85 The Personal Is Political . . . and Historical and Social and Cultural

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The personal is political. As a college student deciding between a major in psychology or journalism, the statement stuck with me. I couldn't shake it. As a feminist, I knew it meant that questions of who should do the housework and childcare were not just women's personal problems but also societal problems of power and patriarchy. But as a young social psychologist, I sensed there was even more to this provocative statement. I came to see that the more you peer inside the personal, the more you discover not only the political and its twin, the economic, but also the historical and all forms of the social and cultural. And this, for me, was a central psychological insight.

What feels so personal – *my* identity, *my* subjectivity, *my* agency, *my* self, *my* I, or *my* me – is not just mine, not fully my own creation, and not just my private property. To be sure, my self requires genes, neurons, and hormones, but also my self belongs to others and rests in the eyes, minds, and actions of others, current, past, and future. Being is thus inherently social. Who we are, what we want, what we care about, what we are supposed to do, what moves us to action, what is possible for us is shaped by the cultural. For me, the cultural is an umbrella term that also covers the political, the economic, the historical, and the social. Specifically, culture is not just the symphony or the ballet or what we eat or how we worship; it includes all the **i**nstitutions, **i**nteractions, and **i**deas that guide the thoughts, feelings, and actions of **i**ndividuals. Individuals are born biological beings, but they become people only as they inhabit the many intersecting cultures that give form and meaning to their lives. Understanding selves and cultures and, as Rick Shweder says, the ways in they "make each other up" has been an ongoing theme of my research.

The self or the *me* at the center of experience is the sense of being a more or less enduring agent who acts and reacts to the world around and to the world within. It is the part of you that perceives, attends, thinks, feels, learns, imagines, remembers, decides, and acts. It is a story you are writing, whether you know it or not. If you lose the plot, you are in trouble. The self connects your present to your past and your future, and lets you know that the person who went to bed last night is the same

one who woke up this morning. The self is also the all-important meaning maker.

In laboratory studies, I examined the self as a system of self-schemas or interpretive structures that help you make sense of your experiences and figure out what to do next. As these studies reveal, all that is self-relevant takes on a special glow. We quickly attend to, learn, and remember what is relevant to our needs, goals, and interests and ignore what is not. This means, as Anais Nin wrote, we don't see the world the way *it is*, but as the way *we are*. For psychologists who hope to know the mind and behavior of others, selves matter.

Understanding our selves in turn depends on understanding the many forms of culture crisscrossing our lives – those associated with nation, region, origin, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, profession, sports team, birth cohort, and so on. These cultures help create different ways of being a self, and these selves, in turn, help create different cultures. Cultures are like water to the fish; they are often hard to experience unless someone takes them away. Understanding the ways in which the personal is deeply political, such that my *I* and my *me* was a European-American cultural product and process, began with trips to Japan and questions I traded with my long-time collaborator, social psychologist Shinobu Kitayama.

Why was it, I wondered, that after lecturing in Japan to students with a good command of English, no one said anything – nothing: no questions, no comments. What was wrong with these Japanese students? Where were the arguments, the debates, and the signs of critical thinking? And, moreover, if you asked somebody a completely straightforward question such as "Where is the best noodle shop?" why was the answer invariably, "It depends." Didn't Japanese students have their own preferences, ideas, opinions, and attitudes? What is inside a head if it isn't these kinds of things? How could you know someone if she did not tell you what she was thinking?

Shinobu listened and replied with his own questions. He was curious about why students shouldn't just listen to a lecture and asked why American students felt the need to be constantly active, to talk all the time, often interrupting each other and talking over each other and the professor? And why did the comments and questions of his American students and colleagues reveal such strong emotions and have such a competitive edge? What was the point of this arguing? Why did intelligence seem to be associated with getting the best of another person, even within a group where people knew each other well?

These questions about the peculiarities of everyday life in different cultural contexts led me first to see that my way of being a self was not

the way to be a self, but *a* way to be a self, and that there were other viable ways to be a self, and finally to a theory of how different cultures reflect and foster different ways of being a self. I learned something about Japanese selves, but, most of all, I saw my own self and national culture in high relief. US cultural ideas, institutions, and interactions reflect and promote an *independent* model of self: a "good" self is a separate, stable, autonomous, free entity possessing a set of defining attributes – preferences, attitudes, goals – that guide behavior. I understood that standing out and expressing one's opinions and preferences was normative and appropriate – necessary, even – in the United States. In contrast, Japanese cultural ideas, institutions, and interactions reflect and promote an *interdependent* model of the self: a good self is a connected and flexible being, defined by relations to others and not fully separate from the social context. Listening, fitting in, being similar to others, adjusting to situations and the needs of others was normative and appropriate. At heart, independence is the sense of the self as a free agent, while interdependence is a sense of the self as an agent committed to significant relationships.

Both ways of being a self are necessary, often coexisting within the same person, but, depending on which self mediates a person's responses, behavior can differ. Researchers now have a good grasp of why the squeaky wheel gets the grease in the United States and why, in contrast, the duck that squawks the loudest gets shot in East Asia. We know, for example, that North Americans speak up more in schools and workplaces than their Asian American counterparts, that high parental expectations can have opposite motivational effects in Asian American and European-American families, that helping others is a moral obligation whether or not one likes a person in India but not in the United States, and that the brain's medial prefrontal cortex activates to judgments about the self in the United States, but to judgments about both self and one's mother in China.

Beyond the East–West divide, researchers also know that people in West African settings claim more enemies and fewer friends that those in North America, that Western Europeans are less likely than North Americans to associate happiness with personal achievement, that Latino dyads talk, smile, and laugh more than Black or White dyads, that Protestants are more likely than Jews to believe that people have control over their thoughts, that people from the US South respond with more anger to insults than do Northerners, and that working-class Americans are less concerned than middle-class Americans with having their choices denied. At the root of most of these differences is the question of whether

cultures foster a relatively independent self or a relatively interdependent self.

Some independent American selves resist the idea the cultures shape selves. But this resistance is itself a product of a culture that makes and mirrors an independent self. The very idea of independence suggests that people should be free from the influence of others. Yet the notion of the independent self is not an empirically derived fact, but, instead, a philosophical and historical construction rooted in the idea of the authority of the individual – a product of Western enlightenment thinking, Christianity and the Protestant Ethic, the Declaration of Independence, the frontier, the American Dream, and all the institutions and interactions that continue to animate these ideas. Some believe that interdependence is a secondary, weaker, or compromised way of being. Yet outside the middle-class West, interdependence is the more familiar, practiced way of being a self. Until we understand how our culturally different ideas about how to be a self mediate our thoughts, feelings, actions, and interactions, we do not have a comprehensive psychology, but a partial and culture-specific psychology, grounded in the middle-class West.

So, the personal is political. Here I have sketched how the political can shape the personal. But because individuals are part of and actively construct their cultures, they are not slaves to them. They can trigger change at all levels of their cultures. As an example, acting independently is currently the most pervasive, promoted, valued, and psychologically beneficial style of behavior in the United States. Yet virtually of all society's pressing social challenges (e.g., environmental degradation and economic inequality) require that people recognize their shared fate and work together – to think and act interdependently. There is reason for optimism: those who desire change can claim their role in culture-making and promote more interdependence in the ideas, institutions, and interactions of their cultures. In this case, the personal can shape the political.

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