

# The Psychology of the Social

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## 7 Self as social representation

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*Daphna Oyserman and Hazel Rose Markus*

### **Introduction**

A sense of self develops as people find or create answers to the questions of 'who am I' and 'where do I belong.' The psychological literature often focuses attention on the way in which people actively and deliberately pursue these questions in therapy, in solitary travels to the top of mountains, in adolescent rebellions, and in midlife crises. Indeed many of the most obvious answers to these seemingly personal questions are highly idiosyncratic; they are custom-crafted, reflecting fine-grained interpretations of individual experience. Some of the answers, however, are a consequence of one's relative positioning in socio-political and historical context, and they are developed interpersonally and consensually. It is these shared and implicit answers to the 'who am I' and 'where do I belong' questions – the *social representations of selfhood* – that are the focus of this chapter. We will suggest that although making a self appears to be an individual and individualizing pursuit, it is also a collective and collectivizing one.

From a societal perspective, self-construction is too important to be left as a personal project. Social integration and the social order require that individuals of a given group have reasonably similar answers to the 'who am I' and 'where do I belong' questions. Among the commitments of every cultural and social group are those that provide a vision of the 'good' or 'appropriate' or 'moral' person. The philosopher Taylor writes: 'To know who you *are* is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what is not, what has meaning and importance for you, and what is trivial and secondary' (1989, p. 28). A cultural group's shared ideas about 'how to be' are reflected in culturally significant stories, sacred texts, proverbs, icons, and institutions, as well as lived in the everyday practices (e.g. language, caretaking, schooling, media, religious, workplace, etc.) of social life.

Our goals in this chapter are to (1) outline the powerful, but often

invisible, role of social representations in framing and undergirding the self; (2) provide an example of variation in social representations of selfhood; (3) discuss how individuals come to terms with multiple or conflicting social representations of selfhood; and (4) sketch some consequences of a social representational approach to the self.

We will argue that social representations are critical to the process of framing, developing, and maintaining a sense of self. These representations are the basic building blocks from which the sense of self is constructed. A social representational approach to the self is relatively new in psychology (Farr and Moscovici, 1984; Shweder and LeVine, 1984). For the most part, the socio-cultural embeddedness of the self has been under-explored, and the self as formulated in Western social psychology has been a fundamentally *asocial* entity. Why has this been the case? As suggested by Holland and Quinn (1987), social representations, what they call ‘cultural frames’, are powerful precisely because they are taken for granted, transparent, and therefore seem logical, necessary, and natural. Social representations provide the form and the language for the ‘who am I’ or ‘who are we’ questions, and in so doing structure the nature of the ‘right’ answer. Thus, in the US, in the course of developing a sense of self, a person typically asks ‘How much have I achieved?’ and/or ‘How happy am I?’, and typically does not ask ‘Is everything OK in my group?’, ‘Am I meeting the needs or living up to the expectations of my group?’ It is no accident then that American selves are conceptualized and expressed in terms of agency or a lack of it, and happiness or the lack of it. Thus a social representational approach is a useful extension of previous social psychological theorizing on the self because it further highlights the role of culture and the social context.

#### **Social representations of selfhood – the uniformity in the uniqueness**

Replaying some of psychology’s and sociology’s earliest themes, recent formulations of the self in the social sciences and philosophy stress that it is a necessary social construction. Erez and Earley (1993) claim: ‘The self is a universal aspect of humanity and its definition is shaped differentially according to various cultural values and perspectives’ (p. vii). One’s sense of self, or perhaps more appropriately, one’s *senses* of self – self can be considered from a variety of perspectives – develop as people assign meaning or significance to themselves as people (Neisser, 1988). This self-making process is an interpersonal and collective achievement (e.g. Baldwin, 1911; Sullivan, 1940), and depends in large part on the shared ideas of those in one’s most significant socio-cultural niches.

According to Vygotsky (1978), children are born into a world of public representations and these representations are eventually internalized through communication and come to form the basis of individual mental representations. As Baldwin writes, 'The knower does not start out in isolation and then come to some sort of agreement with others by "matching" his world of independent sensations and cognitions with theirs. On the contrary, he starts with what he and his neighbors' experiences in common verify, and only partially, and by degrees does he find himself and prove himself to be a relatively competent independent thinker' (1911, p. xx), or, for our purposes, a relatively competent and independent 'self.'

The public representations of selfhood that characterize a given socio-cultural niche function as common denominators – they provide the primary structure of the selves of those who live within these contexts. These shared ideas produce necessary, although often unseen, commonalities in the selves of people within a given context. In defining the nature and role of social representations in constructing the self, we draw on the ideas of Moscovici (1984a) and Farr (1987b) and on the ideas of cultural anthropologists, most notably Holland and Quinn (1987), Hutchins (1980), and D'Andrade (1981), who have developed the idea of cultural schemas (see, e.g., Quinn and Holland, 1987).

Social representations have been described as constructs in the minds of members of a group which allow them to refer to some object for the purpose of communicating and behaving (Farr, 1987b). Individuals are heir to a great deal of knowledge about the world that they do not necessarily draw from first-hand experience (White, 1992; von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, and Vargas, 1994). This cultural knowledge is transmitted and acquired through language and in interaction with others (Holland and Quinn, 1987). There is perhaps no experience, however concrete or novel, that is not informed by shared models which specify what is in the world and how it works (Holland and Quinn, 1987; Strauss and Quinn, 1994). According to Moscovici, social representations refer to a substratum of images and meanings which are essential for societal functioning. They are 'cognitive matrices coordinating ideas, words, images, and perceptions that are all interlinked; they are common sense theories about aspects of the world' (Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983, p. 15).

Collectivities could not operate were it not for a set of theories and ideologies, which they transform into shared realities. Quinn and Holland (1987) refer to these shared commitments and understandings as cultural schemas. They are the 'presupposed, taken for granted models of the world that are widely shared (though not to the exclusion of other

alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of the world and their behaviour in it' (Quinn and Holland, 1987, p. 4).

*Individual and collective representations of the self*

To illustrate the role of social representations in shaping the self, we can compare the social representations of selfhood associated with individualism and the social representations of selfhood associated with collectivism (Schwartz, 1990; Triandis, 1990a; Markus and Kitayama, 1991a; Oyserman and Markus, 1993). From a North American perspective, a collective answer to the 'who am I' question is that 'I am a bounded, autonomous whole.' The solution to this question from a Japanese perspective is 'I am a member or a participant of a group.' The two approaches to selfhood are perhaps even more different than this example conveys. The social representation of Americans assume the separate individual as the first fact, the uncontested reality, while for the Japanese it is the interdependent group that is the taken-for-granted, first fact. Both cultural groups must come to terms with the 'who am I' and 'where do I belong' questions. But for Americans these questions are accorded primacy, while for the Japanese they are considered in conjunction with another set of questions about 'Who are we?'

Moscovici (1984a) suggests that all ideas about the social world can be viewed as means of resolving pervading psychic or emotional tensions (cf. Ortner, 1984). The answers to the 'who am I?' and 'where do I belong?' questions are not obvious – there can be a variety of viable solutions and a group's social representations authorize and make 'real' the group's commitment to one solution over others. Individuals need not, perhaps cannot, grapple with such existential issues alone. This would seem to be one of the reasons for which humans have cultures (Carrithers, 1992). As Godelier (1986) asserts, 'human beings, in contrast to other social animals, do not just live in society, they produce society in order to live' (p. 1). Similarly, Shweder (1982) suggests that every group must generate a set of solutions to the questions embedded in what he calls the 'existence themes'. These include 'what is self' (or 'what is me') and also a set of highly related questions such as 'what is good?', 'what is moral?', 'what is male?', 'what is female?', 'what is mature?', 'what is childlike?', 'who is our kind and who is not?', 'what is our way and what is not?', and the question of hierarchy, 'why do people share unequally in the burdens and benefits of life?'

As the foundation or scaffolding on which the self is constructed, social representations also condition habitual culture-specific patterns of

thinking, feeling, and acting (Farr, 1987a; Farr and Moscovici, 1984; Moscovici, 1984a). One can envision two high-achieving high-school students, one American and one Japanese, each of whom imagines themselves to be a committed, hardworking student. In many respects the manifest daily experiences of these students may be quite similar. Yet, the American student's view of self is likely to be anchored in a social representational repertoire that includes images and ideas of independence, individual freedom, creativity, uniqueness, and the importance of innate ability, while the Japanese student's view of self may be constructed from social representations which includes images and ideas of interdependence, harmonious group interaction, striving to attain standards or fulfil obligations, and the importance of persistence and endurance. As a consequence, the experience of school, of achievement, and of one's self as a student, may be systematically divergent. Exactly how social representations constrain and afford individual and the collective experience and expression of self and identity is, of course, the remaining theoretical and empirical project.

### **Divergence in social representations of the self**

#### *Individualism and collectivism as social representations*

In what ways might social representations of self, person, and society differ? The extensive literature on individualism and collectivism is a useful starting place. Individualism and collectivism can be thought of as different systems of ideas, images, and understandings about people, groups, and society. Thus, individualism focuses attention on the attainment of personal success (Kagitcibasi, 1987; Triandis, 1987; Georgas 1989). Within this world view, the development and maintenance of a separate personal identity is extolled, the importance of striving for self-actualization is highlighted, and the self is viewed as the basic unit of survival (Hui and Villareal, 1989; Markus and Kitayama, 1991a). In this solution to selfhood differences between the group and the individual are clearly delineated, and individuals are supposed to discover and attain their own 'true' selves by reflecting on and attending to themselves (Hsu, 1983).

On the other hand, collectivism focuses attention on maintenance of social norms and performance of social duties as defined by the in-group (e.g. Sinha and Verma, 1987; Triandis, 1990a, 1990b). Within this world view, development and maintenance of a set of common beliefs, attitudes, and practices is extolled, and the importance of cooperation with in-group members is highlighted (Hui and Triandis, 1986; Georgas, 1989;

Markus and Kitayama, 1991a). The group is viewed as the basic unit of survival (Hui and Villareal, 1989) so that attempts to distinguish between the personal and the communal are likely to appear false and be suspect (Triandis, 1990a; 1990b), social responsiveness is valued, and individuals are expected to attain understanding of their place within the in-group by reflecting on and attending to the needs of the group (Cousins, 1989; Markus, and Kitayama, 1991a).

An individualist world view promotes judgement of self and others by the extent of personal success each has achieved (Fiske, 1991). Individual differences are viewed as meaningful and stable, and as coming from the individual and not the context. Coalitions are established for the purpose of maximizing personal gain, and these coalitions change as circumstances change, with each individual seeking relationships with those most able to be of use at any particular point in time (Hsu 1983; Triandis et al., 1988; Waterman, 1984). Alternatively, a collectivist world view promotes judgement of self and others in terms of ascribed group membership. Behavioural or other individual differences are viewed as being due to context differences. Cooperation and co-existence within the in-group is emphasized, and relationships are not described in utilitarian terms but viewed as ends in themselves (Triandis, 1990a, 1990b). Out-group members are viewed with suspicion and hostility (Triandis, 1987; Triandis *et al.*, 1988). In-group membership carries with it a series of ascribed relationships (Triandis, 1987), and culturally prescribed norms dictate which attributes are necessary for meaningful group formation (Hsu, 1983).

#### *Sources of the social representation of self*

The sources of such divergence in social representations of self and society remains a mystery. Recently, Lebra (1992) has sketched a series of ontological differences between North America and Japan, or more broadly between the East and the West. She argues that what it means 'to be' differs quite dramatically within these two regions. Her contention is that much of the East values what she labels the 'Shinto-Buddhist submerged self', while much of the West values a 'Cartesian, split self'. The particular ontological space she describes is defined by two axes – the horizontal anchored by Culture and Nature, and the vertical anchored by Being and Nothingness. Within this space, Lebra (1992) locates two contrasting models of the self. The North American and European self is located in the quadrant defined by Culture and Being. The goal of all existence from this ontological perspective is *self-objectification* – a highlighting of the division between the experiencer



and what is experienced. Becoming autonomous, separate, and distinct from others is valued and emphasized, as are words, the head, and processes like ideation and abstraction. The emphasis is on knowing and knowledge and thus on self-knowledge and self-knowing as the goal of existence.

This Cartesian model of the nature of being and the self overlaps, but is importantly different from that model located in the quadrant defined by Nature and Nothingness. The goal of all existence from this latter perspective is not self-objectification but instead *freedom from self* – a downplaying of the division between the experiencer and the object of experience. It is not separation from others and becoming distinct that are to be valued, but connection with others and the surrounding context that are emphasized. Instead of an emphasis on the head there is an emphasis on the body, and a highlighting of feelings and immediacy. Lebra's (1992) analysis is elaborate and detailed and reveals, for example, how a concern with permanence and causation will be important features of a meaning system rooted in self-objectification, whereas a concern with impermanence and co-occurrence will be highlighted in a system rooted in gaining freedom from the constraints or boundaries of an individual self.

The Cartesian ontology gives rise to the Western notion of the self as an entity containing significant dispositional attributes which is detached from the social context. This view has been called the Western, separate, individualist, or independent view of self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991a; Oyserman, 1993; Triandis et al., 1988). It is characteristic of North American and European, but particularly white, urban, middle-class, secularized, contemporary people. The Shinto-Buddhist ontology is associated with a very different model of the self – one that is characteristic of China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, South America, and Africa. It is typically a collectivist or interdependent view of the self. The self is viewed as interdependent with the surrounding social context, and it is the other or the self or the self-in-relation-to-other that is focal in individual experience. According to this view, people are seen as connected with others, not as separate. The individual is viewed not as an autonomous whole but as a fraction that becomes whole when in interaction with others. The cultural goal is to fit-in with others, to fulfil and create obligation, and, in general, to become part of various interpersonal relationships – to submerge the individual self and to regulate wants and needs in accordance with the wants and needs of others. And it is these cultural imperatives that will be diversely elaborated in a group's stockpile of images, words, schemas, and ideas, and broadly reflected in their modes of thinking.

feeling, and being, and their heuristics, scripts, strategies, and ways of living.

The specific psychological consequences of these two contrasting views of the self and the nature of being for behaviour are currently emerging as a focus of much systematic analysis. Ethnographic studies have revealed marked differences in the practices of self and identity (e.g. Marsella, DeVos, and Hsu, 1985; Choi and Choi, 1990; Parish, 1991; Derné, 1992; Kondo, 1992; Rosenberger, 1992), sharp value differences have been established (e.g. Schwartz and Bilsky, 1990), and recent studies (Oyserman, 1993; Oyserman and Markus, 1993; Markus and Kitayama, 1994a; Woike, 1994) are outlining how self-relevant cognition, emotion, and motivation are markedly divergent depending on the view of self that anchors them.

#### *The example of achievement and control*

A clear example of the meaning-making and discourse organizing role of social representations in the US, comes from the social representation of individualism in American society (Oyserman, 1993; Markus and Kitayama, 1994b). Within the North American cultural context, people are understood to be independent, bounded, autonomous entities who have an impact on and control over the external world (Hsu, 1985; Farr, 1991). Within this cultural frame, individuals are construed, defined, appraised, and evaluated for their achievement, and for their ability to strive, innovate, and overcome obstacles. People are believed to create themselves and to control actively their environment. A need or desire for control is essentialized as a core feature of personality. While fate, luck, circumstance, and social context are relatively unelaborated in these shared North American theories of social behaviour (Finch et al., 1991; Harter, 1992).

In the United States control becomes a key feature of competence and is viewed as an extremely valuable attribute. This social representation is so centrally implicated in individual functioning in the United States that it is tightly linked to self-esteem, social status, personal security, and mental health (Jones, 1989). As embodied in such concepts as self-efficacy, a control orientation has been related to life satisfaction, persistence, and coping in stressful situations (Finch et al., 1991). Because 'being a self' American style requires maintaining active control, individuals who experience a loss of control are likely to feel powerless, helpless, and therefore depressed and anxious (Fordham, 1988; Finch et al., 1991; Ogbu, 1991). If independence, control, and achievement are the organizing metaphors of personhood, then being a 'good' person, or a

person of value, means being able to embody or 'own' specific instances or examples of these attributes. Evidence that one is *successful* in attaining these standards is sought in one's accomplishments, behaviours, and interactions with others. Thus the rubric of shared social representations forms the scaffolding of the self and serves as a standard against which one is assessed and assesses the self.

Within the United States, the sense that a person is a bounded, autonomous entity, whose abilities and competences allow for mastery of the environment is a pervasive organizing framework. It is manifest as a 'perception' about individual reality, not as a consequence of one's particular theory of the person. The ability to control outcomes in a variety of domains is the basis of competence in this framework. A key cultural task is to discover the domains in which one is competent and then to verify and affirm them. The primary role of others is to provide reflected appraisal or directly to evaluate one's performance. A *negative* evaluation suggests a lack of ability in a domain. A positive evaluation means that one has skill and talent in the domain in question and is therefore 'good' in terms of that domain. Rather than risk failure, being 'bad', and a loss of self-esteem, individuals are likely to disinvest from domains in which they have 'failed' or are likely to 'fail' (e.g. James, 1890; Stevenson, Azuma, and Hakuta, 1986; Steele, 1988; Markus, 1990; Spencer and Steele, 1992).

Jones (1989) suggests that the value placed on control has resulted in a desire to perceive the self as innately capable rather than as capable by dint of effort. Consequently, intelligence is valued more than perseverance, and creativity or innovation are valued more than perfecting a project or carrying through a task. 'Most of us [i.e. Americans] would rather be a little *gifted* than a lot *dogged*, unless we can also convince ourselves that being *dogged* is part of a strong character, which is, in turn, a highly stable – maybe even naturally endowed – attribute' (Jones, 1989, p. 481). Thus, within a social context in which innate ability is valued above perseverance, failure attributable to a clear lack of effort may be preferred to expending effort and therefore exposing oneself to diagnosis of one's competence.

Because the American social representation of personhood makes achievement and internal control central to one's worth as an individual, it seems natural that individuals seek out domains in which they can do well and concentrate effort on these domains, to the exclusion of others. Thus schoolchildren 'try out' various activities. They are given samplings of music, language, art, computers, sports, and other activities. Implicit in this process is that children are to 'discover' which are the domains they have talent in and focus on those. A consequence of this process is

that children and youths who do not believe they are likely to attain success in school may be likely to disinvest from school and become involved in non-conventional or deviant activities instead (e.g. Steele, 1988; Oyserman and Markus, 1990a, 1990b; Ogbu, 1991; Spencer and Steele, 1992).

Within the American social representation of personhood, dependence on others is assumed to be a negative trait. Thus, 'altruism', or helping without clear, immediate, or concrete personal gain, is viewed with suspicion, and relationships are assumed to be formed in order to attain personal goals rather than being defining in themselves (Hsu, 1983). Parents thus exhort their children to be independent, to stand on their own two feet. Even pre-school teachers provide parents with feedback about their child's leadership capacity as opposed to the child's tendency to 'follow the lead of other children' (Fujita and Sano, 1988; Peak, 1991).

The nature of American social representations of selfhood is placed in high relief when compared with those of Japanese society. Rather than focus on the boundedness of individuals, individual achievement, personal control, and therefore the assessment of skill-based competence, Japanese social representations of personhood focus on interpersonal embeddedness and continuous work at making sense of, and attaining ever closer approximations of, one's roles and responsibilities (Markus and Kitayama, 1991b, 1994a). Thus, while as 'individualists' Americans believe in giving priority to self-interests over those of the groups or contexts to which they belong, Japanese social representations of personhood elaborate participation, interdependence, or collectivity.

Collectivists, it is said, do not distinguish between their own and their group's interests, viewing the self as irrevocably bound to and interconnected to others (Erez and Earley, 1993). While boundedness involves proof of agency, interconnectedness involves continual and ongoing effort to maintain harmony in relationships and to meet the needs and expectations of those with whom one is connected. Persistence as part of the social representation of personhood permeates all of Japanese society (Blinco, 1992). The centrality of persistence is continually reinforced and strengthened throughout development and the educational process. The term 'gambaru' (i.e. 'hold on, don't give up') is a positive one, in which one is exhorted to continue trying to achieve a goal no matter how hard or unattainable it may seem.

Deeply and pervasively embedded in Japanese thinking is the idea it may take many years of intensive training and study to master any worthwhile skill. Any short-cut is seen as potentially harmful because it is the persistence needed to attain the goal that makes the goal worthwhile. The 'truest' experiences of life are believed to occur only through

mental training (Rohlen, 1989, 1991). And educators suggest that everyone can achieve if they persevere and endure hardship, especially in the years prior to secondary school. In defining themselves, many Japanese are likely to seek evidence of perseverance, continuous effort toward the socially and interpersonally relevant goals of harmony with one's place, meeting the needs of others in one's role set, as well as the attainment of standards of quality or excellence set out for the group. Rather than seek out and focus on those domains in which one has a sense of expertise, one is to persevere in those tasks set out for one in the social roles that one occupies. Increasing success is assumed to come with steadfast perseverance or concentration on these tasks. Thus, rather than the self-message 'In school some kids can do well at maths and others cannot, what kind of kid am I?', the self-message is 'In school kids are to do well in maths, am I doing well yet?'

Because the social representation of personhood in terms of interdependence or collectivism assumes that one's social roles will prescribe much of what one does, one's goals, one's behaviours and therefore who one *is*, individuals are evaluated in terms of the extent that they have met the standards of these social roles. One's task is then to learn these standards and work to attain them because fulfilling one's social place allows others to fulfil theirs.

In the US, boundedness, the ability to control or exert force on the environment, is operationalized as competence. The social representation of competence has to do with the relationship between one's abilities and the effort exerted on the task. Thus, one way of showing competence is to be able to succeed at a task in spite of low effort. Thus, perseverance on task is viewed as the opposite of competence (Jones, 1989). Within the Japanese model, however, ability per se is not valued above effort, and effort is viewed as creating ability. In the US, then, persistence is often understood to be a character trait one has instead of ability, while in Japan it is viewed as a major pathway to ability. The impact of these differing social representations on behaviour is hinted at by findings such as Blinco's (1992), in which over two-thirds of US school students persisted less than the average time on tasks of the Japanese students, while less than 10 per cent of Japanese students persisted at or below the American mean.

We have been describing here a cultural level of reality, one created and maintained by social representations and their supporting practices. Individuals may resist or fail to incorporate these public and mutually constructed ideas of selfhood into their meaning-making systems. Questions of how social representations are transmitted and spread (see Sperber, 1985), of how many individuals in a given socio-cultural niche

must share them, and with what level of incorporation and understanding (see Nisbett, 1993; Menon and Shweder, 1994), and of how much resistance or outright negation can be tolerated with a given cultural system constitute a significant research agenda.

### **Competing social representations**

Social representations are defining features of socio-cultural environments and movement from one social context to another may mean moving from one lexicon, array, or *gestalt* of social representations to another. Because these social representations are the building blocks of self, this movement is likely to result in a disruption or shift in self-conceptualization and self-understanding as one seeks to make sense of oneself in the ideas, images, and language of a new context.

For example, Dympna Ugwu-Oju (1993) describes the process by which an Ibu woman's sense of herself is radically changed when the self-language or frame she uses shifts from the social representations of personhood and 'being a woman' she brings with her from her Nigerian birthplace to the social representations of personhood and 'being a woman' predominant among her New York professional colleagues. This cultural frame switching brings with it a fundamental change in what is viewed as relevant to the self, and in what should be taken into account, resulting in a far-reaching re-evaluation of who she *is*. In Nigeria, self-definition depends on fulfilling one's role as a woman and on meeting the social, interpersonal, and behavioural obligations of wife, mother, daughter, and friend. In the United States, self-definition is typically linked not to duty and obligation but instead to personal happiness.

Although the type of conflict in frames of personhood described by Dympna Ugwu-Oju (1993) is extreme, some tension or discord in the social representational context will be experienced by all people as they move across the life course. Thus, adolescents leaving high school for college may experience a lack of certainty as to 'who they are' because the conceptualizations brought from the high-school context are not isomorphic with those for college. An even larger-scale shift is likely for youth who enter the military or civilian employment after high school (Owens, 1992). New soldiers going through boot camp and then entering the military hierarchy are to learn not simply concrete skills but to experience themselves in terms of a new frame, that of a 'good soldier'. In the US, this process of taking apart and then recreating the individual is part of the lore of boot-camp experience. The process is important because a 'good' soldier is one who will obey commands, and follow procedures because in the process of following procedures and perse-

vering he (or she) will attain proficiency in the behaviours needed to fulfil this social role, and thus act in terms of the good of the group. In the military, as in Japan, identity reconstruction involves framing the self as part of a social unit. Typically, in America, the social unit exists to serve one or another self-goal.

A dramatic shift also occurs for youths entering the job market for full-time employment after high school. These youths must reconceptualize who they are and their worth in terms of the demands and opportunities of the entry-level jobs available to them, rather than in terms of the social context and niche presented by high school. Movement into the world of work involves a transition into the future, from the roles of childhood and student to the roles of parent and wage earner (Oyserman and Markus, 1990a; Jessor, Donovan, and Costa, 1992; Curry et al., 1994). Entry-level jobs may afford relatively few contexts for attaining the possible selves nurtured while in school. What it means to be competent in these new frames can be quite different than what was previously understood, and many youths undergoing social context changes are likely to feel a loss of competence in the transition phases (Owens, 1992). Similarly, the transition to motherhood requires conceptualizations of competence in terms of a new baby, but also shifts in the domains of work, hobbies, and intimate, familial, and social relations.

Life transitions then often are connected to context shifts, which bring changes in the social representational repertoire of personhood used to constructing, defining, evaluating, and bolstering the self. Retirement requires different conceptualizations of how one is to be competent once the domain of work is no longer a ready source of self-definition. Life transitions can highlight and sometimes bring to the fore divergent self-representations. And it is this divergence that often precipitates life crises in America.

The consequences of multiple social representations of personhood are likely to be experienced most directly and extensively by people in industrialized heterogeneous societies who necessarily live in multiple contexts simultaneously. Each of an individual's significant socio-cultural contexts – for example, gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, neighborhood, work-place, birth cohort – can make some claim on the person. Very often, the social representations of a given socio-cultural niche are not just implicit in the surrounding context of images and ideas, but actively invoked and promoted (Felner et al., 1985; Goodnow, 1990; Hutnik, 1991; Spears and Shahinper, 1994). Many contemporary socio-cultural contexts comprise individuals and groups of individuals who are continually providing advice with respect to 'how to be' and 'how not to be' (Oyserman and Markus, 1993).

For some people, the messages will cohere, providing a more or less unified set of ideas about how to be (e.g. I am a good husband, father, and worker because I work hard, am reliable, and provide for my wife and children). In such situations it is relatively difficult to appreciate the importance of social representations and cultural frames. Many people, however, are likely to experience multiple, sometimes independent, and sometimes contradictory representations of what matters in the world, the meaning of personhood and what it means to be a 'good' or 'appropriate' or 'normal' person in the context. Thus, being a woman brings with it one set of social representations concerning femaleness and gender. These representations may overlap significantly with being a mother, but may be independent of, or in significant conflict with, the social representations associated with being a stockbroker (Eagley and Mladinic, 1994).

To the extent that one's social representations are contradictory, grounded in different assumptions, or irrelevant to one another, a person is faced with a more complex and effortful self-construction and maintenance task (Oyserman and Markus, 1993). Thus, being a parent, worker, spouse, friend, and member of a religious or ethnic group may often involve conflicting representations about how and who to be (e.g. does one invest energies in one's career or work for the good of one's ethnic group?). Within the US, as in other countries, socio-cultural and ethnic groups are likely to differ in their conceptualizations of personhood (Hutnik, 1991; Julian, McKenry, and McKelvey, 1994). Because of the inherent tension or conflict between these sets of representations, individuals must either find a way to reconcile or fit together ethnically based and larger societal social representations of personhood, or choose one or another conceptualization as one's dominant frame and primary source of self-relevant knowledge (LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerten, 1993). In the case of minority ethnicity in the US, representations from the in-group have to be connected in some way with the social representations from larger society and these representations of one's group in larger society, are likely to reflect misunderstandings, inaccuracies, and negative or narrow portrayals of one's group's capabilities (McLoyd, 1990).

Social representations held by women, African-Americans, and members of other minority groups about the nature of personhood and themselves as group members are not independent from the larger social contexts in which they are embedded (Jackson et al., 1991). Women come to know themselves via their own representations and in terms of men's representations of them (Oyserman and Markus, 1993). Social representations take into account the larger framework. The organizing



framework of the larger society may also provide a yardstick against which one evaluates and values both the self and one's group. For example, Eagley (1993) suggests that both women and men view women as more nurturant than men, and men as more agentic than women. They also view nurturance as not being helpful for success in high-prestige occupations. Nurturance is viewed positively, as a good trait, but it is viewed as incompatible with success in high-prestige occupations. Women may individually choose to self-define as autonomous and agentic, or as not-nurturant, but such an effort will be largely ineffective if others use a different social representational repertoire to interpret their actions. Allen, Thornton, and Watkins (1994) review literature suggesting that, as they are a group over-represented in the lower socio-economic status ranks, social representations about poverty and the self-definitional meaning of poverty are likely to colour the ways in which African-Americans represent themselves as a group. They are likely to mention being poor, unemployed, and doing without in describing African-Americans. Because their options are limited by economic realities, African-Americans of lower socio-economic status are more likely to sharply distinguish themselves from American society in general. They tend to use more distinct positive and negative descriptors than African-Americans of higher socio-economic status. Allen, Thornton, and Watkins (1994) suggest that this may be because African-Americans of higher socio-economic status are afforded more self-definitional options and therefore are not required to view themselves primarily in terms of race. They can therefore see continuities and overlaps between African-Americans and other groups in American society.

When individuals belong to groups with divergent social representations of personhood or when the social representation of their group conflicts with social representations of personhood in larger society, the self-definitional task is two-fold. These individuals must both define what they *are* and also what they are *not*, in spite of expectations that they will be. In America, it is likely that African-Americans interacting with non-African-American others must take race into account in defining themselves because race is defined as important, as having meaning, and providing information in the larger societal context. Judd (1993), in a study of university students, recently found that African-Americans are viewed as athletic, musical, fun loving, religious, violent, loud, uneducated, and irresponsible by whites (Allen, Thornton, and Watkins, 1994, report similar findings). African-Americans may choose to use this vocabulary to self-define or attempt to define in terms of the 'vocabulary' used to define whites (independent, ambitious, intelligent, self-centred, uptight, greedy, racist, and wealthy). In either case, however, the other's

template or grid of images, meanings, and language must be taken into account. In other words, the social representation of black-ness produces a vocabulary, a prism, or lens through which the self is viewed (Oyserman, 1994). Spears and Shahinper (1994) also find that minorities describing themselves in majority language describe themselves more in terms of their collective identity than when they utilize their native tongue, suggesting that thinking of themselves in the context of the majority requires group-focused self-definitions.

Generally speaking, Americans of African descent are heir to cultural traditions of communal helping, family aid and connectedness, the legacy of racism (Martin and Martin, 1985; Asante, 1987, 1988); and the Protestant work ethic-based cultural imperatives to be independent, successful, achieving, and self-focused (Katz and Hass, 1988). Embedded as they are in contexts which provide conflicting, contradictory, or negative messages, African-Americans must struggle to find a balance between these messages, some means of creating and sustaining a sense of self that will provide a meaning-making framework, structuring and focusing energies on one's life tasks and productive pursuits, which identities thrust upon the self (Oyserman, 1994).

A social representational approach to the self highlights the need to take into account the interplay between the multiple contexts in which individuals are *simultaneously* embedded. A clear example has to do with ethnicity and gender. Ethnicity-based social representations are interwoven with gender-based social representations, creating a unique social space which cannot be neatly separated into 'ethnic' and 'gender' component parts (Haw, 1991; Martinez and Dukes, 1991). Social representations containing gendered and ethnically derived content must be melded with social representations derived from the broader culture as a meaning-making framework critical in making sense of experiences, regulating affect, and controlling behaviour (e.g. Brown, 1990; Hughes and Hertel, 1990; Bilides, 1991; Oyserman, 1994). Some have argued, for example, that being both African-American and female is a 'double' minority status with two sets of negative connotations (e.g. Lewis, 1989). However, it appears that the melding of the two contexts brings a unique set of representations, which is not a simple derivative of either alone (Oyserman 1994).

#### **Consequences of a social representational approach to the self**

It is becoming increasingly critical that we take account of and explore the implications of social contexts as our world and our perspectives becomes more multicultural. To the extent that the motives, behaviours,

and emotional experiences of individuals other than those in the majority are of consequence, then, an understanding of the diverse social representations of personhood are critical. Social representations are not merely reflections of reality, they create reality by affording certain perceptions and constraining others. We experience and come to know ourselves and others in terms of the social representations we bring to bear. We do not experience ourselves in terms other than those made available by our social representations.

Given the emphasis in North American psychology on internal attributes, traits, or mental structures as the core elements of the self, it is not surprising that the shared and collective nature of the self have not yet received a great deal of attention. A focus on social representations should allow researchers to ask a variety of new and interesting questions about the foundations and scaffolding of the self-system. Although individuals are highly active in the process of self-making, the materials available for writing one's own story are a function of our public and shared notions of personhood. American accounts of the self, for example, involve a set of culture-confirming ideas and images of success, competence, ability, and the need to 'feel good'. It would be productive to examine how much divergence exists in the nature of the self-structures (self-schemas, possible selves, self-prototypes, life tasks, personal projects, etc.) within and between given groups and systematically to explore the sources of the core cultural ideas about selfhood and the everyday social practices through which individuals live out these core ideas. American notions of 'how to be' appear to be evolving at a rapid rate (i.e. 1990s' men and women are very different people from the 1960s' men and women; see also Kruse, chapter 13 this volume), and many questions arise about how these largely media-driven and negotiated cultural imperatives of selfhood influence the structure and functioning of the self-system. In other cultural contexts, concern focuses on the extent to which collective representations of the self carry within them ethnic divisions, intergroup conflict, mistrust, and rivalry (Mesquita, 1993; Oyserman, 1993).

With respect to changing the self, a social representational approach would involve a careful consideration of the nature and organization of the repertoire of ideas and images and ideologies available in a given socio-cultural context (see also Augoustinos, chapter 10 this volume). Members of various minority and subordinate groups, for example, may confront a social representational environment saturated with images and ideas that are unwanted and undesirable and that cannot be easily individually ignored. Similarly, self-change or self-improvement programmes or therapies of any sort (weight loss, substance abuse, depres-

sion) could benefit from an analysis of the nature of the prevalent social representations and cultural frames that characterize an individual's environment. Development of such approaches would do well to heed what are viewed as the 'natural' imperatives of self in a particular context, while dissemination would require that the assumptions on which the approach is built fit the assumptions of the new context.

A social representational framing of the self encourages a broader perspective on the self and explicitly takes the social context into account. It delineates the ways that the self is afforded and constrained by the way personhood, gender, and ethnicity are construed within one's socio-cultural context. This is critical if we are to make sense not only of why certain issues are important to some groups and not to others, but also to appreciate how others make sense of and experience their everyday reality.

On an individual level, social representations are meaning-making structures; at a group level, they are the framework which allows individuals from the same social context to be able to predict or make sense of social interactions with the others. Certain goals, behaviours, and situations are central to the social representations of personhood in any given context. Behaviour in culturally central situations may be carefully scripted, affording little variance in behaviours in these situations and leading to negative construals of others who do not behave according to these scripts. Further, because certain goals are central to our social representation of personhood, we assume their importance and make sense of the other's behaviours in terms of these goals. When both sides to an interaction hold in common these representations, then the other will feel familiar and like the self, and interactions will occur with ease. When individuals with divergent social representations interact, both sides may assume common goals or orientations when they are in fact not held by the other, leading to misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the other. At its most benign, in such circumstances, individuals will understand what the other is doing and what it is intended to convey but will be fundamentally unconvinced by the other's behaviour or rationale because the premises on which it is built are not shared. Often, however, we may be unaware that the other is acting under a different set of premises and simply make sense of his or her behaviour in terms of the premises brought to bear by our own context. Thus, in the classroom Americans will assume that all students are competing to show their own creativity and independence in discussions and assume that the Asian student who is not pushing his own opinion into the fray simply has none. In this way, we are likely to misconstrue the other and not elicit feedback that could correct this

misconstrual. Over time, this is likely to lead to mutually held negative appraisals of the other, and a sense of exclusion, particularly on the part of those with less power to impose their representations on interactions.