

The Cultural Effects on the Self

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“I wish I had a different life. I wish I was braver, and prettier, or just happy.” (Vardalos, 2002) All of us have different perceptions of who we are, who we would like to be, and how we want others to view us. There are numerous factors that can influence the self, each one having a different impact than the one before it. One important dynamic is culture. The movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* raises several important questions about the relationship between the self and one’s ethnic background. What effect does being raised in a close-knit collectivistic culture have on someone’s self-esteem? Do people feel it is necessary to change the way in which they portray themselves so they can be accepted into another culture? *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* depicts how culture can shape the self through its influence on autobiographical memories, self-discrepancy, and self-presentation.

There are several important scenes that provide us with insight into the self. At the beginning of the movie, Toula reflects upon her life by recollecting specific instances to show what it was like being raised in a Greek family. The moments she is remembering are known as autobiographical memories, which are recollections that a person has about a series of events that have had a meaningful impact on his or her life (Rubin, 1996; Thompson et al., 1998). Her memories are used to show how her life has been affected by her culture. People generally seem to recall instances that occurred during transitional periods in their lives. In Toula’s case, she talks about specific times when she was in elementary school, middle school, and high school. These are all important intermediary phases in a person’s life. Her memories only reflect upon ways in which her culture made her stand out from others in school, thus causing her a great deal of awkwardness and humiliation. Studies have shown that when remembering things that occurred in the past, we tend to exaggerate circumstances or inflate our roles in situations in order to make ourselves look better and boost our self-esteem. For example, in 1996 Harry Bahrick and his colleagues conducted an experiment in which they asked college students to recall all of their grades from high school.

After checking the accuracy of their reports with the real high school transcripts, the researchers found that students had a tendency to embellish any bad grades that they had received (Bahric et al., 1996). Toula only talks about events that fostered her feelings of inadequacy and lowered her self-esteem, such as being ridiculed for eating ethnic food at school or her father embarrassing her in front of her friends by talking about his Greek heritage. This does not seem to go along with the research done on autobiographical memories. I feel that this situation could be looked at from a different perspective. Perhaps Toula was exaggerating her past to make her life look bad. That way, when she does become happy and successful in her life, people will view it as an incredible triumph and praise her for it. This is a form of self-handicapping, which occurs when people take actions to hurt their own performance or image in order to protect their own self-esteem (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Some people do this so they can claim more recognition if they succeed.

Another important psychological principle depicted during the movie is the notion of self-discrepancy. According to this theory, there are discrepancies between how we see ourselves and the way in which we really want to see ourselves. This match can be used to define one's self-esteem. For example, a person with a large discrepancy between their real and ideal selves would most likely have a negative self image and a low self-esteem (Higgins, 1989). Early on in the movie there is a part where Toula is sitting in an alley outside of her restaurant looking at a flyer for college. She talks about her desire to have a different life and to be happy. Her current self-perception is that she is unattractive, boring, and cowardly. It is clear that there is a large discrepancy between the way she views herself and the way she would like to be viewed. Toula does not act in a positive or up-beat manner during the beginning of the movie and she does not have any confidence in herself. For example, when Ian and his friend come to the restaurant for coffee, it becomes obvious that Toula is attracted to Ian, but she has difficulties talking to him. She even tries to hide behind the counter so she can observe him from afar. The self-discrepancy that exists within Toula has greatly lowered her self-esteem making it hard for her to even carry on a

simple conversation with a person of the opposite sex. She automatically assumes that he would not want to have anything to do with her because she is not good-looking or assertive. This is consistent with the self-discrepancy theory. Toula's poor self-image stems from the pressure placed upon her by her culture to marry a Greek man at an early age and have many children. People like Ian, who do not have a specific heritage that he or she can clearly identify with, do not experience these types of demands from a large group or society. For this reason, Ian appears to be much more comfortable with who he is and does not spend time dwelling on who he could be. A number of studies have been done on the self-discrepancy theory, including one by Higgins, Friedman, and Shah. In this study, participants were asked to list several attributes that they would like to possess (ideal-self attributes) and several that they feel they should possess (ought-self attributes). Next, they had to fill out a questionnaire in which they rated how much they would like to possess these traits and how much they thought they really did have them. To determine self-discrepancy, the average score for how much they thought they actually possessed these traits was subtracted from the average score of how much they would like to possess their ideal-self traits. The same was done for the ratings of ought-self attributes. Afterwards, the subjects took an emotional frequency survey in which they were asked how often they experienced certain emotions in the last week. This survey included emotions associated with dejection and agitation. Participants who had a high self-discrepancy with regards to the ideal-self characteristics were more likely to report that they had felt dejection-related emotions more frequently in the last week. Similarly, those who had a high self-discrepancy with their ought-self traits reported feeling agitation-related emotions more often in the last week (Higgins, et al., 1997).

A common theme throughout *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is the idea of self-presentation. This is basically the way in which we choose to portray ourselves to others and the tactics we employ in the process (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). There are several moments where this aspect can be identified in the movie. First, Toula can be seen changing her appearance by wearing

contacts, putting on makeup, and dressing differently. She is later shown, with her new look, socializing with others at college. In another scene Ian tells Toula that he will do whatever it takes to make her family accept him, including being baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church. Immediately after Ian is baptized, there is a scene in which he is welcomed by Toula's entire family. Later on we see a part where Toula's father complains that he went out of his way to be nice to Ian's family so they would like him, but they did not seem to respond to any of his endeavors. All of these are examples of strategic self-presentation, which consists of the techniques we use to form other people's impressions of us in order to assure that we will gain some sort of approval. People tend to have an easier time accurately presenting themselves, rather than manufacturing a personality (Pontari & Schlenker, 2000). In a study done by Pontari and Schlenker in 2000, experimenters asked subjects who were introverted or extroverted to act in a manner that either contradicted or was consistent with their true selves. The subjects were able to do this without a problem. However, the researches later asked the participants to do the same thing while keeping an eight-digit number in mind for a memorization test later on. When assigned with this task, participants were successfully able to act in accordance with their true selves, but had difficulties trying to act in a way that was out of character. In reference to the movie, it can be hypothesized that Toula's father was not able to make a good impression upon Ian's parents because he was too preoccupied with the notion that his daughter was marrying someone outside of their culture. This could have prevented him from presenting himself as a more tolerant person, which is why Ian's parents did respond positively to him.

The movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* shows us how the responsibilities and expectations that come with cultural orientation can affect the self. The three principles that have been discussed in this paper—autobiographical memories, self-discrepancy, and self-presentation—have all been affected in some manner by the characters' cultural identifications. This means that the ideas and values we were raised with play a critical role in forming how we see ourselves, how we want to see

ourselves, and how we feel about ourselves. Everyday we interact with people from a variety of different heritages, some of which have played a stronger role in their lives than others. It is important for us to take this fact into consideration before passing judgment on people. For example, we may perceive someone's enthusiasm for their culture as over-bearing or even a little inappropriate, when we are really neglecting the fact that they may have been raised to be very knowledgeable about and have great pride for their heritage. This person could define who he is by his ethnicity and might believe that the best way to gain approval from others is to present himself in a manner that is consistent with his heritage. I think it would be very interesting to conduct research with people who were raised in the United States and belong to a culture that is very close-knit or more collectivistic, such as the Greeks. I would like to see how often events dealing with their cultural identification are present in their autobiographical memories and how the expectations of their ethnicity have affected the discrepancy between who they are and who they want to be. Other research should be done with people who come from individualistic cultures, or who do not have a strong cultural identity, and have been accepted into groups where a great amount of pride and importance is placed on one's ethnicity. For example, people who have married into a culture that is very different from their own should be observed to see if they present themselves in a different way when socializing with members of the other culture and analyze how that has affected their self-esteem. Everyone has been affected differently by the manner in which they were raised and we must make an effort to respect and understand these differences in order to maintain a balance within our society.

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