

Culture and the Self." Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation

Markus and Kitayama's paper, *Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion and Motivation* was an interesting read. The paper focuses on how different construal's of oneself and their relation to others, affects behaviors and psychological processes of cognition, emotion and motivation. The authors focus on two cultures – American and Japanese to mark differences on conception of self and its effects. On a general level, the authors show that the western, particularly America, notion of self is highly independent and self-contained while Asian countries, like Japan, hold an interdependent view of self that is derived in relation to others. These contradictory views on self, give rise to differences in psychological processes and raise a bigger question of which psychological process can be considered universal? If we maintain a tunnel vision from siloed society, it is easy to believe that one culture's conception of emotions and behaviors are universal but upon examination, a different reality emerges. In this paper, through various experiments, the authors show that different populations, do in fact, respond differently but in accordance their socialized construction of self.

The idea that the concept of self is not universal, made me think, is one notion "more correct" than the other or does each to its own an acceptable idea? This was not the central quandary of the paper, but towards the end the author's comment that even " within highly individualistic western culture, most people are still much less self-reliant, self-contained or self-sufficient than the prevailing cultural ideology suggests" (Kitayama et al 247). This may require re-thinking of notion of self in western cultures. Even though, it is more prevalent to see liberal ideologies that have greater emphasis on individual rights and autonomy being pushed in the name of betterment or modernization. Cultures that promote emphasis on interdependence may be seen

as oppressive and inconsiderate of individual autonomy without being given the consideration that the practices and philosophy of interdependence community may have greater overall benefits.

Additionally, the authors' claim that "a cross-cultural survey of the self lends support to Durkheim's (1912/1968) early notion that the category of the self is primarily the product of social factors, and to Mauss's (1938/1985) claim that as a social category, the self is a "delicate" one, subject to quite substantial, if not infinite, variation", increases the need to identify cultural practices and social norms and continue looking into its long term and short term impact on human beings (Kitayama et. al 226-227). The recognition of moldable human cognition, emotion and motivations places a higher imperative for social, political and economical institutions to go beyond simplifying assumptions of people's behavior to justify existing systems and look towards systemic and cultural transformation. For instance, capitalism is heralded as the best economic system for productivity with claims that people are inherently competitive and driven by self-serving incentives. This gives rise to a culture where individual gain and success is rewarded which reinforces the notion of individualism. However, as individual success and validation takes precedence over greater good, the self-correcting mechanisms of markets begin to fail in face of greed, excess accumulation and control. A greater understanding of external factors that affect individuals would help us evaluate these larger human systems even more effectively.

This framework of thinking could be impactful on a micro-organization level too. How should diversity training and policy be instituted to retain the diversity on the psychological level over just distinction in physical attributes? Do company cultures, especially large multinational corporates, affect the enhance or diminish a construal of self that one may have from other settings? Or do people adopt a "work-self" and "home-self" to adjust to cultural expectation? In a global, interconnected world as more people are subject to notions of self through their own traditions as

well as ideas presented through media, public education, peers, workplace etc. In such situations, how does one respond to the similar tests and probing? A hypothesis I suggest is that strong influence of multiple cultures could form a “psychological weave” where the behavior or response fluctuates and forms a mixed pattern. This would be like the “work-self and home-self” concept but on an even more subtler level outside of conscious decision making. I would suspect a subconscious tension between contradictory views leading to a weakened or varying sense of self. I am highly interested in finding research and studies done on influence of diverse culture on notion of self and its impact.

Overall, I found the results and discussion of this study fascinating and believable due the systemic methodology applied. For each of the psychological processes studied, the authors give a good explanation of what it is, how they measured the differences and what are the limitations. It is a well written paper and that inspired many questions in my research interest of work, economy and human well-being as well consideration for globalized world and transient cultural influences.

Reference

Markus, Hazel and Kitayama, Shinobu (1991). Culture and the Self. *Psychological Review* 98:224-253