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978-0-521-15360-7 - The Conceptual Self in Context: Culture, Experience, Self-Understanding

Edited by Ulric Neisser and David A. Jopling

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*Part I*

**The self in culture**

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## 1

**Concepts and self-concepts**

ULRIC NEISSER

The conceptual self is a mental representation: It's what we bring to mind when we think about ourselves. Though there are other important aspects of the self, it is this one – the self-concept – that we evaluate, defend, glorify, despise, or seek to improve. Other forms of self-knowledge, based on perception rather than thought, were considered in *The Perceived Self* (Neisser, 1993); this is not the place to rehearse the arguments made there. In a sense those arguments only set the stage; now it's show time. What can be said about the conceptual self?

Conceptual selves are concepts, so a few general remarks about concepts will not be out of place. Loosely speaking, my concept of X is everything I believe (rightly or wrongly) to be the case about X, everything that comes to mind in connection with X. Your concept of X is similarly defined. People who share a language and culture hold many concepts more or less in common; this enables them to communicate, albeit imperfectly. But even when concepts are shared, their content may vary widely from one person to the next. You and I each have a concept of war, for example, but yours may differ substantially from mine; such differences often become obvious in political discussion. Similarly, you and I each have a concept of Ulric Neisser, the author of this chapter. These must be even more different. Mine is surely the more elaborate and detailed; after all it's my *self*-concept, which I've been developing for over half a century.

Concepts that refer to real but complex things, like war and Ulric Neisser, rarely do full justice to their referents. I am sure that neither your conception of war nor mine comes even close to comprehending all that happens in actual wars as they occur around the world. Concepts are one thing, reality is another. The same thing can be said of your concept of Ulric Neisser. More important, the same thing can also be said of *my* concept of Ulric Neisser. Self-concepts never do full justice to the self.

Although real things and the concepts that refer to them are distinct, they are not independent. The causal connections run both ways:

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On the one hand, experience of the real thing helps to shape the concept. What people think about war depends partly on their experience of it (if any), though of course many other factors also play a role.

On the other hand, the concept partly shapes the event itself. What actually happens in war depends partly on what the combatants think *should* happen and, thus, on their concepts of war.

It's the same with the conceptual self. The real Ulric Neisser is one thing; my corresponding concept (which I call "I" or "me") is another. To some extent my self-concept has been shaped by concrete experience of the self: I have learned a few things about Ulric Neisser over the years. But the opposite direction of causation is also important: If I behave in certain ways in order to live up to an idealized self-concept, for example, my real self is being partly shaped by my conceptual self. Generally speaking, the boundary between the self and the self-concept is difficult to fix with certainty.

This is especially true because selves do not exist in isolation; self-knowledge never begins from scratch. Each of us lives – and has grown up in – some specific cultural setting. That setting was the context in which we developed our ideas about human nature in general and about ourselves in particular. Different cultures may stress different kinds of self-concepts and thus, to some extent, support the development of different selves. But how different can they be? Don't all human beings share the same basic characteristics, necessarily incorporated in every self-concept?

This is a controversial question. My own opinion (Neisser, 1988, 1993) is that people are first of all *ecological* and *interpersonal* selves – active embodied agents in the natural and social environments. Their self-concepts will surely reflect at least those characteristics, no matter where they live or what else they may believe. These particular aspects of the self-concept, which I take to be universal, have been summarized by Clifford Geertz in a memorable and often-quoted passage:

The Western conception of the person [is of] a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background. (1984, p. 126)

But Geertz himself believes just the opposite! In his view, self-concepts can and do vary dramatically from one culture to the next. The "Western conception of the person" that the quoted passage so eloquently describes is actually a "rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures," at least according to Geertz. Not all anthropologists agree (Barth, this volume; Spiro, 1993).

This dispute – about the universality versus the cultural specificity of the conceptual self – may be a matter of emphasis rather than a difference of opinion about facts. In comparing any two things – and any two cultures –

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one can choose to stress either similarities or differences. The best course of action in such a dispute may be to suspend judgment, at least for a time, while trying to learn more about the domains involved. Thus, this is an appropriate point at which to review the contributions made in the present volume.

The selections in Part I “The self in culture,” offer a number of insights into the self–culture relationship. In Chapter 2, Hazel Markus and her collaborators, Patricia Mullally and Shinobu Kitayama, introduce the notion of *selfways*. A selfway is a characteristic pattern of engaging in the social world – a pattern that establishes or strengthens certain kinds of self-concepts. Markus et al. are primarily interested in the contrast between European-American selfways on the one hand and those of Japan, Korea, China, and Africa on the other. The European-American tradition values self-consistency: People think of themselves as having internally established traits that remain the same (or at least *should* remain the same) across different social contexts. It also values uniqueness: Each individual has his or her own special blend of those traits. In more relationship-oriented societies like those of Asia, however, neither consistency nor uniqueness is regarded as a virtue. On the contrary, selves are flexibly defined with reference to particular social settings; the most important thing is for the individual to fit into the group and further its goals. This is not an all-or-none cultural difference: Markus et al. do not argue that Americans care nothing for relationships or that Japanese have no persisting individuality. Nevertheless, the selfways that are most obvious and most readily available may differ widely from one culture to another.

These apparently exotic concepts are more relevant to U.S. society than they may seem at first. In one especially interesting section, Markus et al. consider “gendered selves in European-American contexts,” using the same ideas to examine the situation of women in mainstream United States today. In Chapter 3, Linda Koenig explores the implications of these ideas for contemporary U.S. theories of clinical depression. It has often been observed that depressives do not exhibit the unrealistic levels of self-esteem that are otherwise so widespread. Most Americans believe that they are “above average” on desirable traits such as intelligence and leadership; they typically have an exaggerated view of their own control over events and hold unjustifiably optimistic views of what the future has in store for them. It has been argued that such “illusions” are essential to mental health; without them, one is at risk for depression. But the findings reported by Markus and her collaborators force us to reconsider this view. Self-esteem–related exaggerations of this kind are far less common in Japan (and probably in other Asian societies) than in the United States: Most Japanese do not rate themselves as above average on desirable traits. As Koenig points out, this hardly means that most Japanese are depressed. It means

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instead that our theories of self-esteem and its relation to mental health have been far too culture-bound: In illness as in health, the conceptual self must be understood in context.

I have described the self-concept as a set of beliefs, but not all beliefs are equally articulated. This means that we must be cautious in drawing conclusions from what people say about themselves to what they actually believe. In Chapter 4, Fredrik Barth describes two cultures in which this contrast is striking. One of these is the Baktaman of New Guinea, a small isolated nonliterate group that Barth studied intensively. The Baktaman almost never describe themselves or talk about their own traits. But this hardly means that they have no self-concept: They don't say much about other people either, but are nevertheless shrewd judges of character. Similarly, Baktaman men never speak of the extensive and remarkable secret rituals into which they have been initiated; nevertheless, the symbols used in those rituals play major roles in defining their identities.

To contrast with these laconic villagers, Barth describes a group at an apparently opposite extreme. The sophisticated Buddhists of Himalayan Bhutan are ready to talk about the self at the drop of a hat. For them it has endless theoretical charms: Reincarnation, acquired merit, fortune, and many other issues are the subject of frequent discussion (as is the Buddhist doctrine that selves do not really exist at all). But these deep questions seem to have little or no relevance to the moral and practical decisions of everyday life in Bhutan, which are made on very different grounds. Thus, although it is surely true that the conceptual self can be understood only in its cultural context, that context may not be as univocal as is often assumed.

Where Barth is reluctant to take what people may say about themselves at face value, George Lakoff (Chapter 5) regards language and its metaphors as the key to the self-concept. His contribution here is consistent with the more general analysis of concepts that he and Mark Johnson first presented in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and have since elaborated elsewhere (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987). In applying that analysis to the self-concept, Lakoff notes that speakers of English have surprisingly many metaphors that represent the self as divided. These metaphors are at the base of such sayings as:

I'm not myself today.  
Take a good look at yourself.  
He rarely shows his real self.  
I don't know what possessed me to do that.

What is the nature of this division? Many of the metaphors are consistent with what Lakoff calls "the traditional Western model of the transcendental ego," in which a nonbodily "subject" controls – or should control – the body and its passions. Others are more complex; it seems that the subject is

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by no means always in control. Taken together these metaphors comprise a system in which different aspects of the self are seen as distinct entities that have specific relationships to each other: They are in the same or different places, visible or hidden, controlling or controlled, one above or below the other, and so on. Such metaphors are not restricted to English: Japanese has a similar system, and other languages may as well. Lakoff speculates that perhaps “these metaphors are tapping into some sort of real human experience,” that is, an experience in which the subject does not have control of the self. But are they?

In Chapter 6, Charles Nuckolls takes a closer look at the incidence and meaning of the experiences that these metaphors describe. He first notes that although English is indeed rich in metaphors of possession, the corresponding *experiences* (seeming to lose control of the self to some other entity, such as a god or spirit) are rare in the United States. When they do occur, as in certain snake-handling cults, they seem very far removed from normal U.S. life. This state of affairs contrasts with that in Telugu-speaking South India, where episodes of possession (e.g., by a goddess) are relatively common. But Nuckolls observes that whereas the Telugu language has no lack of Lakoffian divided-self metaphors, they are never used for such episodes. Instead, possession phenomena are described with an entirely different vocabulary.

At first glance, this suggests that metaphoric structures may just be irrelevant to actual conceptualizations of the self. But Nuckolls goes on to note a deeper paradox: Possession states may be rare in American life, but they are by no means rare in the American imagination. Books and movies like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Alien* have an apparently endless appeal here: “The United States probably leads the world in movies about self-loss.” From a psychodynamic perspective, this fascination suggests an underlying ambivalence. Americans may not believe in possession, but they also seem very much afraid of it. The situation is quite different in India, where possession is an accepted aspect of experience: The prolific Indian film industry rarely addresses such themes. Nuckolls argues that an adequate theory of such phenomena will require psychoanalytic as well as cognitive modes of analysis.

The common message of these chapters is not only that cultural factors must be considered if we are to understand the conceptual self, but also that considering them can lead to surprising conclusions. In Chapter 7, Daniel Hart and Suzanne Fegley show that this also applies to the study of development. Their examples – organized around the familiar Damon–Hart (1988) model of self-development – show that what children know and say about themselves can take strikingly different forms in different contexts. At one extreme is a selected group of altruistic and culturally active African-American adolescents in the ghettos of Camden, New Jersey,

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who produced sophisticated self-descriptions at a very high level of analysis. At another extreme are the children they tested in Iceland, most of whom could not (or would not) respond to self-referential questions at all. In discussing this difference, Hart and Fegley suggest that the “cultural heterogeneity” of one’s life experience directly influences the articulateness and accessibility of one’s self-concept. Children who encounter a variety of perspectives are often called upon to defend and, hence, to explicate their own beliefs; those who grow up in small homogeneous societies have much less opportunity to do so.

If self-concepts are *concepts*, they should be subject to whatever principles govern concepts in general. Unfortunately, cognitive psychologists do not yet agree on what those principles are. At this time there seem to be four alternative views: the “classical” model, the “prototype” model, the “exemplar” model, and the “theory” model. In Chapter 8, John Kihlstrom and his collaborators, Lori Marchese-Foster and Stanley Klein, review these models with special reference to the self. In doing so, they are particularly concerned with how each model accounts for the *context specificity* of self-concepts. Although Markus et al. (Chapter 2) describe European-American conceptual selves as being relatively consistent from one setting to the next, Kihlstrom et al. think of self-concepts as quite sensitive to context. They have even devised a computer program that asks individuals “what they are like” in different interpersonal relationships and uses the answers to locate each respondent in something like an “interpersonal space.” In the end, they agree with Epstein (1973) that the self-concept is best understood as a kind of personal theory.

In Chapter 9, Robyn Fivush and Janine Buckner take the argument a step further. They agree with Hart and Fegley that the development of the self must be considered in context, but that’s not enough. The function of social interaction is not merely to facilitate internal cognitive processes; it is to establish real social relationships. “The self that emerges from interaction is a dialectical self, defined as much by the other and the interaction as by the individual.” Similarly they agree with Kihlstrom et al. that the self-concept is defined partly through personal memories, but the social function of remembering is not just to recall events; it is to define and redefine the meanings of those events in socially acceptable ways. It seems to me that the parent–child exchanges described by Fivush and Buckner present concrete examples of what Markus and her collaborators (Chapter 2) call “selfways”: culture-specific interpretations of meaning that help to shape the self as well as the self-concept.

Part II of this volume, “Experiencing the self,” addresses a different set of questions. When I first suggested that there are five distinct forms of self-knowledge (Neisser, 1988), the one that seemed most cryptic was the “private self” of inner experience. The other selves were relatively straight-



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forward: The “ecological self” situated in the physical environment and the “interpersonal self” established by social interaction are available through perception (Neisser, 1993); the “temporally extended self” is available through memory (Neisser & Fivush, 1994), the “conceptual self” through language and culture. But what can we say about mental life – about qualia, emotions, aches, fleeting thoughts, persistent feelings, images, dreams – about the experience of being yourself? Unlike other forms of self-knowledge, private experience is not given “through” any medium; it’s just there. Some people (Jung called them “introverts”) are more interested in it than others (“extraverts”), but everyone can attend to it at least a little if they choose. In doing so, they are attending to an aspect of the self.

Although it may be true that people can attend to their own mental experiences “at least a little,” it is surprisingly hard to do so in a consistent way. The history of psychology is a case in point: The introspective evidence on which the founders relied turned out to be embarrassingly inconsistent. Perhaps, however, they were just using the wrong method. “Introspection” in the nineteenth-century European sense is not the only way to pay attention to one’s own mind. There is also a much older set of techniques, originating in Asia, that are known collectively as “meditation.” Some of the insights obtained in those traditions – and thus some of characteristics of the private self – are reviewed by Eleanor Rosch in Chapter 10.

Rosch is an unusually good guide to this territory, especially for readers with backgrounds in psychology and cognitive science. An accomplished experimental psychologist herself, she knows where we are coming from and what questions we are likely to raise. The focus of her chapter is on “mindfulness meditation,” which aims at enabling individuals to become more aware of the ongoing content of their minds. That content turns out to be neither a logical set of categories nor a pleasantly flowing “stream of consciousness” nor even a neatly defined “private self”; instead there is – at first – a rushing tumbling torrent of (mostly self-referential) thoughts. It is that torrent that novice meditators encounter first; they make many additional discoveries if they continue in the discipline.

Rosch’s account of those discoveries is compelling. To read her chapter is to learn quite a bit about Eastern meditative traditions and what they have to teach; one even gets a glimpse of the kinds of changes that such practices can produce in those who pursue them rigorously. Still, most of us are unlikely to do so. If past behavior is any guide, we will probably stick with more familiar modes of thought – specifically, with the modern Western frame of mind that we know so well and in which we feel so comfortable. But what exactly is that “modern” frame of mind? Are we really comfortable with it? How is modernism related to our experience of the private self? In Chapter 11, Louis Sass addresses these questions from a very



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different perspective, one that combines the study of psychopathology with that of culture.

It seems to me that each form of self-knowledge is subject to its own forms of pathology. The disorders of the ecological self are clearly neurological: They include the “unilateral neglect syndrome,” in which patients ignore half of their body along with half of the environment; “anosognosia,” in which they insist that their fully paralyzed limb is moving normally; and “phantom limbs,” which are still experienced as present and painful although they were amputated long ago. In contrast, the classic pathology of the interpersonal self is described as “infantile autism”: The prototypical autistic child is utterly indifferent to the feelings of others and barely distinguishes persons from objects. The remembering self, in its turn, is subject to a wide range of disorders: These include functional and organic amnesia, certain forms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and (recently) the false memory syndrome. As for the conceptual self, its abnormalities are too numerous to mention. They are what Freud used to call “neuroses”; in the final analysis, they are failures of self-understanding. But the paradigmatic disorder of the *private self*, of self-consciousness, of inner life, is more profound than any of these: It is schizophrenia, the psychosis of modern life. At least, this is Sass’s argument.

Schizophrenic delusions often reflect a confusion between consciousness and reality. At one moment the patient feels passive, manipulated, powerless even to think his own thoughts; at another he is the center of the universe and “all the clocks in the world feel his pulse.” Bizarre as these ideas may seem, they are nevertheless curiously close to certain widely accepted positions in modern philosophy. From Kant’s insight that the mind is the measure of all things to Foucault’s metaphor of the centralized prison in which the thoughts of every inmate are open to surveillance, modernism has been marked by an increasing “subjectification” of the world along with an “objectification” of mental life. The very idea of a private self is recent and modern. For Sass it is an idea that reeks of paradox, one that many schizophrenic patients find unbearable. His chapter is an extended analysis of that paradox, undertaken with due regard to other contemporary approaches to mental illness.

Many philosophers have been concerned with understanding the self, and they are by no means all in the tradition described by Sass. In Section III of our book, two philosophers offer quite different perspectives. In Chapter 12, Sheila Mason focuses on current controversies in ethics and their relation to my own theory of self-knowledge. Then, in Chapter 13, David Jopling summarizes the realist and antirealist conceptions of the self in the course of an overview of our entire volume.

The contrasting orientations to ethics that Mason describes are strongly reminiscent of the cultural contrasts drawn by Markus and her collabora-

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tors in Chapter 2. Traditional Western ethics is based on universal principles that (ideally) should govern the moral decisions of individuals. Such a notion is very much in the spirit of the European-American “independent self” described by Markus et al. John Rawls’s famous *Theory of Justice* (1971) epitomizes this view. In recent years, however, it has been sharply challenged by alternative approaches based on cultural and feminist perspectives. One of those alternatives is the *communitarian* ethic, which insists that individuality is not enough: Persons are defined by, responsible to, and “morally embedded” in social groups. The other is the *ethic of care*, which sees “the moral problem as a problem of care and responsibility in relationships rather than as one of rights and rules” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 73). On this attractive view, relations with others are not sustained by a cold calculus of contractual obligations, but by affective ties, nurturance, and trust.

Mason suggests that some of the concepts in my analysis of self-knowledge (Neisser, 1988) may offer useful support for these alternative theories, especially the ethic of care. Analogous to the physical environment that presents an array of affordances to each ecological self, there is a kind of “moral environment” that offers a range of morally relevant choices. Distinguishing good from evil, right from wrong, is thus in some measure a *perceptual* task. Even more relevant is the interpersonal self, present from earliest infancy, that engages in immediate and unreflective social relations with others. It is precisely in those relations that the sense of care and of shared responsibility must begin. Mason’s chapter suggests the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between moral philosophy and cognitive psychology.

Perhaps the most fundamental of the questions raised in this volume is about reality itself: Are there any real selves out there, or only cognitive constructions? According to the currently popular “postmodern” stance, all knowledge (including self-knowledge) is just one or another version of a set of culturally sanctioned stories. In Chapter 13 David Jopling is appropriately critical of this *antirealist* attitude. In an ambitious overview of our book as a whole, Jopling (my coeditor) summarizes much of the argument and shows that antirealism is by no means a necessary conclusion. A *realistic* stance toward the self is equally or more compatible with the four general propositions that emerge from these chapters:

- The self is conceptualized in many different ways across cultures.
- There is wide phenomenological variability in how the self is experienced by different individuals.
- There is a significant disjunction between self-concept and self; people are not necessarily what they believe themselves to be.
- The experience of the self is inextricably woven into the fabric of language and self-description.

Far from forcing us to a skeptical postmodernism, these complexities are fully compatible with a realistic model of the self. For Jopling, the real self is