



## The Concept of Self in Different Cultures

The concept of 'self' in Western and Eastern cultures differs significantly around two poles – the subject 'I', characterised by awareness, and the object 'me', encompassing internal consciousness. Although a broad generalisation, the 'self' of western society is individualistic, in contrast to the eastern concept of 'collective self', or the 'we' absorbed into the 'I'. There is general agreement in the literature that the self is formed by social, cultural and historical influences and varies considerably according to the cultural context. Mainstream psychological and psychoanalytic ideas are western-centric, based on the clinical observations of western personality with an emphasis on individualism. With this in mind, is it possible to apply the concepts of self drawn from Western psychology to individuals who have selves that are formed by non-western influences?

The growth of modern psychotherapy in the west has been an extension of the development of individualism. Assertiveness, self-actualisation, personal rights, freedoms, autonomy and independence are emphasised. Acceptance of individual differences is encouraged and the mature individual takes responsibility for themselves and their own self-fulfilment. The individual emerges as an independent entity whose needs, rights and opinions should be respected.

In the Eastern world the concept of 'self' is broader. When a person from an eastern culture says 'I', the cultural meaning is 'we'. The 'self' includes a variety of significant others leading to the 'collateral' or 'unindividuated' self.

The core system of many Middle Eastern cultures is characterised by a hierarchical system of intimate relationships. There are certain role expectations and each individual is expected to remain in this role. In Afghanistan, my own culture, the older child, in particular the male, is expected to be the 'walking stick' of his or her parents and take the primary caregiver role when their parents need them. On the other hand, parents are responsible to ensure their children are nourished in soul and body so they can fulfil this role. Even when the child becomes an adult, his or her wellbeing is the responsibility of their parents. These interdependent responsibilities are in contrast to the individualistic western 'self' with its emphasis on independent self-actualisation.

A popular generalisation of gender differences is often applied to the role of women in Eastern cultures as 'invisible', 'slaves' or 'inferior'. However, women play an active role in this hierarchical system. Although they might be invisible in public, they are not invisible in their private family lives and are a significant part of this 'collective' self. Amongst Muslims the value of women is emphasised in sayings of the Prophet Mohammed (Hadith) 'Heaven lies under the feet of the mother'. 'The most perfect in faith amongst Muslim men is he who is best in manner and kindest to his wife.' These cultural values and traditions provide eastern women with security and safety. It is hard for them to depart from this collective 'self' and become

independent. Even when this security system has deteriorated for any reason, women carry the burden of secrecy of this private 'self'. To talk about these issues is to endure an intrusion into this private world.

In Arabic culture individuals live in a symbolic relationship with their families, and identify themselves as extensions of a collective central identity. The basic needs of the individual are provided for: physical needs, safety, a sense of belonging and feeling loved, and self-esteem. In contrast to the west, conformity and group orientation are valued highly. A family member who leans towards individualism or 'self-actualisation' risks rejection and condemnation. In Afghanistan, older family members provide advice and direction, and give emotional and financial support. Problems are kept within the family and are discussed rarely with non-family members. Expression of emotion is seen to be inappropriate for Afghan men who consider it shameful to cry and believe they should be tough enough to tolerate suffering without crying.

Diverse Eastern and Asian cultures share common themes of respect for authority, mode of emotional expression, strong family ties and high social and role expectations. In Japanese culture a sense of 'I-ness' or even 'I want' or 'I wish' seldom exists. Japanese depend on each other to sense what the other person wants. They keep a private, secretive self within whom a range of feelings, fantasies, and thoughts are present. In Indian culture the collective self is superior to individual self.

An essential consideration of difference between east and west is the profound meaning that a higher 'Self' or 'spiritual self' has for many non-western people. For instance, Muslims believe that suffering, life, death, joy and happiness are derived from God, who gives you the strength to survive. They do not experience themselves as separate from God, nor believe they have any definite control over life. A trust in God reduces stress.

Many therapists claim psychoanalysis is unsuitable for non-western cultures. However, if cultural considerations are taken into account, it is possible to use the 'we-ness' in the counselling relationship to assist clients to work on their very private 'self'. Therapists must be realistic and make suitable adaptations and compromises in consideration of the client's ego-strength and the strength of the traditions present within the client's family and personal identity. Clients from these populations may see themselves as subordinate to the therapist and may have expectations of the therapist as a person who symbolises authority. They may expect a dependent relationship where the therapist will take over and care for them. A failure to consider these differences can damage the therapeutic endeavour.

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