ball"). Figure 2.2 shows that individual-focused memories were more common among the European American participants than among the Chinese participants, but the opposite was true for family-focused memories. These findings provide additional evidence that independence characterizes the Western self-concept, but interdependence characterizes the self-concept of East Asians.

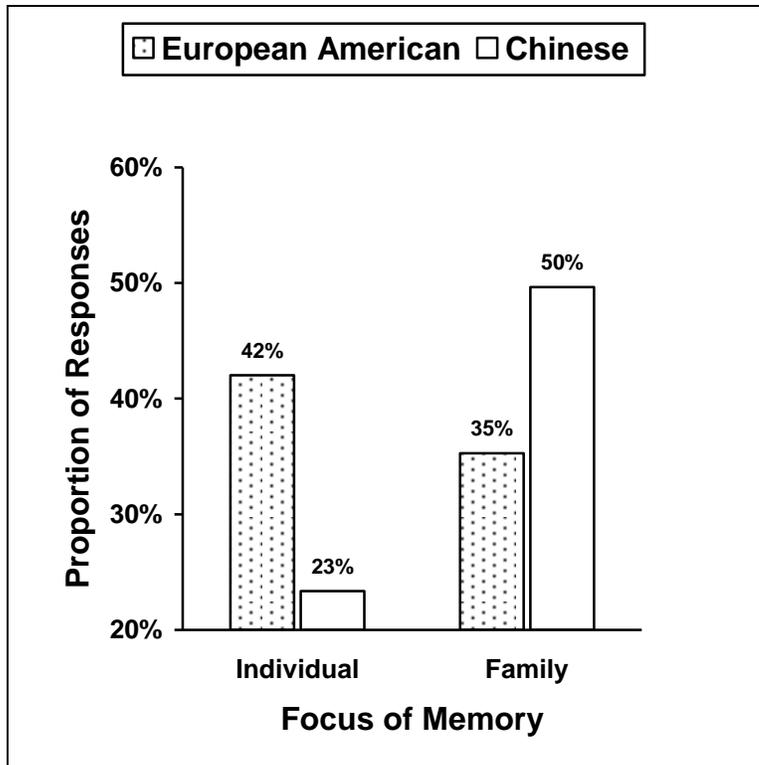


Figure 2.2. Cultural Differences In Early Childhood Memories. When asked to recall their earliest memory, European American students were more inclined than Chinese students to remember events that focused only on themselves, whereas Chinese students were more inclined than European American students to remember events that included their family. These data support the claim that other people figure more prominently in the self-concept of East Asians than Americans. (Source: Wang, 2001, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 220-233)

3. **Cultural Differences in Self-Concept Development**

In a follow-up study, Wang (2004) investigated the developmental course of cultural differences in the self-concept. European American and Chinese children of various ages were asked to describe themselves, and Wang calculated the number of times the children mentioned a private, personal identity or a public, collective one. Figure 2.3 shows that children in both countries experienced a steady rise in the number of private, personal identities, but only Chinese children showed a steep rise in the number of public, collective identities. As a result, differences between the two countries were greatest in the 2nd grade. At this age, European American children showed a pronounced preference to think

of themselves in private, personal terms, whereas the self-conceptions of Chinese children were more balanced between private, personal identities and public, collective ones.

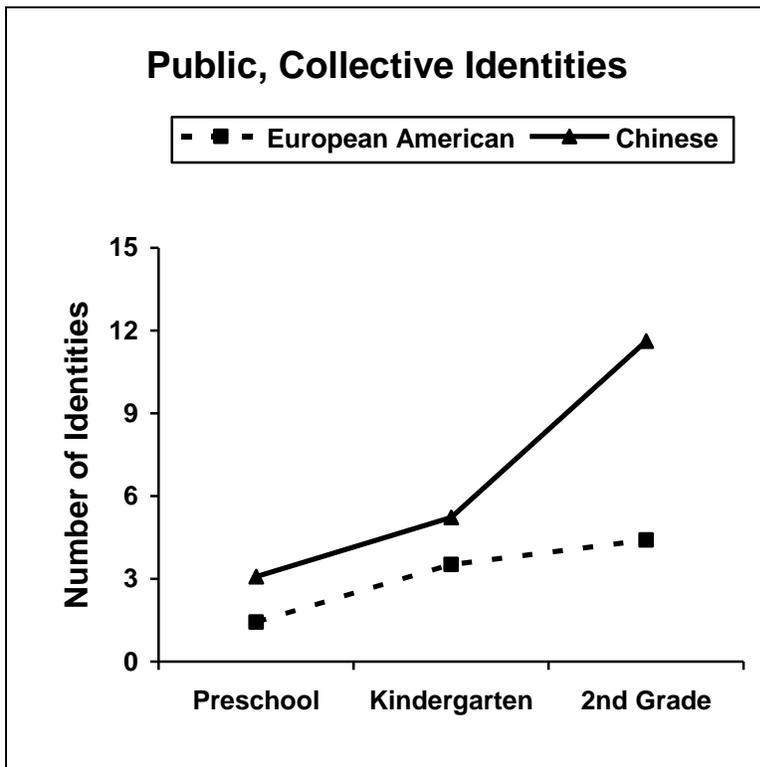
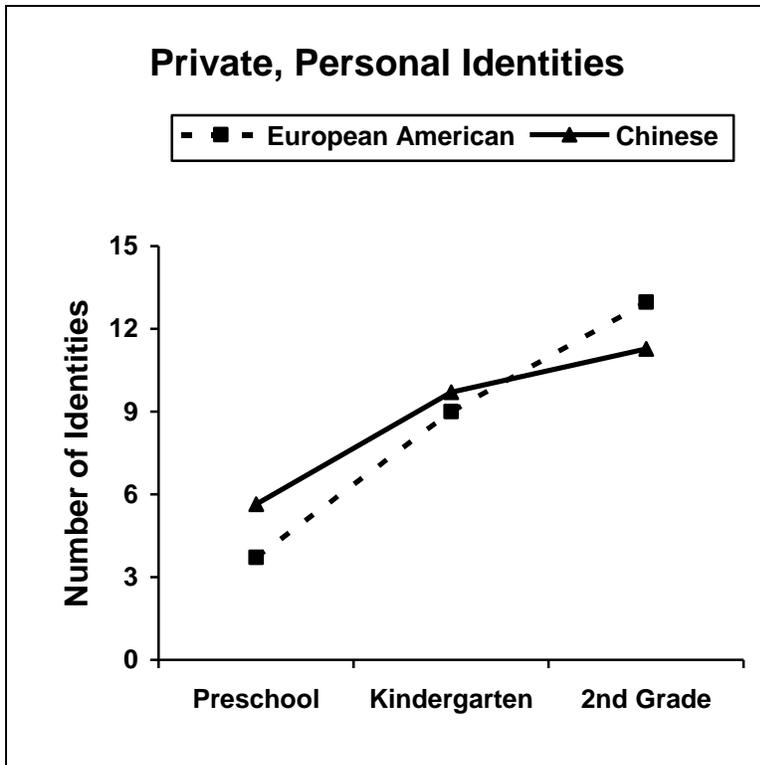


Figure 2.3. Identities Mentioned by European American and Chinese Children When Asked to Describe Themselves. **Both cultural groups experienced a steady increase in their use of private, personal identities, but only the Chinese children showed a comparable rise in their use of public, collective identities.** (Source: Wang, 2004, *Developmental Psychology*, 40, 3-15)

4. **Cultural Differences in Shame and Guilt**

Men cannot live without shame. A sense of shame is the beginning of integrity. –Mencius (Chinese philosopher)

Earlier we noted some important differences between shame and guilt, concluding that shame has negative interpersonal consequences because it is associated with anger, blaming others, and displaced aggression. This analysis may be more characteristic of individualistic, Western countries than collectivistic, East Asian ones. In collectivistic, East Asian countries, the capacity to experience shame is regarded as a virtue, driving people to cultivate qualities that promote personal fulfillment and bring honor to their family and group (Li, Wang, & Fischer, 2004; Stipek, 1998). For these reasons, shame appears to have more positive social consequences in East Asian countries than in Western ones (Wong & Tsai, in press).

B. **Ethnic Differences Within the United States**

Nations are a political unit, not a social one, and various cultures and subcultures often coexist within a given nation. This is increasingly true in the United States, for example, as immigration patterns and differential birth rates have transformed a country that was once rather homogenous into a mosaic of different languages and traditions. Because of this diversity, individualism and collectivism differ within the United States. In general, European Americans tend to be less collectivistic than Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos/Latinas (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). These differences stem, in part, from differences in ethnic identity, with European Americans placing less importance on their ethnic identity than do people of color (Gaines et al., 1997).

The ethnic differences that occur within nations highlight an important point. Many people live bicultural (or even multicultural) lives, and how they think of themselves changes with the social context (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). Consider, for example, the experience of Asian Americans. When they are with their family, they may think of themselves primarily in collectivistic terms, focusing on the ways in which they are connected to others and part of a larger social group. When they are with their friends, they may be more inclined to adopt the mannerisms and style of European Americans, leading them to think of themselves in individualistic terms.

Two related issues regarding these collective identities have received attention. One line of research has focused on how people evaluate these specific identities. Historically, minority status carried a negative connotation, as minorities were stigmatized and subjected to discrimination. This state of affairs led some minority group members to resent, disavow, or even turn against their ethnic identity (Lewin, 1948).

Recent years have seen a shift in these tendencies. Beginning with the Black Pride movement in the 1960s, minority groups have worked to improve the way their members evaluate their minority status. Rather than viewing their minority status as a stigma, group members are encouraged to celebrate their heritage and view their minority status as a source of pride. These efforts have met with

resounding success. Most minority group members now evaluate their ethnic identity in positive terms (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Phinney, 1990).

A second line of research has looked at how people maintain their ethnic identities when exposed to a dominant majority culture. Consider children of Latin-American descent who live in the United States today. As a result of housing and friendship patterns, their Latin identity is likely to be paramount during their early (pre-school) years. Later, when they begin to attend school, they come into contact with the broader European-American culture. What happens to their ethnic identity then?

Table 3.8 describes four possible outcomes based on the strength of the children’s identification with the majority and minority group (Berry, 2001; Phinney, 1990; Rudmin, 2003). Children who adopt the identity of the dominant culture, while still retaining a strong identification with their cultural background, are said to be acculturated, integrated, or bicultural. Those who abandon their ethnic identity for an American identity are said to be assimilated. Separation occurs among those who refuse to identify with the dominant culture, and those who lose their ties to both cultural groups are said to be marginalized.

Table 3.8. Four Bicultural Identity Orientations

		Identification with Ethnic Group	
		<u>Strong</u>	<u>Weak</u>
Identification with Majority Group	Strong	Acculturated Integrated Bicultural	Assimilated
	Weak	Separated	Marginalized

Assimilation was the desired outcome for many turn-of-the century immigrants. These newly arrived Americans sought to completely immerse themselves in American culture and shed their ethnic identity. In so doing, many changed their names, tried to lose their accents, and studiously adopted the customs and mores of American culture.

The situation today is quite different. Cultural diversity and pluralism are celebrated, and many minority group members strive to become acculturated, not assimilated. Phinney (1990) describes several behaviors that facilitate this goal, including participation in ethnic activities, continued use of one’s native language, and the forging of friendship patterns with other minority group members. Ethier and Deaux (1994) found that behaviors of this sort helped Hispanic students retain their ethnic identity during their first year in predominantly Anglo universities.

C. ***Gender Differences in the Self-Concept***

Across cultures, men and women think of themselves in characteristically different ways. Whereas men think of themselves in individualistic terms, emphasizing traits that reflect social dominance and competitiveness, women tend to think of themselves in interdependent terms, emphasizing interpersonal traits, such as warmth and nurturance (Cross & Madson, 1997; Guimond, Chatard, Martinot, Crisp, & Redersdorff, 2006; Kashima, Yamaguchi, Kim, Choi, Gelfand, & Yuki, 1995). Undoubtedly, these differences are influenced by socialization and childrearing practices. From an early age, girls are encouraged to develop interpersonal skills that promote positive personal interactions, such as paying close attention to other people's feelings and needs, and being conciliatory, cooperative, and compliant. Over time, these behaviors come to be part of the self-concept, leading women to think of themselves in interpersonal terms.

An investigation by Gabriel and Gardner (1999) showed that men and women also differ when it comes to the nature of their social identities. These investigators had male and female college students complete a "Who am I?" questionnaire similar to the one shown in Table 2.1. Among other things, the participants' responses were coded as representing the relational self (e.g., "I am the youngest child in my family.") or the collective self (e.g., "I am Italian."). Figure 2.4 shows that although relational identities were more common among women than among men, collective identities were more common among men than among women. These findings support the claim that women define themselves in relational terms, whereas men focus more on the groups to which they belong (see also, Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Maddux & Brewer, 2005).

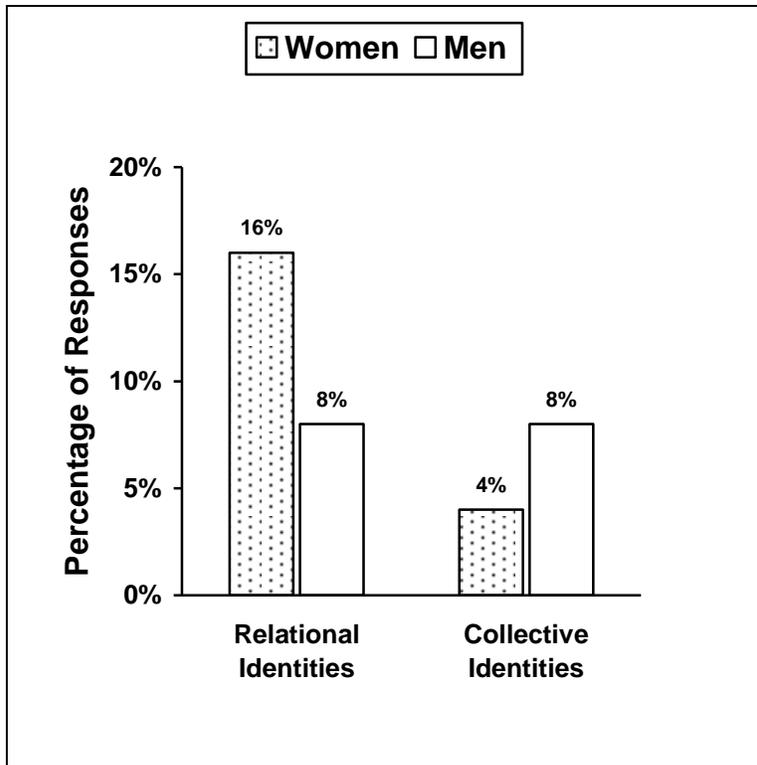


Figure 2.4. Gender Differences in the Social Self. **When asked to describe themselves, women were more apt than men to mention relational identities, but men were more apt than women to mention collective identities.** (Source: Gabriel & Gardner, 1999, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 642-655)

IV. **Self-Concept Activation**

To this point we have documented differences in the way people characteristically think about themselves. Yet people think of themselves in so many ways, that only a portion of their self-knowledge can be active at any time. For example, a person who thinks of herself as hardworking at one moment may think of herself as sentimental at another moment. In this section, we will examine factors that explain these shifts in self-definition.

The model shown in Figure 6.5 will guide our discussion. In the middle of the figure is a box labeled “self-representations.” We will use this term to refer to the way people are currently thinking of themselves. Other theorists have referred to these momentary self-representations as aspects of the phenomenal self (Jones & Gerard, 1967), the spontaneous self-concept (McGuire & McGuire, 1981, 1988), self-identifications (Schlenker & Weigold, 1989), the working self-concept (Markus & Kunda, 1986) or the active self (Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2005, 2007). All of these terms call attention to the fact that only a subset of self-knowledge is active at any time and that, once activated, self-representations affect the way we process information, feel, and behave.

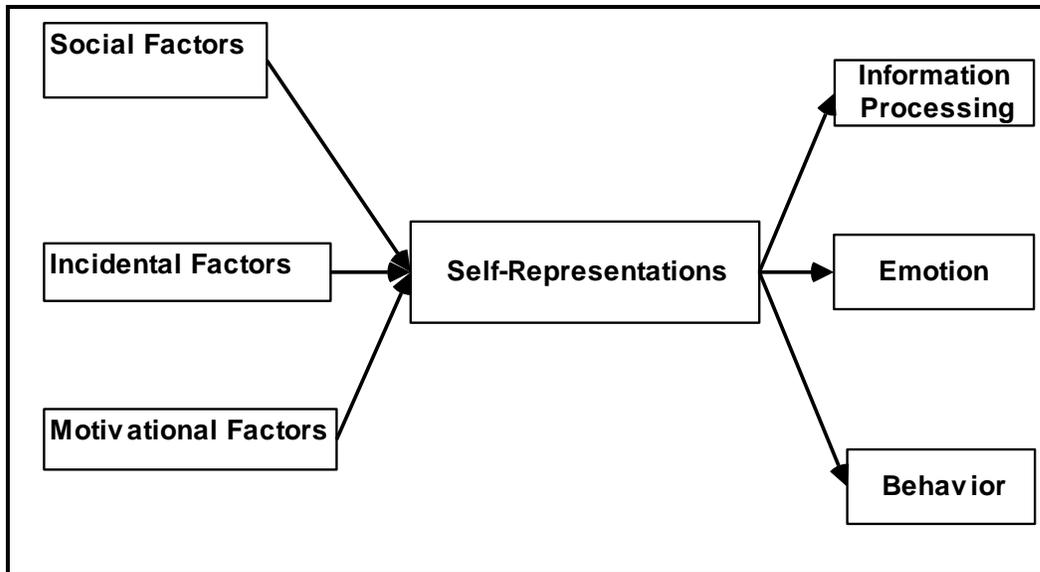


Figure 6.5. A schematic presentation of the factors that affect the way people currently think about themselves, and the influence these thoughts have on other aspects of psychological life.

A. *Social Factors Activate **Self-Representations***

A variety of social factors influence self-representations. Social roles are probably the most important factor to consider (Roberts & Donahue, 1994). For example, I am more likely to think of myself as a professor when I'm teaching than when I'm coaching my son's baseball team. In a similar manner, you are more likely to think of yourself as scholarly when you are studying in the library than when you are out on a date.

The composition of the social environment also activates self-representations. According to the **distinctiveness postulate**, people think of themselves in ways that distinguish them from their social surroundings (McGuire & McGuire, 1981, 1988; Nelson & Miller, 1995; von Hippel, Hawkins, & Schooler, 2001). To illustrate, sitting at a restaurant with a lot of school children will probably lead you to think of yourself as grown-up and mature. In contrast, sitting at a restaurant with a lot of senior citizens will probably lead you to think of yourself as youthful and energetic.

The social environment also influences the salience of personal and collective identities. **Self-categorization theory** (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) proposes that whether people define themselves in terms of their various social groups (e.g., as an American, Protestant, or teamster) or in terms of their various personal identities (e.g., as ambitious, dependable, or outgoing) depends, in part, on the social context. Group identities are highly salient in intergroup contexts. An American, for example, is more likely to think of himself as an American when he is in Paris, France, than when he is in Paris, Texas. This is because his nationality is distinctive when he is in a foreign land. In contrast, personal identities are more common in intragroup contexts. For example, a woman is more apt to be thinking of her personal qualities when interacting with

other women than when interacting with a group of men. The salience of group identities is also influenced by group size. Almost by definition, minority groups tend to be statistically distinctive (in part, this is what it means to be a minority). Because of this distinctiveness, minority group members think about their group identity more than majority group members (Brewer, 1991; Mullen, Migdal, & Rozell, 2003; Simon & Hamilton, 1994).

Even cultural symbols can influence the relative accessibility of different self-views. Ross, Xun, and Wilson (2002) asked bilingual Chinese Canadians to complete a “Who Am I?” questionnaire in either English or in Chinese. The investigators then compared these responses to the responses of a control group of European Canadians who answered in English. Figure 2.6 shows that although personal self-descriptions were more common than collectivistic ones in all three participant groups, this difference was smallest when Chinese participants completed the questionnaire in Chinese. Ross and colleagues argued that this is because the Chinese language activated a collectivistic identity among native Chinese (see also, Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Hong, Morris Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Ramírez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martinez, Potter, & Penebaker, 2006; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Wang & Ross, 2005).

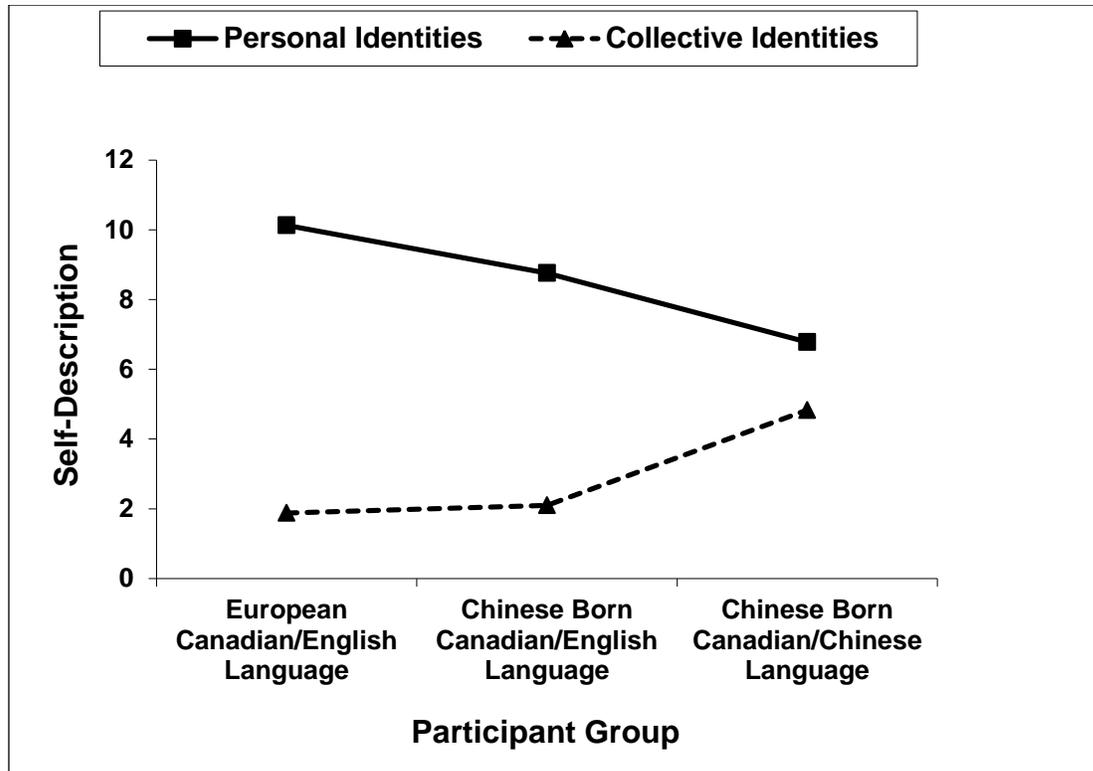


Figure 2.6. Self-Descriptions of European Canadians and Chinese-born Canadians. **When asked to describe themselves, all three participant groups reported more personal identities than collective identities. However, this difference was smallest when Chinese born Canadians described themselves in Chinese. These findings suggest that situational cues activate different identities in biculturals.** (Source: Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 1040-1050)

Finally, significant others can also activate particular self-representations. Earlier we noted that people possess relational self-views, consisting of a particular self-view in a particular relationship (e.g., I am inarticulate with my boss). Even subtle reminders of the relationship partner, such as a whiff of perfume, can activate a corresponding relational self-view. To illustrate, [Baldwin, Carrell, and Lopez \(1990\)](#) asked graduate students in psychology to evaluate their research ideas after viewing (at levels below conscious awareness) the scowling face of their advisor or the approving face of a fellow student. Students exposed to the disapproving face subsequently evaluated their work more negatively than did those exposed to the approving face, presumably because they begin to think of themselves through their advisor's eyes (see also [Andersen & Chen, 2002](#); [Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006](#); [Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981](#); [Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003](#); [Hinkley & Andersen, 1996](#); [Shah, 2003a, 2003b](#)).

B. ***Incidental Factors Activate Self-Representations***

It is noteworthy that students in the Baldwin et al. (1990) study were not consciously aware they had viewed an approving or disapproving face, even though seeing these faces affected the way they thought about themselves. This finding is

consistent with evidence that self-representations can be activated by a variety of subtle, incidental factors (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). For example, Stapel and Blanton (2004) had participants view pictures of Einstein or a clown at presentation rates too fast to consciously detect. Those who *saw* the clown subsequently rated themselves as more intelligent than those who *saw* Einstein. In another experiment, participants who were first asked to think about professors performed better at a game of *Trivial Pursuits* than did those who were first asked to think about secretaries (Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998). And still another study found that participants behaved more competitively during a business negotiation when artifacts relevant to competition were present (e.g., a briefcase) than when these artifacts were absent (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004). Presumably, the presence of competitive artifacts activated self-representations of competitiveness in participants, and these activated self-representations led participants to behave competitively (Wheeler et al., 2005, 2007).

C. **Motivational Factors Activate Self-Representations**

Finally, individuals can purposefully activate specific aspects of their self-concept (Gump & Kulik, 1995; Kunda, 1990). According to Brewer's **optimal distinctiveness** theory, people have two fundamental needs: A need to feel connected to others and a need to feel special and unique (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The strength of these two motives varies. When we need to feel connected to others, we activate views of ourselves that focus on our collective identities (e.g., I am a Catholic); when we need to feel unique, we activate views of ourselves that highlight our individuality (e.g., I am artistic).

Pickett, Silver, and Brewer (2002) conducted an experiment to test optimal distinctiveness theory. During the first part of the experiment, the experimenters induced needs for social inclusion in some participants by leading them to feel different from others. In contrast, needs for social differentiation were induced in other participants by leading them to feel highly similar to others. Afterward, participants rated how important various groups were to them, including large, collective groups, such as their ethnicity, race, and religion. Pickett and colleagues predicted that collective identities would be most attractive to participants whose needs for social inclusion had been aroused, and least attractive to participants whose need for social differentiation had been aroused. Figure 2.7 provides support for this prediction. Compared to a control group, participants with heightened needs for social inclusion overvalued their collective identities, whereas those with heightened needs for social differentiation devalued their collective identities (see also, Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002; Pickett & Brewer, 2001).

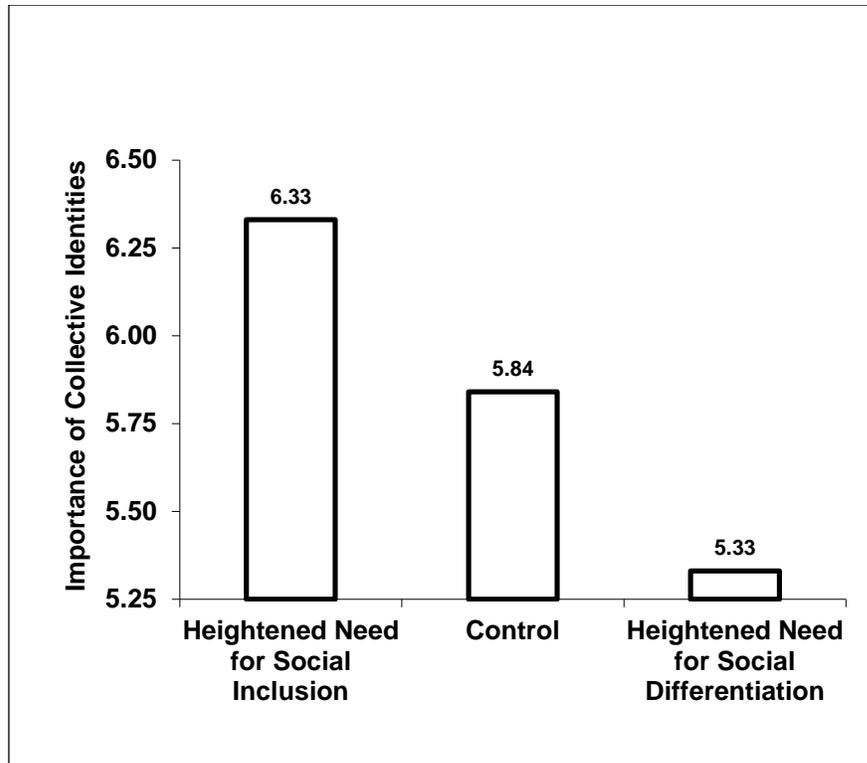


Figure 2.7. The Importance of Collective Identities as a Function of Needs for Social Inclusion and Social Differentiation. Compared to a control group, participants who first thought about how different they were from others (heightened need for social inclusion) overvalued their collective identities, but participants who first thought about how similar they were to others (heightened need for social differentiation) devalued their collective identities. (Source: Pickett, Silver, & Brewer, 2002, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 546-558)

D. ***Stability vs. Malleability in the Self-Concept***

The research we have just reviewed show that people's ideas about themselves are subject to change. Indeed, some of the research makes it seem as if these views can be modified with apparent ease. Are people's ideas about themselves really easily altered by shifting circumstances, or are people's ideas about themselves firmer and more resistant to change?

Although some theorists have argued that there is no core, stable set of beliefs when it comes to the self (e.g., [Gergen, 1982](#)), most of the evidence suggests otherwise. For one thing, people's views of themselves are highly stable after the age of 30 ([McCrae & Costa, 1994](#); [Mortimer, Finch, & Kumka, 1982](#)). It is also the case that therapists struggle for years to change the self-views of their clients, often with only limited success. Why, then, does it seem as if researchers have been able to so readily alter people's beliefs about themselves in experimental settings?

The first thing to note is that there is a difference between self-concept *activation* and self-concept *change*. The research we have reviewed is concerned with factors that influence which one of a person's many self-views will be active at a given time. The evidence here is clear and straightforward: Numerous factors

(e.g., the social context) influence the salience or accessibility of our various self-views.

The second issue under discussion—self-concept *change*—is more controversial. Here the question is whether people’s ideas about themselves can be easily modified. Can people who generally think of themselves as attractive easily be made to think of themselves as homely? Several things should be kept in mind when considering this question.

First, the changes we have documented are often not large in any absolute sense. People who typically regard themselves as reticent and shy do not suddenly report being gregarious and outgoing. Rather, people’s self-ratings merely shift a bit toward one or the other self-view depending on the factors we have discussed.

Another thing to consider is that college students have been the participants in most of the investigations we have reviewed. There is good reason to believe that people’s ideas about themselves have yet to crystallize at this stage of life (Sears, 1986). This fact undoubtedly contributes to the ease with which self-conceptions can be modified. In a related vein, participants may not have been highly certain of the self-conceptions being altered, and this uncertainty could have made their self-views more pliant (Kunda, Fong, Sanitioso, & Reber, 1993; Swann & Ely, 1984).

Finally, the experimental sessions extract people from their normal social environments (Swann, 1984). In the real world, people typically choose their social environments (Niedenthal, Cantor, & Kihlstrom, 1985; Snyder, 1979). For example, a person who thinks she is competitive is likely to engage in competitive activities. These activities, in turn, activate competitive views of the self. People also enlist the aid of others to help them maintain their self-views (Swann, 1990; Swann & Hill, 1982). For example, if your romantic partner considers you to be a real sweetheart, her warmth and endearments will probably activate this view in your mind as well.

What, then, can we conclude from the research we reviewed earlier? The most reasonable conclusion is that although people’s self-representations shift from one situation to the next, they tend to be relatively stable over time, largely because people structure their lives in ways that promote stability rather than change.

V. Chapter Summary

In this chapter we examined the nature of the self-concept (or **ME**). William James divided the **ME** into three subcategories: the material self (our bodies and extended selves), the social self (the various roles we play in social life and the way we are recognized and regarded by others), and the spiritual self (our inner or psychological self, including our ideas about our traits and abilities, values and habits, and the way it feels to be us). We then looked at contemporary research that has tested and extended James’s scheme.

We then considered the nature of self-feelings. James identified a class of emotions that directly implicate how people feel about themselves. These self-relevant emotions, include feelings of pride, guilt, shame, and embarrassment. James believed these emotions were instinctive in nature, and that people were

motivated to experience the positive emotions and avoid the negative ones. Subsequent researchers have examined the nature of these emotions and the manner in which they are influenced by various self-standards (e.g., our ideas about who we ought to be).

Next, we examined group differences in the nature of the self-concept. Cultural differences were discussed first, comparing individualistic cultures (which emphasize independence and uniqueness) and collectivistic cultures (which emphasize interconnectedness and social harmony). Gender differences were also discussed, with women being more apt than men to define themselves in relational terms.

Finally, we considered various situational factors that activate different self-views. Here we saw that people tend to think of themselves in ways that distinguish them from their social surroundings. We also noted that people strive to maintain uniqueness and connectedness, and these desires can lead them to purposefully activate particular self-views.

- William James distinguished three components of the empirical self (or **ME**). These were (a) the material self (i.e., tangible objects, people, or places that carry the designation my or mine); (b) the social self (i.e., our social roles and the way we are recognized and regarded by others); and (c) the spiritual self (i.e., our inner or psychological self, including our perceived traits, abilities, emotions, and beliefs).
- Contemporary researchers have refined and expanded James's scheme to include the collective self and the relational self. The collective self refers to social categories to which we belong, including our racial, religious, and ethnic identities. The relational self includes specific individuals who are part of our self-concept (e.g., my children; my boss) and the way we think of ourselves when we interact with them (e.g., I am playful with my children and respectful with my boss).
- William James identified a class of emotions that always involve the self as a point of reference. He called the positive emotions self-complacency and the negative emotions self-dissatisfaction. James believed that these emotions were instinctive in nature and that people are motivated to experience the positive emotions and avoid experiencing the negative emotions. Subsequent researchers have built on James's analysis by (a) making finer distinctions among these emotions (e.g., by distinguishing between shame and guilt) and (b) by exploring how these emotions are influenced by people's beliefs about who they could be, want to be, or ought to be.
- Other people can be an important source of self-feelings. People can bask in the reflected glory of other people's accomplishment (e.g., sports fans experience pride and euphoria when their team wins). People also derive feelings of self-worth from the social groups to which they belong and they feel better about themselves when they appraise their group in more

positive terms than they evaluate other groups.

- People differ in the importance they attach to their various identities. People in Western cultures emphasize the ways in which they are different from others, and place great importance on their personal identities. People from Eastern cultures emphasize the ways in which they are similar to or are related to others, and place more importance on their collective and relational identities.
- Individuals also differ within each culture. Women tend to think of themselves in more relational terms than do men, and men tend to think of themselves in more collective terms than do women.
- A variety of factors can activate different aspects of the self-concept, including a variety of subtle, incidental ones. In general, people tend to think of themselves in ways that distinguish them from their surrounding social context. People can also deliberately choose to activate different aspects of the self-concept to satisfy needs for social inclusion and social differentiation.

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