

## Individuality and community: The limits of social constructivism

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**Abstract** Is selfhood socially constituted and distributed? Although the view has recently been defended by some cognitive scientists, it has long been popular within anthropology and cultural psychology. Whereas older texts by Marcel Mauss, Clifford Geertz, Hazel Rose Markus, and Shinobu Kitayama often contrast a Western conception of a discrete, bounded, and individual self with a non-Western sociocentric conception, it has more recently become common to argue that subjectivity is a fluid intersectional construction fundamentally relational and conditioned by discursive power structures. I assess the plausibility of these claims and argue that many of these discussions of self and subjectivity remain too crude. By failing to distinguish different dimension of selfhood, many authors unwittingly advocate a form of radical social constructivism that is not only incapable of doing justice to first-person experience but which also fails to capture the heterogeneity of real communal life. [community, experience, phenomenology, selfhood, subjectivity]

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### INTRODUCTION

Within the cognitive sciences, the increasing popularity of “4E” approaches to cognition, that is, approaches that highlight the *embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive* character of cognition, has gone hand in hand with a steady criticism of the traditional idea that cognition primarily takes place inside individual brains (Newen, de Bruin, and Gallagher 2018). Whereas proponents of 4E cognition initially emphasized the link between the mind, the body, and the inanimate physical environment, a more recent development has been to also look at the role of the social environment. As the argument goes, some forms of cognition are also socially distributed: They involve other individuals and even groups and social institutions. But what about selfhood? Might selfhood also be socially distributed and constituted? Although the cognitive sciences have only recently explored this question (e.g., see Prinz 2012), the idea has been commonplace within disciplines such as anthropology and cultural psychology for a long time. In the following contribution, I intend to look closely at how notions such as self and subjectivity have been discussed within these disciplines. My aim is not to provide an exhaustive overview but rather to first demonstrate the prevalence of a radical form of social constructivism and then to pinpoint its limitations.

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## TURNING TO ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

In a famous article from 1938, “Une catégorie de l’esprit humain: la notion de personne, celle de ‘moi,’” sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss criticized what he called the “cult of the ‘self’” and its aberrations (Mauss 1985, p. 3). Even if many would find it natural to ascribe the autonomous and individual self a central role in action, morality, and rationality—even if many might find such a notion of self both fundamental and primordial, Mauss argued that we are dealing with a rather peculiar and recent Western invention. In his view, the notion has a complicated historical origin, one deeply influenced by changing social structures and by specific religious (Christian), legal, and philosophical ideas (pp. 3, 22).

Since then, influential authors have picked up on this idea and pointed to the existence of a more relational, collectivist, or “groupist” non-Western conception of self, one according to which the self is seen as “an integral part of the collective” and as nothing “without the collective” (Markus and Kitayama 1994, p. 570).

In an often-quoted passage in “‘From the native’s point of view’: on the nature of anthropological understanding,” anthropologist Geertz (1974, p. 31) writes:

The Western conception of the person as 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 both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures.

This view is echoed by anthropologist Richard Shweder and psychologist Edmund Bourne, who have contrasted a Western *egocentric* conception, which views the self as a discrete and self-reliant entity, which prioritizes and valorizes the autonomous individual and which considers society as something that merely serves the interests of the freestanding individual, with a *sociocentric* and organic conception of the relation between an individual and society that they take to be prevalent in non-Western cultures. On this latter account, the self is not distinguished from or separated from the social context. Rather, selfhood is by and large a question of the culturally determined social role one occupies. According to the non-Western, sociocentric conception, we are defined by our interpersonal relationships and are all part of an interdependent system (Shweder and Bourne 1982, pp. 105, 111, 127, 132).

In a much-cited paper, to mention just one further example, social and cultural psychologists Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama argue that people in different cultures have strikingly different construals of the relation between self and others and that these construals can influence, and in many cases determine, the very nature of individual experience (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 224). They contrast what they call an *independent* from an *interdependent* conception of the self. Whereas the former, which they also call the Western conception, conceives of the self as an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity that primarily feels and acts because of its own unique internal attributes (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 224; Markus and Kitayama 1994, p. 569), the interdependent conception takes

others and the social context to be focal in individual experience (Markus and Kitayama 1991, 225). On this conception, the self depends upon the social context and changes according to the social situation, or as they also put it, given that relations with others in specific social contexts on this account are taken to be constitutive of the self, “others are included *within* the boundaries of the self” (p. 245).

## CONCEPTIONS OR MANIFESTATIONS OF SELFHOOD

When addressing the question of self, some anthropologists and cultural psychologists have claimed that the non-Western self is both less individuated and less differentiated than the Western self, that the non-Western self is a sociocentric or socially distributed self, a self extended to include significant others (also see Marsella 1985). As radical as such claims might sound, it is, however, not always clear how one ought to interpret them. Is the focus on the conception, experience, or nature of selfhood? Do the authors intend to criticize the Western conception for failing to grasp the true interdependent nature of self or are they rather propounding a form of ontological relativism: Cross-cultural conceptual differences reflect or mirror or constitute cross-cultural ontological differences?

At first sight, the ambition of Markus and Kitayama, for instance, seems to be to show that the notion of a discrete and autonomous self is not only not as cross-culturally widespread as often assumed but ultimately also fundamentally out of sync with social and psychological reality. As they write,

Even within highly individualist Western culture, most people are still much less self-reliant, self-contained, or self-sufficient than the prevailing cultural ideology suggests that they should be. Perhaps Western models of the self are quite at odds with actual individual social behavior and should be reformulated to reflect the substantial interdependence that characterizes even Western individualists. (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 247; also see Markus and Kitayama 1994, p. 575)

On the face of it, Markus and Kitayama seem to recognize that cultural ideology is one thing and social and psychological reality another. When looking closer at their texts, however, it becomes increasingly unclear which view they actually defend. On the same page as the quote above, they also endorse the view that cultural differences in styles of behavior and display of emotional expression reflect differences in “the phenomenology accompanying the behavior” (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 247). In an article published a few years later, they argue that you will not only come to believe that you are a discrete and bounded self, but also come to experience yourself as one, if you live in a society with institutions, social practices, and other cultural elements that promote the independent construal of self (Markus and Kitayama 1994, p. 573). At the same time, Markus and Kitayama also claim that the anti-collectivist ideology of the unique and self-contained self, which has increasingly gained a foothold within the social sciences (see Abrams and Hogg 2001, p. 428), does *not* account for actual social behavior (Markus and Kitayama 1994, p. 575) and ultimately fails to grasp “many of the social and interdependent aspects of the self” (p. 569). At one point, Markus

and Kitayama refer to Neisser's distinction between the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, and conceptual self and seem to defend the view that while there are certain features of our embodied experience that are both universal and cross-cultural, and which provide all humans with some private sense of self, there are other aspects of the self that are culture-specific (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 225). But a page later, they revert position again and endorse the strong claim that there are cultures where the individual is no longer "the primary unit of consciousness" (p. 226). But what precisely is that supposed to mean? What do they mean when they, as already mentioned, claim that "others are included *within* the boundaries of the self" (p. 45), on the interdependent, non-Western, construal?

Consider the case of shame. Shame is arguably both a self-conscious and a social emotion (Zahavi 2012); it is, to use a term coined by developmental psychologist Vasudevi Reddy, a self-other-conscious emotion (Reddy 2008) since it makes us aware of our relational being. It concerns the self-in-relation-to-others. The existence of vicarious shame might serve as a particular clear illustration of this. Consider the following example. You were born in the country in which you now reside, but both of your parents are immigrants. You are attending a university class and feel shame when your teacher expounds on how immigrants systematically exploit the generosity of the welfare system. Why would you feel ashamed in a situation like this? The key lies in the relationship between yourself and the ones who are subjected to the denigrating criticism. As a self-conscious emotion, shame targets your own identity. For you to react with shame in a situation like the one described arguably pre-supposes that processes of group identification are in place and that you consider your relationship to your parents (partially) constitutive of your own identity, constitutive of who you are (also see Salice and Montes Sánchez 2016). Such group identifications are obviously not restricted to family members alone, which is also why, when traveling abroad, some might feel ashamed when witnessing the misbehavior of compatriots. We are not only individuals, possessors of singular identities, but also group members, shareholders in collective identities. Granted this analysis is correct, one might then argue that a "loss of face" is simultaneously a personal and a collective process (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007, p. 53).

However, one cannot, based on a study of shame, infer that experience "is always simultaneously social and subjective, collective and individual" (Kleinman and Fitz-Henry 2007, p. 53). To put it differently, whereas the case of shame might serve as a good example of an experience where "others are included within the boundaries of the self," there are other experiences where it is much harder to see such a claim being justified. Consider, for instance, ordinary perceptual experiences such as the perception of the blue sky or the experience of a stomachache. To what extent does it hold true for such experiences that the individual is no longer the primary unit of consciousness and that others are their organizing principle? I do not want to deny that one might come up with examples featuring visual experience and bodily pain where these experiences are not only shaped by culture but also interpersonally structured. But the claim that this holds true for *all* perceptual and bodily experiences is a very strong claim and one that simply is not borne out by the evidence provided by Markus and Kitayama. The same holds true for the claim that the individual in non-Western cultures is no longer the primary unit of consciousness if this is supposed to imply that non-Western

“individuals” cannot distinguish their own perceptual experiences from those of others or that they feel the pain of others in the same way as they feel their own.

The very reference to a Western and a non-Western conception is also problematic. Not surprisingly, several anthropologists have subsequently objected to this binary dichotomization and argued that the claim that there are only two conceptions is a stupendous simplification (Hollan 1992, p. 283; Spiro 1993, p. 108; Cohen 1994, pp. 14–15).<sup>1</sup> Not only does it overlook the diversity and variety of non-Western cultures, but it also presents an astonishingly crude account of how the self has been conceived in Western history and culture as if thinkers like Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, James, Heidegger, and Mead all had the same view of self. That sociocentric accounts of self can also be found in Western theorizing is easy to demonstrate. Take first the case of philosopher and social theorist George Herbert Mead, who in *Mind, Self, and Society* argued that we are selves not by individual right but in virtue of our relations to one another (Mead 1962, p. 182). Given its social constitution, the self “implies the preexistence of the group” (p. 64). Ultimately, Mead is explicit in his defense of the claim that selfhood is socially distributed. As he writes, “No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also” (p. 164).

Consider next, the communitarian criticism of liberalism. For communitarians, such as philosophers Michael Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre, liberalism is premised on a commitment to an asocial individualism that fundamentally misunderstands the relation between the individual and the community (see Mulhall and Swift 1996). We are not social atoms that only subsequently form social relationships with others because we deem that to be to our individual advantage and conducive to the realization of our own pre-social goals. Rather, my goals and preferences, what has significance and meaning to me, are largely shaped by the community of which I am part. But even more important, my very identity is not something ready-made, something fixed by nature that simply awaits discovery. Rather, it is by forging an identity that I become a self. It is by living a life under certain normative guidelines that I develop my own viewpoint on matters, and thereby acquire a distinct individuality. As philosopher Charles Taylor writes, “My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose” (Taylor 1989, p. 27). It is consequently not simply my preferences and values that are influenced by my community. No, it is my very self-identity. To think that one can get to the core of human selfhood by abstracting away from the social context is a fundamental mistake. Rather than being an antecedently individuated self, rather than being merely contingently embedded in a community, my identity as an individual has a communal origin. I cannot be a self on my own, but only with others, as a participant in a process of social experience and exchange (Taylor 1985, p. 35).

## LEVELS OF SELFHOOD

Given a normatively rich conception of the self like the one just presented, that is, an account that defines selfhood in terms of normative commitments and values, it is easy to see the legitimacy of a sociocentric and socially distributed account of selfhood. But is this normative conception sufficient, or might the self be so multifaceted that a comprehensive understanding of its complexity necessitates conceptual differentiation and clarification and ultimately an integration of various levels of analysis?

There continues to be much controversy about the nature, structure, and reality of the self. But one idea being increasingly accepted in both philosophy and empirical science is that the self is neither simple nor univocal but better viewed as multifaceted. While William James already differentiated the material, social, and spiritual self (James 1890, p. 292), and psychologist Ulrich Neisser distinguished the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, and conceptual self (Neisser 1993), neuroscientists Antonio Damasio and Stan Klein have more recently argued that evidence from neuropsychology and neuropathology points to the multidimensional nature of self (Damasio 1999, pp. 16–17, 127; Klein 2010). In a target article published in *Journal of Consciousness Studies* in 1999, philosopher Galen Strawson summarized the ongoing controversy about the notion of self by listing over 20 concepts, including autobiographical self, narrative self, core self, dialogical self, embodied self, normative self, and neural self (Strawson 1999, p. 484). As should be clear from these few references, the discussion is both complex and somewhat confusing. While various authors operate with slightly different distinctions and a variety of labels, there is, however, growing consensus that it makes sense to distinguish, at the very least, a more primitive experientially grounded self from a more normatively enriched and extended self (Fuchs 2017; Gallagher 2000; Strawson 2009; Zahavi 1999, 2005, 2014).

Some dimensions of self are clearly social and first established in and through development, interaction, and enculturation. Consider again the claim that my normative orientation is an essential part of who I am. Who I am is a question of what matters to me and what I care about. This is why knowing I am, say, pro-choice rather than pro-life and pro-gun tells you something about who I am. If I change my interests, political views, religion, or other commitments, I change as well. To the extent that there are aspects of our self-identity constituted by the values and norms we endorse, these aspects can also be lost, for instance, in severe dementia.

But there are also other, arguably more fundamental dimensions present from early on, which are linked to our embodiment and experiential life. Consider, for instance, that we encounter the world from an embodied perspective. The objects I perceive are perceived as being to the right or left of *me* or as within reach or further away from *me*. Likewise, our experiential life is not merely distinguished by its *qualitative features* but also by its *subjective character*. There is not simply something it is like—qualitatively speaking—to taste buttermilk, to feel a headache, or to enjoy ice skating because when we do so, the experiences are not simply given as free-floating anonymous events. When feeling a headache, I am not faced with a

two-step process in which I first detect an unpleasant experience, and then wonder whose experience it might be. Rather, the experiences are necessarily like something *for* a subject. They involve a viewpoint; they come with *perspectival ownership*. Rather than to simply speak of the what-it-is-likeness of experience, it is more accurate to speak of the what-it-is-like-*for-me*-ness of experience (Zahavi 2014, 2020; Zahavi and Kriegel 2016). Consequently, a minimal form of selfhood is a built-in feature of experiential life. One can see this proposal, which has a clear phenomenological heritage, as occupying a middle position between two opposing views. According to the first view, the self is viewed as an enduring substance (say a physical brain or an immaterial soul) that is distinct from and independent of our ongoing experiential life. According to the second view, there is nothing to consciousness besides a variety of ever-changing experiences; there are experiences and perceptions but no experiencer or perceiver. On the present Husserlian proposal, *the experiential self* is not a separately existing entity, it does not exist independently of, in separation from or in opposition to the stream of consciousness, nor is it a social construct that evolves through time. Rather, the self is defined in experiential terms as the first-personal mode of experiencing. It is identified with the subject(ivity) of experience, which is something no experience can lack (Zahavi 1999, 2014).

It is important to recognize the difference between the thicker normative and the thinner experiential notion of selfhood, but we are not faced with competing accounts we have to choose between. Rather, both notions target different aspects or levels of selfhood. One classical thinker to favor such a multidimensional account is Husserl. In his work, the two dimensions just outlined are often discussed under the headings of *pure ego* and *personal ego*.<sup>2</sup> For Husserl, the pure ego is not something “mysterious or mystical” but simply another name for the subject of experience (Husserl 1989, p. 103). One reason Husserl thinks a phenomenological description and analysis of consciousness must include such a reference to a pure ego is because of what he takes to be the radical first-personal character of experience. Experiences do not occur anonymously; rather, they possess an intrinsic individuation. As he writes in *Ideas II*, “What is uniquely and originally individual is consciousness, taken concretely with its Ego” (p. 315), and “This subject has absolute individuation as the Ego of the current cogitation, which is itself absolute individual in itself” (p. 103). To claim that experiences are ownerless, to claim they are nobody’s experiences, would for Husserl not only fail to do justice to this radical individuation, but it would also make it impossible to account for social experiences, which by conceptual necessity presuppose a distinction between self and other (Husserl 1973c, p. 335).

The pure ego has an important role to play in Husserl’s account of consciousness, but as he also points out, even though our experiential life is inherently individuated, it is a formal kind of individuation (Husserl 1973a, p. 23). This can be brought out by the following consideration: I can come to have the same kind of experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and preferences as somebody else without becoming the other, just as somebody else can come to have the same type of experiences and beliefs as I have without becoming me. Given that this is the case, it cannot be the specific content of experience that constitutes my being as a subject and distinguishes me from others. Rather, my most basic self-identity is the formal identity of my

pure ego. But as a human person, I am more than simply a pure ego. I also have character traits, abilities, dispositions, interests, habits, and convictions, and since this is all something that the pure ego lacks, the latter should not, as Husserl writes, “be confused with the Ego as the real person, with the real subject of the real human being” (Husserl 1989, p. 110).

How do we then, according to Husserl, become personal egos? Our identity as persons, our personal character and individuality, is constituted through development as a result of our personal genesis and history. Husserl in particular emphasizes the importance of our convictions, commitments, and decisions. By being committed and devoted to a certain set of central values and by leading a life in the light of specific norms, I come to have a view and voice of my own, and I come to be a true individual in the robust sense of the term. This process does not occur in isolation, however, but is very much a matter of a continuing socialization. As Husserl puts it, every child is “raised into the form of a tradition” (Husserl 1973c, p. 144). By being socialized, we inherit and appropriate a tradition passed down over generations, a tradition that comes to normatively regulate, orient, and organize our experiences and actions by serving as a guide for how one ought to act and behave. Our constitution as persons is consequently also a matter of partaking in an open “generative nexus, a concatenation and intersection of generations” (p. 178). In many cases, the convictions I come to hold are convictions I appropriate from other community members through processes of communication. What they take to be valid acquires validity for me as well. Sometimes, I can reconstruct the rational reasons behind the others’ convictions and actively make them my own; in other cases, I am simply yielding passively to the influences and suggestions of others without even realizing it (Husserl 1977, p. 163):

The development of a person is determined by the influence of others, by the influence of their thoughts, their feelings (as suggested to me), their commandments. This influence determines personal development, whether or not the person himself subsequently realizes it, remembers it, or is capable of determining the degree of the influence and its character. (Husserl 1989, p. 281)

In arguing for this view, Husserl explicitly emphasizes that my being as a person is not simply my own achievement, but the result of what he calls my “communicative intertwinement” with others (Husserl 1973b, p. 603; see also Zahavi 2019).

I do not expect everybody to be convinced by all details of Husserl’s analysis. But what is important for present purposes is his differentiation between the thicker normative and the thinner experiential notion of selfhood and his insistence on their compatibility. One might dispute the differentiation or deny the existence of one or both dimensions. But any of these moves requires careful argument. What is not acceptable is to take findings that clearly pertain to the more normative dimension of self and then without further justification use that as evidence regarding the nature and structure of the self-tout court. But that is precisely what has occasionally happened in the anthropological and cultural psychological debate.

Consider again Geertz, who has argued that the right way to grasp and understand “other people’s subjectivities,” that is, the fundamental structures of their experiential lives, is by



studying their modes of expression and the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions—in terms of which they represent themselves to themselves and to one another (Geertz 1974, pp. 30, 44). As he also puts it: Such symbolic forms “generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display” (Geertz 1973, p. 451). After having then suggested that the pre-occupation with the self as distinct center or subject of experience is a peculiar Western invention, Geertz mentions the case of a young Javanese man, whose beloved wife died suddenly, and who afterwards did his utmost to flatten “the hills and valleys of his emotion” and to appear as calm as possible. Geertz takes this case to demonstrate the parochiality of the Western conception of selfhood (Geertz 1974, p. 34). But why assume that culture-specific rules about how to display emotions in public should affect the idea that the self is a center of awareness?

We find a similar conflation in the work of Markus and Kitayama, who explicitly define the self as “the ‘me’ at the center of experience” (Markus and Kitayama 2010, p. 421), and who then argue that being such a center of awareness requires input from sociocultural practices and that the relevant question is not whether the self is culturally constituted, but rather how and when this happens (2010, pp. 421, 423).<sup>3</sup> On their account, internalized cultural norms “can influence, and in many cases determine, the very nature of individual experience” (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 224). They also argue that there are cultures where the individual is no longer “the primary unit of consciousness” (p. 226) and where “others rather than the self [...] serve as the referent for organizing one’s experiences” (p. 246). Statements like these suggest a strong cultural determinism, where cultural models and theories of selfhood ultimately constitute subjective experience. But the evidence offered to support such a view is puzzling. One study discussed by Markus and Kitayama found that whereas 64% of European-American mothers stressed building children’s “sense of themselves” as an important goal of child-rearing, this only held true for 8% of Chinese mothers (Markus and Kitayama 1994, p. 572). As interesting and as telling as this (by now probably outdated) finding might be when it concerns the question of where and when normative imperatives about individual flourishing are promoted, it is hard to see why such findings should be of any relevance to the question of whether the subject of experience is an individual or the group.

## THE RETURN OF SUBJECTIVITY

Perhaps it could at this point be objected that Geertz and Markus and Kitayama probably would not actually argue that subjective experiences are through and through socially constructed. By failing to distinguish different dimensions of selfhood, they have simply unwittingly advocated more radical views than they might have realized. I think this explanation is likely, but it merely highlights one of my main points, namely, the need for and importance of being clear about the scope of one’s claims. The texts I have been discussing do not contain careful distinctions between the experiential and the conceptual, the ontological and the cultural, nor for that matter clear evidence (be it empirical or theoretical) for why one cannot or should not make such distinctions.

In more recent work, the situation is markedly different. In a 2006 article, for instance, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann complexified the anthropological debate in a significant and important way by drawing on contemporary emotion research. On the one hand, emotions are often listed as paradigmatic examples of subjective experiences, but on the other, they have also often been used, for instance by Geertz, to illustrate the impact of culture. As Luhrmann points out, however, emotions are complex and contain private, universal, public, and culture-specific dimensions. Drawing on componential accounts of emotions, she then lists six factors that an account of emotions must consider: (subjective) feeling, physiology, facial expressions, display rules, appraisals, and representations (Luhrmann 2006, p. 355). Whereas the first three according to Luhrmann are universal and common to all humans, the latter three are culture-specific. One can always discuss some of these details, but Luhrmann's intervention is important since she is precisely offering the more nuanced analysis I have found missing in other anthropological and cultural psychological contributions. Given the multifaceted structure of emotions, it would not be appropriate to home in on, say, the display rules and to argue that since they are culture-specific, emotions in toto are culture-specific as well.<sup>4</sup>

Can one then conclude that the radical social constructivism I have been criticizing is ultimately a strawman, a position nobody actually defends? No, unfortunately not. Specifically targeting the experiential self, clinicians Suze Berkhout, Juveria Zaheer, and Gary Remington have recently argued that even the most basic pre-reflective sense of self, the most intimate first-person experience, is enabled by discursive relations of power and therefore social and relational through and through (2019, pp. 443, 462). To suggest that the self is a pre-social singular entity with determinate ontological boundaries is in their view simply a Eurocentric misconception (pp. 446, 459). In reality, the self is a complex and fluid intersectional construction. In support of the claim that the experiential sense of self, subjectivity, and the first-personal character of phenomenal consciousness is socially constituted and distributed, they refer to recent work in ethnography, anthropology, gender studies, critical race theory, and postcolonial and poststructuralist scholarship (pp. 442, 446, 459, 462). As a case in point, consider the introduction to the volume *Postcolonial Disorders*:

The increasing use of the terms 'subject' and 'subjectivity' in anthropology points to widespread dissatisfaction with previous efforts to understand psychological experience and inner lives in particular cultures, characteristic of an earlier generation of psychological and cultural anthropologists—however important and incomplete that work was. 'Subjectivity' immediately signals awareness of a set of historical problems and critical writings related to the genealogy of the subject and to the importance of colonialism and the figure of the colonized 'other' for writing about the emergence of the modern (rational) subject. Subjectivity denotes a new attention to hierarchy, violence, and subtle modes of internalized anxieties that link subjection and subjectivity, and an urgent sense of the importance of linking national and global economic and political processes to the most intimate forms of everyday experience. It places the political at the heart of the psychological and the psychological at the heart of the political. Use of the term 'subject' by definition makes analysis of the state and forms of citizenship immediately relevant in ways that analysis of the 'self' or 'person' does not. (Good et al. 2008, pp. 2–3)

That anthropology has become interested in subjectivity is a significant step when compared to Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous assertion in *The Raw and the Cooked* that it might be best if anthropology would disregard "the thinking subject completely, [and] proceed as if the thinking process were taking place in the myths, in their reflection upon themselves and their interrelation" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, p. 12). As anthropologist Sherry Ortner has rightly pointed out, it is crucial to restore subjectivity to social theory, not only because it is a major dimension of human existence, but also because it is connected with agency and has political importance (Ortner 2005, pp. 34–35). As should be clear from the introduction quoted above, however, it would be a mistake to assume that this interest would automatically go hand in hand with an increased recognition of the irreducibility of first-personal experience. In this context, the reference to subjectivity is indebted far more to the work of philosopher and historian of ideas Michel Foucault and post-structuralism than to, say, Husserl and phenomenology. Partly playing on the etymological roots of the term "subject" (one is always subject to, or the subject of, something), Foucault claimed that people come to relate to themselves as selves, come to engage in practices of self-evaluation and self-regulation, within contexts of domination and subordination. As he writes, "the subject who is constituted as subject—who is 'subjected'—is he who obeys" (Foucault 1990, p. 85). On such an account, subjectivity is not an inherent feature of experience, but an ideological category produced in a system of social organization.

It is at this point important not to conflate different explanatory agendas. It is one thing to show that *what* we experience can be influenced by social relations and power structures, that the significance we attribute to personal experience might be historically and culturally modulated, that our social identity categories are discursively constructed, and that the normative self—defined in terms of moral commitments, endorsed values, and the like—is a social entity. Arguing for all these claims would be uncontroversial. To argue that experience as such, that is, the very fact *that* we have experiences is a product of discursive power structures and that the experiential self—defined in terms of the first-personal or subjective character of phenomenal consciousness—is socially constituted and constructed is entirely different and far more controversial. But often, the topics are lumped together; often, authors move from the claim that our experiential life is *shaped* by social interaction and culture to the claim that it is *enabled* by social interaction and culture. But these are by no means identical claims, and because of this confusion, authors often advocate claims that far outstrip the evidence they present and the arguments they offer.

As anthropologist Anthony Cohen has pointed out, being clear about the difference between *individualism* and *individuality* is important (Cohen 1994, p. 14). Whereas individualism privileges and valorizes the non-social individual, to ascribe individuality to community members is simply to recognize them as distinct subjects of experience. One cannot without explicit evidence conclude that sociocentric cultures that do not promote individualism, that is, cultures where individual interests are subordinated to the good of the collective do not contain individual subjects. Maybe North Americans are more likely to describe themselves in terms of unique and distinctive features and character traits than Japanese who might be more inclined to define themselves in terms of social ties and group affiliations. Does this difference

point to interesting cultural differences between North Americans and Japanese? It probably does. Does it entail that Japanese are not individual subjects of experience but indistinguishable and interchangeable bearers of the social roles they perform? Hardly. We should not conflate a particular ideology of individualism, which might be distinctive of certain cultures, with the possession of first-personal experience, which arguably is part of what it means to be human.

This was recognized by Mauss. As he clarifies in his 1938 article, his target was the concept of self as a cultural category and the question of how individualism came to acquire its contemporary significance in the public and institutional domain. Mauss was concerned with historically and culturally divergent *conceptions* of self and was not discussing or criticizing the sense of self and its psychological role. As Mauss writes, “it is plain, particularly to us, that there has never existed a human being who has not been aware, not only of his body, but also at the same time of his individuality, both spiritual and physical” (1985, p. 3).<sup>5</sup>

The tendency to conflate different explanatory agendas and to base very radical claims about the social construction of experience and selfhood on irrelevant evidence can not only be found within anthropology and cultural psychology. As the following two examples can show, it is far more widespread.

In a landmark article from 1991, historian Joan Scott criticized the idea that experience is a source of incontestable evidence. Scott’s agenda was historiographical. She was critical of a tendency prevalent in feminist studies to base its understanding and theorizing of women’s reality on the reporting of personal experience. Whatever merits this criticism might have, however critical we ought to be vis-à-vis the claim that nothing could be truer than a subject’s own account of what she has lived through, Scott eventually veered into metaphysical terrain. She ended up claiming that experiences are linguistic events, that the coherence and unity of selves are socially constructed, and that subjects and identities are all constituted discursively (Scott 1991, pp. 776, 793).

In the concluding chapter of his influential book *Interaction Ritual Chains* from 2004, sociologist Randall Collins writes that a core sociological position throughout the 20th century—a position that allegedly has gathered plenty of supporting empirical evidence—is that individual subjectivity is a social product. Microsociology has shown that we are all socially constructed and, as he puts it referencing Goffman, that the self is the product rather than the cause of a successful interactional performance (Collins 2004, pp. 345–346).

It is interesting to see what kind of arguments Collins offers supporting this view. Rather than engaging with issues in philosophy of mind, Collins repeatedly refers to Mead’s claim that thinking is an internalized conversation (Collins 2004, pp. 45, 203), and he then proceeds by investigating how something like the admiration for individual uniqueness and nonconformity as well as developing an introverted personality type has emerged historically (pp. 345, 347). As he remarks at one point, whereas people traditionally were conformists and simply participated in the normal collective life, it was only “around the nineteenth century, when

mansions were built with separate entrance corridors (instead of one room connecting into the next) and back stairways for servants” that the fully private introvert became common (pp. 362, 367). As interesting as this observation might be, is it really of pertinence to the topic under discussion?

A direct implication of a strong social constructivist account of experience is that creatures who are not yet enculturated and who have not yet participated in robust discursively shaped interpersonal interactions—as well as all non-social organisms—lack experience. A crying newborn would, by this reasoning, not be experiencing distress and would not yet be a subject of experience. That already seems a highly counterintuitive claim, but the real challenge is to explain how this experienceless creature becomes phenomenally conscious as a result of being discursively regimented.

None of the authors I have discussed offer any such account. None have shown how states initially non-conscious can be transformed into subjective experiences through social interaction, enculturation, and interpellation. Perhaps it might be objected that the real issue of contention is not about having phenomenal conscious states but about coming to experience and classify them as inner, private, subjective, and as mine rather than as yours. The argument could then be, that this only happens at a relatively late stage of development and that it results from interpersonal communication and enculturation. It is only in interaction that the child comes to acquire a sense of the perspective of others and thereby comes to appreciate the particularity of its own perspective. As has also occasionally been claimed, we learn to think silently and privately only after having learned it publicly in communication with others, and our experiential life is only privatized through social experience. Both norms of decorum and strategic reasoning gradually teach us to “edit and filter what we say publicly about ourselves, and thus to render ever more aspects of our experience private” (Crossley 2011, p. 99). However, to make such an argument—which I agree with—would be to shift the focus of the conversation. The claim that our experiential life is fundamentally first-personal is not a claim about how we classify and categorize our experiences. It is a claim about the nature of phenomenal consciousness. It is the claim that our experiences, in virtue of being the phenomenally conscious episode they are, are also presented to us in a way that differs from how they are available and accessible to others. The claim would be that this first-personal (and self-involving) givenness is manifest in the very having of the experience and that it even obtains when we lack the conceptual skills to articulate or appreciate it (Zahavi 1999, 2014, 2020).

To dispute this claim, it is not sufficient to show that the norms that guide our lives are socially derived or that a variety of emotional experiences are influenced by social relations. What has to be shown is rather that first-personal experience is constitutively dependent upon social interaction, not merely when it comes to its specific content but as regards its very *being*. Absent relevant social interaction and discursive regimentation, there either would be no experiential life or this experiential life would not be first-personal, but rather publicly available and epistemically accessible to a plurality of subjects, in the same way as cobblestones

and clouds. But none of the theorists discussed above has ever mounted anything like an argumentative defense of such a claim.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION: INDIVIDUALITY AND COMMUNITY

Why do anthropologists and cultural psychologists engage with and address the question of self in the first place? One argument has been that such an engagement is called for if one wants to clarify and understand social relations, collective identities, and communal rituals (Cohen 1994, p. x; Sökefeld 1999, p. 418). Bearing this ultimate agenda in mind, might one then not claim that the appeal to a form of irreducible first-person subjectivity is a non-starter since such an approach can never offer a satisfactory clarification of the topics of sociality, intersubjectivity, and community? Was that not precisely the Achilles heel and central weakness of Husserlian phenomenology? Let me by way of conclusion suggest that the fact of the matter is very much the reverse (see also Zahavi 2001). Experiential subjectivity is not an obstacle but a requirement for any proper intersubjectivity, just as individual minds are pre-conditions for genuine we-phenomena. To conceive of the difference between self and other as a founded and derived difference, say, as a difference that arises out of an undifferentiated anonymous life, obscures that which has to be clarified, namely, inter-subjectivity understood as a relation between subjects. In a similar manner, undervived plurality lies at the heart of communal life. Collective intentionality and we-experiences do not require or amount to a single unified consciousness. Even though a we involves some kind of unity, some shared perspective, a we is a *first-person plural*. Every we involves plurality; every we involves a diversity bridged rather than erased. Difference must be preserved to make possible a genuine being-with-one-another (Zahavi 2021b). To quote the philosopher Hannah Arendt, togetherness and co-operation require a preservation of diversity and should ultimately be understood not as a fusional one-ness (Arendt 1958, p. 123) but as a “paradoxical plurality of unique beings” (p. 176).

The self is a multifaceted phenomenon. A comprehensive understanding of its complexity necessitates conceptual differentiation and clarification and ultimately an integration of various levels of analysis. To argue, without further qualifications, that *the* self is discursively constituted and socially distributed, that it is nothing without the collective, indistinguishable from the social context, and that our individuality is reducible to the particular intersection and amalgamation of culturally determined social roles we inhabit are indefensible claims. A failure to properly distinguish cultural, conceptual, and experiential perspectives on the different dimensions of self will inevitably lead to a mischaracterization of the research domain and also to poor social science. This is by no means to deny the fundamental importance of sociality. We come to acquire a more robust view and voice of our own by being committed and devoted to a certain set of values and by leading a life in the light of specific norms. We would not have the normative commitments (and entitlements) we have, were it not for the social relationships in which we engage. To that extent, others might be said to be constitutively involved in our lives. But acknowledging this, and acknowledging that the attitudes of others, their respect and support, are of central significance for one’s quality of life, for our

social status, and for our flourishing as individuals, does not entail that the experiential sense of self, the very subjectivity of experience, the self understood as a locus of awareness, is also socially constructed.

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## Notes

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1. Markus and Kitayama do recognize that their distinction between the independent and interdependent construal of self is not absolute. They concede that there might be other views of self that cannot be classified according to this binary model (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 225), and they also admit that even if the independent construal of self might be said to be prototypical of "White, middle-class men with a Western European ethnic background" (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 225), it might actually be less apt when it comes to women in general, as well as men from other ethnic groups or social classes. Given all these qualifications, given that the independent construal on their own admission is not considered applicable to half of the population, namely, women (Markus and Kitayama 1994, p. 575), one might wonder why they labeled it the Western conception of self in the first place.
2. For a more extensive presentation of Husserl's position, see Zahavi (2021a).
3. To support their claim regarding the interdependent and culturally shaped nature of self, Markus and Kitayama also appeal to neuroscience, and in particular, to a well-known study by neuropsychologists Zhu et al. (2007) that purports to show that culture affects the psychological structure of self and that there are marked neural differences between the Western self and the Chinese self. What is remarkable about the study in question is that the authors at no point define what they mean by self. This conspicuous lacuna is unfortunately quite common in much neuroscientific literature on the neural correlates of self and self-representation (Zahavi and Roepstorff 2011). Whereas great effort is typically invested in explaining the experimental setup and discussing and interpreting the results, much less time is devoted to discussing and clarifying the alleged explanandum. But a lack of clarity in the concepts used leads to a lack of clarity in the questions posed and thus also to a lack of clarity in the design of the experiments supposed to provide an answer to the questions.
4. There is much to like in Luhmann's article, but I also think her analysis falls short in one specific regard. When talking about the feeling component, the raw subjective experience, the qualitative what-it-is-likeness, Luhmann claims that it is the least researchable factor, and something that ultimately must remain unknowable, inaccessible, unsharable, and inarticulable (Luhmann 2006, p. 349). I think Luhmann has here been misled by a certain type of analytic philosophy. I think much more can be said about the subjective feeling component, and I think phenomenology has developed the resources for doing so (see Gallagher and Zahavi 2021; Szanto and Landwehr 2020).
5. Given the expectation that disciplines such as anthropology and cultural psychology should be particularly sensitive to and respectful of topics such as diversity and otherness, a surprising outcome of the claim that the subject in non-Western collectivist cultures can be understood as a nexus of culturally determined social roles is the abject failure to respect the irreducible uniqueness of the non-Western other. This treatment aligns with Peter Berger and Thomas

Luckmann's description of the institutional process of *reification*: "There is then a total identification of the individual with his socially assigned typifications. He is apprehended as *nothing but* that type" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, p. 108). As if this is not enough, the reductive stereotyping also goes in the other direction. In making their contrast between the sociocentric and egocentric conception, Shweder and Bourne lament the psychological costs of living under the thrall of the latter conception:

"It is also sobering to reflect on the psychic costs, the existential penalties of our egocentrism, our autonomous individualism. There are costs to having no larger framework within which to locate the self. Many in our culture lack a meaningful orientation to the past. We come from nowhere, the product of a random genetic accident. Many lack a meaningful orientation to the future. We are going nowhere—at best we view ourselves as 'machines' that will one day run down." (Shweder and Bourne 1982, p. 132).

As an attempt to capture the identities and self-experiences of Western subjects, this depiction must not only be classified as simple-minded; it also replicates in the most caricatured manner, the Occidental picture of Westerners as uncultured machine-like creatures.

6. Some cognitive scientists do in fact defend the claim that human beings who are denied all social interaction would be like zombies, "completely self-less and thus without consciousness" (Prinz 2003, p. 526). For a criticism, see Zahavi (2014).

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