

Review Paper

Self in the Context of Gender, Culture and Society: A Psychological Analysis



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Abstract

In search of a universal law (s) of a pure human nature, "self" had been advanced as a theoretical construct having stable and universal character. However, such a treatment could not reveal the nature of self in all its complexity because of the diverse plurality existing within our social world. Instead, self is needed to be understood in depth according to varying contexts, i. e., culture, caste, class, gender, time and space. The "social" is an inseparable part of one's self because society not only defines but creates psychological reality. It moulds our psyche and our existence becomes meaningful so long there is a salience and fit between these two. It is the context where one recognizes his or her identity in socially defined terms, and these definitions become reality as the individual lives in society. The present paper analyses the ways how self, in its different manifestations, is influenced by the contextual realities surrounding gender, culture and society.

Keywords: Self-identity, social identity, gender, social context, mental health.

Introduction

Self is the centre of one's existence. It encompasses all aspects (I, me, and mine) of being. There have been efforts to understand this concept in various disciplines, especially in Psychology and Philosophy. The twentieth century has contributed a lot in furthering our knowledge about self. It has witnessed a steep progression in the studies focusing on different aspects of self; and a number of them have indicated at the distinguished uniqueness of the person embodying it.

Definitions of Self

The self has been defined as a custodian of awareness which notices what goes on in its own field (Sullivan, 1947). According to Murphy (1947), it is an individual known to the individual. Hamachek (1978) calls it a person's own private picture of himself or herself and Jersild (1952) defines it as one's total subjective environment with thoughts and feelings constituting awareness of her or his existence; and Basch (1983) states that self is an individual's unique experiences with cohesion and continuity throughout life.

Besides being something person specific or individual, the self has a social origin and it is dealt best in the "symbolic interactionism" approach. Highlighting this aspect, Mead (1934) writes that it is essentially a social structure which arises in social experience. Cooley's (1902) "looking-glass self" theory proposes that other people function as mirrors for us; as they reflect to us images of ourselves. A self-idea of this sort has three principal elements

- 1) the imagination of our appearance to the other person
- 2) the imagination of his or her judgment of that appearance
- 3) and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification.

This is very relevant to understand people's situation in society; as the reflected appraisals play a very significant role in regulating our behaviour. These appraisals make us conform to the cultural and behavioural standards of society. In fact, various dimensions of the contexts, i. e., culture, caste, class, gender, time and space play a significant role in moulding our self.

It is the social dimension that finds the maximum share of attention from James (1890) in his pioneering work on self. The social impact on self contributes to the formation of social self. The 'social self', according to James (1890) refers to the recognition gained from others in society and one's impressions carried by them. In his view, a person has as many social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he or she cares.

The person generally shows a different side of his or her personality to each of these different groups. The person is able to do so because of the reflexive nature of self. According to Wenkart (1950), it is both a knower (subject) and a thing that is known (object). This very nature of self gives human beings a special power not only to look at the world through their self, but also to reflect on self and change it if needed. This creates the psychological space where the individuals relatively work on self-construal processes.

Different Manifestations of Self

Self takes various forms when it involves in different processes going within a person, e.g. self-concept, self-esteem, self-image and self-identity.

Self-concept

Self becomes “self-concept” as a result of being perceived and reflected upon (Goswamy, 1977). This purely cognitive aspect of self, acts like a map which one can consults in order to understand himself or herself, especially in the moments of crisis and choice (Raimy, 1948). It can also be used as a guide to appropriate conduct (Coor & White, 1974) because once a self-concept is formed; it becomes a standard with which new experiences are compared and assimilated in the existing schema. The self-concept or the idea of “what we are” and “what we can do” (awareness of “being” and of “action”) is not present at birth but arises out of social experience and interaction. It both incorporates and is influenced by the individual’s location in the social structure. It achieves its particular shape and form in the matrix of a given culture, social structure and institutional system (Rosenberg, 1981).

Self-esteem

Baumiester (1999) has defined self-esteem as an evaluative dimension of self-knowledge. Self-esteem is an extent to which one feels good about oneself and prizes, values, approves or likes oneself (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Besides this, it is partly influenced by how the person is rated by others. Therefore, in addition to the individual psychological processes (e. g., self-attribution and psychological centrality), the factors related to the social context (e. g., reflected appraisals and social comparisons) also contribute to the development of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). The interplay of social and interpersonal relationships and contacts plays a significant role in the development of self-esteem. Our liking and disliking ourselves in traditional societies is determined more by our context. We all tend to appreciate and value ourselves only for those qualities which are approved and accepted by society. In case of gender roles, although we may like our personal attributes, but the complete fulfilment may be experienced by achieving consistency with the social standards of feminine or masculine behaviour.

Self-image

The preceding processes leads to the development of self-image, a relatively more concretized and crystallized self-conception which remains fairly stable over a period of time. This image (self-image as well as social-image) and the roles one performs in society provide individuals with an identity - a status or label.

Self-identity

Self-identity is a uniquely integrated and temporally consistent set of conceptions that an individual is having about the self’s physical, psychological and social attributes (Whitbourne, 1987). It is germane to a person’s meaningful existence in society. It integrates one’s meaning to oneself with that of one’s meaning to others, thus linking self with the world. A coherent identity not only gives one a sense of uniqueness, but also a sense of relatedness with the world and social network, and a sense of continuity across time. It is important for giving direction and effectiveness to one’s life and sustaining intimacy in relations with others. Thus it is a product of a person’s attitudes, values and past experiences as well as the social group(s) to which she or he belongs. Besides being relatively permanent, identities are flexible to some extent. In fact, as complex creatures, human beings have multiple identities arranged hierarchically by salience. They are evoked according to the suitability and relevance of the situation.

Identities can be categorized basically into three levels, namely human, personal and social. The *human identity* is based on one’s awareness of self as a human being. It is formed as a result of comparing oneself with other members of the human species. The *personal identity* refers to those traits and behaviours that the person finds self-descriptive, such as bodily and psychological characteristics, personal tastes, intellectual concerns and feelings of competence. These definitions distinguish and separate the person from others in his or her group. The *social identity* is derived from one’s knowledge of his or her membership of a social group. It is an individual’s self-definition in a social context.

Self in the Social Context

The society or a social group has profound impact on individuals’ identity. Since they exist in relation to others, therefore their concept of who they are, what sort of people they are, and whether they relate to others as members of in-group or out-group, is largely determined by their feeling of belongingness to a particular group. In this context, it is notable that individuals’ ability to form and modify an identity and to adopt a particular identity style may enormously differ with changing social roles and varying cultural emphases (Helson et al., 1995).

The social embeddedness of self makes it explicit that social-identity plays an important part in the development or change of a person’s self-identity. Perception of differences or similarities leads to the formation of categories which give different identity statuses to different groups of people viz. men, women or women belonging to various caste and class strata. Roles get defined on basis of the general orientation of the group members.

A sense of positive self-identity (containing both personal and social identity) is considered crucial for the well-being of an individual. According to Baumeister (1986), people “who have problems with identity, are generally struggling with the more difficult aspects of defining the self, such as the establishing of long-term goals, major affiliations, and basic values” (p.4). Self is socially constructed. Therefore, society’s role in moulding one’s ego and affecting our life through processes like socialization needs to be looked at in detail. Differences in ways of socializing girls and boys in a traditional patriarchal society of India may have different outcomes for their personality.

Conclusion

'Self' as a psychological construct has been understood and interpreted differently in different disciplines. Earlier it was considered have stable and universal character; but the post-modernist view emphasized the role of contextual factors in shaping and determining the nature of self. Since, the human beings are social by nature, so it becomes an inseparable part of their existence. Society not only defines but creates psychological reality for them. They experience their identity in socially defined terms, and so are their roles evaluated. The knowledge of their membership of a particular social group, that is, the social identity, has a significant impact on their mental health as well. Hence, the ideology of gender, cultural beliefs, practices and values of the society create space for the growth and development of a person in to one who becomes the ideal for future generations. It is the responsibility of the society to socialize its children in a way that they can develop a strong personal identity, and at the same time, feel proud of their social identity.

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