

The Self & Identity in Context



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Who Are You?

Take 60 seconds and write down:

1. Five words that describe you.
2. Three groups you belong to.
3. One role that is most important to you.

Who Are You?

What is the 'Self'?

The self refers to how individuals perceive, evaluate, and understand themselves (Rogers, 1951)

The Self is:

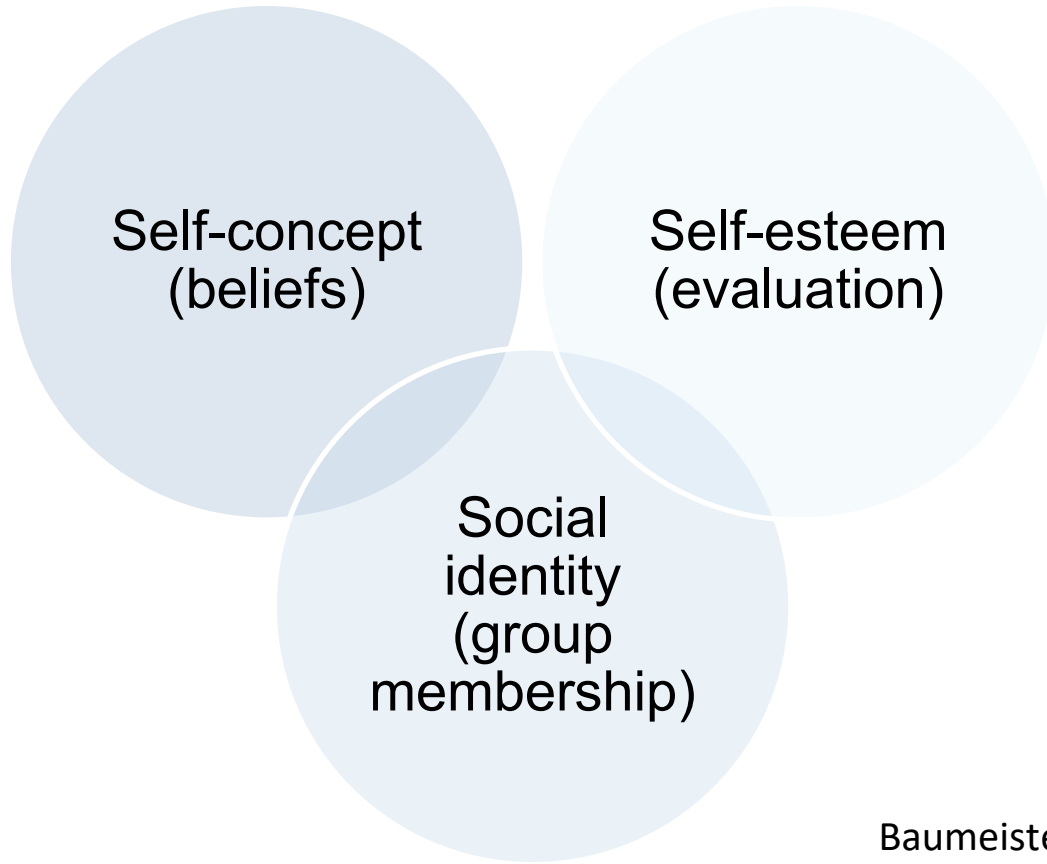
- Dynamic: it changes over time
- Context-dependent: different situations bring out different aspects of who we are
- Socially shaped: it develops through interaction with others and within cultural systems



Self Concept

- The set of beliefs we have about who we are
- It is not always accurate:
 - Sometimes people overestimate their abilities.
 - Sometimes people underestimate themselves.
- Objective truth does not matter – only that the person believes it
- A lens through which we interpret experiences
 - Two people may experience the same thing, but respond very differently





Baumeister (1998; 2021)

The Looking Glass Self' (Cooley, 1902)

We imagine how we appear to others

We first imagine how we look to another person.

We imagine how others judge us

Next, we interpret how we think others evaluate us.

We develop feelings about ourselves

Finally, these imagined evaluations influence our self-concept and self-esteem.

- Reflected appraisals (Felson, 1985)
 - We partly learn who we are by internalising how we believe others see us.
- Harris & Orth (2020)
 - Reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and social relationships across the lifespan



Self-Awareness

Self-awareness refers to our ability to reflect on ourselves; to think about our thoughts, behaviours, and how we are perceived by others (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Silvia & Duval, 2001)

Leads to self-evaluation and behaviour regulation

Objective self-awareness = when we become aware of ourselves as an object of evaluation.

We tend to compare ourselves to standards, these might be:

- Personal goals (e.g., 'I want to sound confident')
- Social norms (e.g., 'I should behave appropriately in this setting')
- Expectations from others



Functions of the Self

Knowledge Structures

- Self-concept helps us organise and interpret information about ourselves and the world
- The self acts like a kind of filter, shaping how we perceive and remember experiences

Regulatory System

- The self helps guide and control our behaviour. It allows us to:
 - Set goals
 - Monitor our progress
 - Adjust our behaviour when needed
- If your behaviour doesn't match that self-view, it may create discomfort

Do we know ourselves?

Social comparison (Festinger, 1954)

- we evaluate our abilities, opinions, and even our worth by comparing ourselves to other people.
- These comparisons can be:
 - Upward (to people doing better), which can motivate improvement but sometimes lower self-esteem
 - Downward (to people doing worse), which can boost self-esteem but might reduce motivation

Self-perception (Bem, 1972)

- We sometimes infer our own attitudes by observing our behaviour
- So instead of thinking, 'I must feel motivated, so I study', it can work the other way around: 'I study a lot, so I must care about my degree.'

Feedback from others

- The reactions, comments, and behaviours of other people influence how we interpret ourselves

Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987)

Actual Self

- Our current view of ourselves.
- It's how we believe we are right now, based on our traits, abilities, and behaviours.

Ideal Self

- Who we would like to be
- It reflects our hopes, aspirations, and personal goals.

Ought Self

- Who we feel we should be
- This version of the self is often shaped by social expectations, such as family expectations, cultural norms, or perceived responsibilities

Why we sometimes feel dissatisfied with ourselves

- When there's a difference between the actual self and the ideal self, this can lead to feelings like disappointment, frustration, or dissatisfaction
- When there's a gap between the actual self and the ought self, this often leads to feelings like guilt, anxiety, or pressure

How identity is linked to emotion

- SDT shows us that emotions are not just random, they are closely tied to how we evaluate ourselves against internal standards
- The self is shaped not only by personal goals, but also by social and cultural expectations

How social expectations become internalised as part of the self

- these discrepancies can be motivating. They can encourage behaviour change
 - But if the gap is too large or feels unattainable, it can also lead to stress or lower self-esteem
- 

Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986)

Hoped-for selves

- Who we would like to become
- Aspirations and goals

Expected selves

- Who we realistically think we may become

Feared selves

- Who we want to avoid becoming

Possible selves remain a major contemporary area of research, particularly in education and motivation (Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2006)

Self-Construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991)

Independent self-construal

- people define themselves primarily in terms of their individual traits, abilities, and characteristics
- more commonly associated with individualistic cultures, where there is a strong emphasis on personal achievement, independence, and standing out as unique

Interdependent self-construal

- people define themselves in terms of their relationships and social roles
- more commonly associated with collectivist cultures, where maintaining relationships, harmony, and social connection are prioritised

Who/What Shapes the Self?

Internal (the individual)

- Personality
- Cognition
- Biological factors,
- Personal experiences

External (Society)

- social relationships
- group memberships
- cultural norms
- wider structures like education, media, and power systems

The self as co-constructed

- The self emerges through the interaction between the individual and their social world
- Our internal thoughts and feelings are shaped by external experiences AND our behaviour, in turn, shapes how others respond to us
- Your own goals and motivations shape how you respond to those expectations

Task: Identity Radar

Which Identities Matter Most?

1. Get a piece of paper and draw a large circle with the word 'ME' in the middle
2. Around it place your different identities
3. Rank them: Draw a circle around each word – the biggest the circle, the more important
4. Context Challenge: Think about your different contexts – does the identity strength change based upon different contexts? If so, draw a star next to the ones that change
5. Discuss in pairs/small groups:
 - Which identity surprised you? Which identity changes most?
 - Which identities are invisible to others? Which identities do others notice first?

Student/
Course

Nationality

Family
Role

Friend

Hobby

Religion

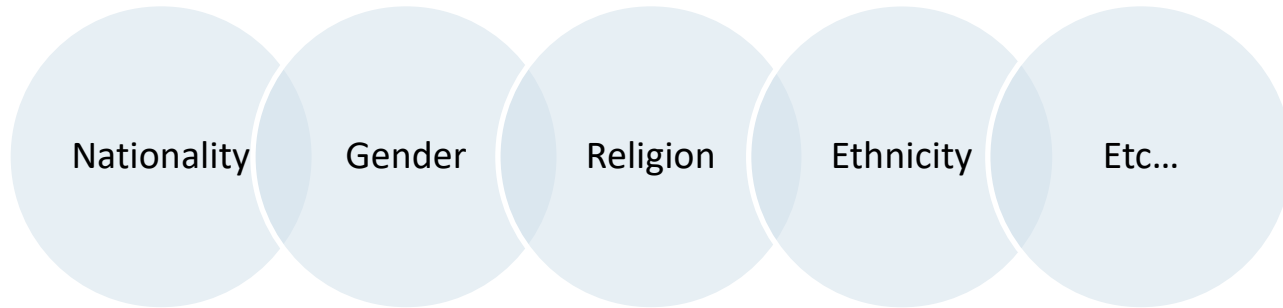
Gender

Sexuality

Job

Online
Identity

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)



- Social identity = a sense of belonging and a way of locating ourselves within the social world.
- Being part of a group can give us:
 - A sense of belonging
 - A sense of purpose
 - A source of self-esteem (Harris & Orth, 2020)
- We don't just belong to groups; we care about them, invest in them, and often defend them... but it can also lead to bias, exclusion, and intergroup conflict
- Social identity research now extends beyond prejudice and intergroup conflict to areas such as social media, collective action, leadership, health, and political behaviour (Gaffney, Hogg & Hohman, 2023)

Categorisation

- We mentally organise the social world by placing people, including ourselves, into groups
- We tend to exaggerate similarities within groups and differences between groups.



Identification

- We begin to adopt that group as part of our identity
- We start to internalise the norms, values, & behaviours associated with that group
- We begin to care about the group and its status



Comparison

- We compare our group to other groups
- These comparisons are often biased in favour of the in-group.



Positive Distinctiveness

- We want our group to be seen positively in comparison to other groups
- Positive group comparisons help maintain self-esteem and a positive social identity
- Can encourage in-group favouritism and loyalty to the group



In-Groups and Out-Groups

“Us” (in-group) vs “them” (out-group)

- This concept shapes how we perceive, evaluate, and behave towards others
- In-group favouritism = we evaluate members of our own group more positively, trust them more, and are often more willing to help them.
- Out-group derogation = we may show bias against out-groups. Not necessarily overt hostility; it can be subtle.
- Why?
 - If our group is seen as positive or superior, that reflects positively on us as individuals.
 - So, we are motivated (often unconsciously) to view our group in a favourable light.

Minimal Group Paradigm (Tajfel, 1970)

- How little does it take for group bias to emerge?
- participants were divided into groups based on something completely trivial (estimating the number of dots on a screen)
- Categorised as:
 - Over-estimators
 - Under-estimators
- These groups had:
 - No history
 - No interaction
 - No real meaning
- Participants still showed in-group favouritism
- Simply categorising people into groups is enough to trigger bias.

Minimal Group Paradigm

Tajfel et al. (1971)

- Assigned to groups based on trivial criteria (e.g., preference for paintings by Klee vs Kandinsky OR random assignment)
- Participants were asked to allocate rewards (e.g., points/money) to members of their own group (in-group) or members of the other group (out-group)
- Findings: Participants consistently showed in-group favouritism
- They often chose options that benefitted the in-group more than the out-group
- Even sacrificed absolute gain to maximise relative difference

Billig & Tajfel (1973)

- Refined earlier MGP experiments by testing whether participants understood the task, and ensuring findings were not due to confusion
- Findings: Even when fully understanding the task participants still showed in-group favouritism. Suggesting bias was intentional rather than accidental
- In-group bias is not just a misunderstanding; it reflects motivated behaviour

Locksley et al. (1980)

- Tested whether MGP effects hold when: More information about individuals is available
- Findings: When participants had individual-level information, reliance on group categorisation decreased
- Group bias is strongest when information is limited and group categories dominate perception

Minimal Group Paradigm

Brewer (1979)

- Investigated whether bias means loving the in-group or hating the out-group
- Findings: People tend to show In-group favouritism more than active hostility toward out-groups
- Bias is often about favouring “us”, not necessarily disliking “them”

Schmidt & Drake (2023)

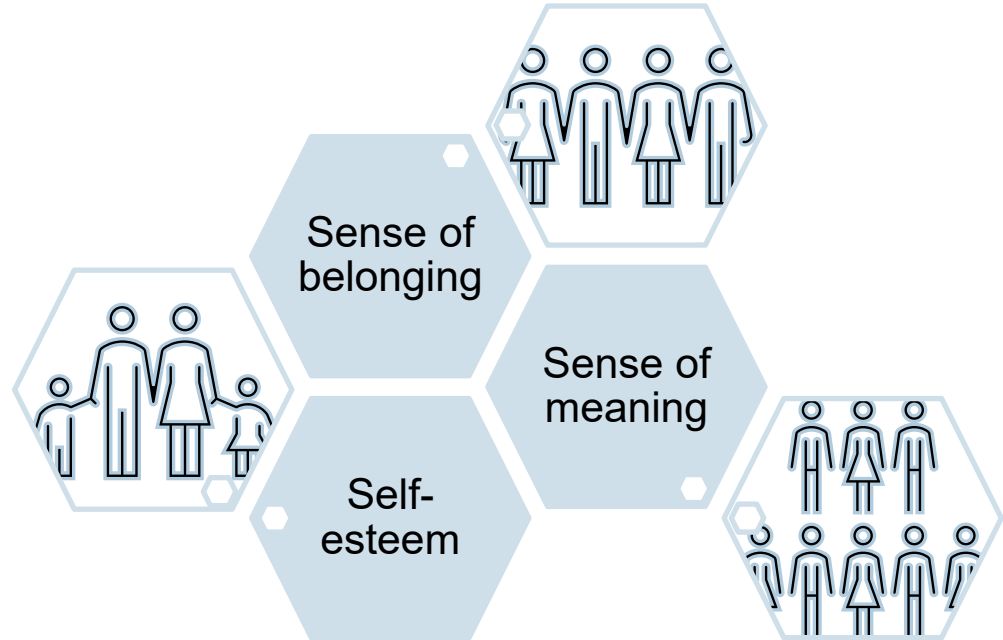
- Large experimental comparison of different MGP designs
- Tested multiple ways of creating minimal groups
- Measured both: Explicit bias (e.g., allocation tasks) and Implicit bias
- Key Findings: Participants consistently favoured their in-group across conditions
- Bias emerged regardless of how groups were formed
- The strength of bias varied depending on: Task type or Group salience

Tao, Guo & Wang (2024)

- Groups created in a sports context (basketball teams) based on minimal/temporary identity (no long-term meaning)
- Key Findings: Participants showed greater social mindfulness and prosocial decision-making toward ingroup members.
- Outgroup members received less favourable treatment during social decision-making tasks.
- Demonstrates that even temporary group memberships can influence social behaviour.

Why Groups Matter

- Interconnected
- Powerful influence on behaviour:
 - Conform to group norms
 - Defend their group's reputation
 - Show favouritism toward in-group members
- Can lead to exclusion and bias
- Central to our psychological experience of the self



Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner et al., 1987)

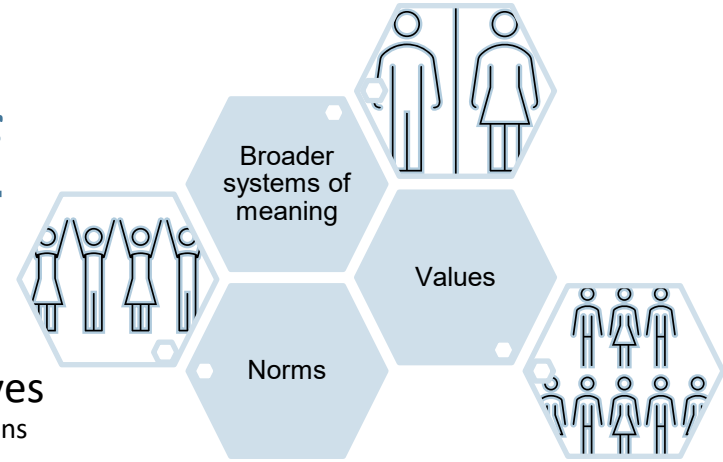
- Not just one identity – we have multiple possible identities
- Situational & context dependent
- We shift which aspect of the self is most prominent in any given moment
- We are more likely to adopt a group identity when:
 - Group differences are salient or visible
 - There is a sense of contrast between 'us' and 'them'
 - The social context highlights shared characteristics within a group
- Depersonalisation: shifting from thinking of yourself as a unique individual to thinking of yourself as a representative of a group
- Recent work highlights that social identities are increasingly shaped through online and digital environments (Networked Society Research; Reynolds et al., 2010)

Task: The University Challenge

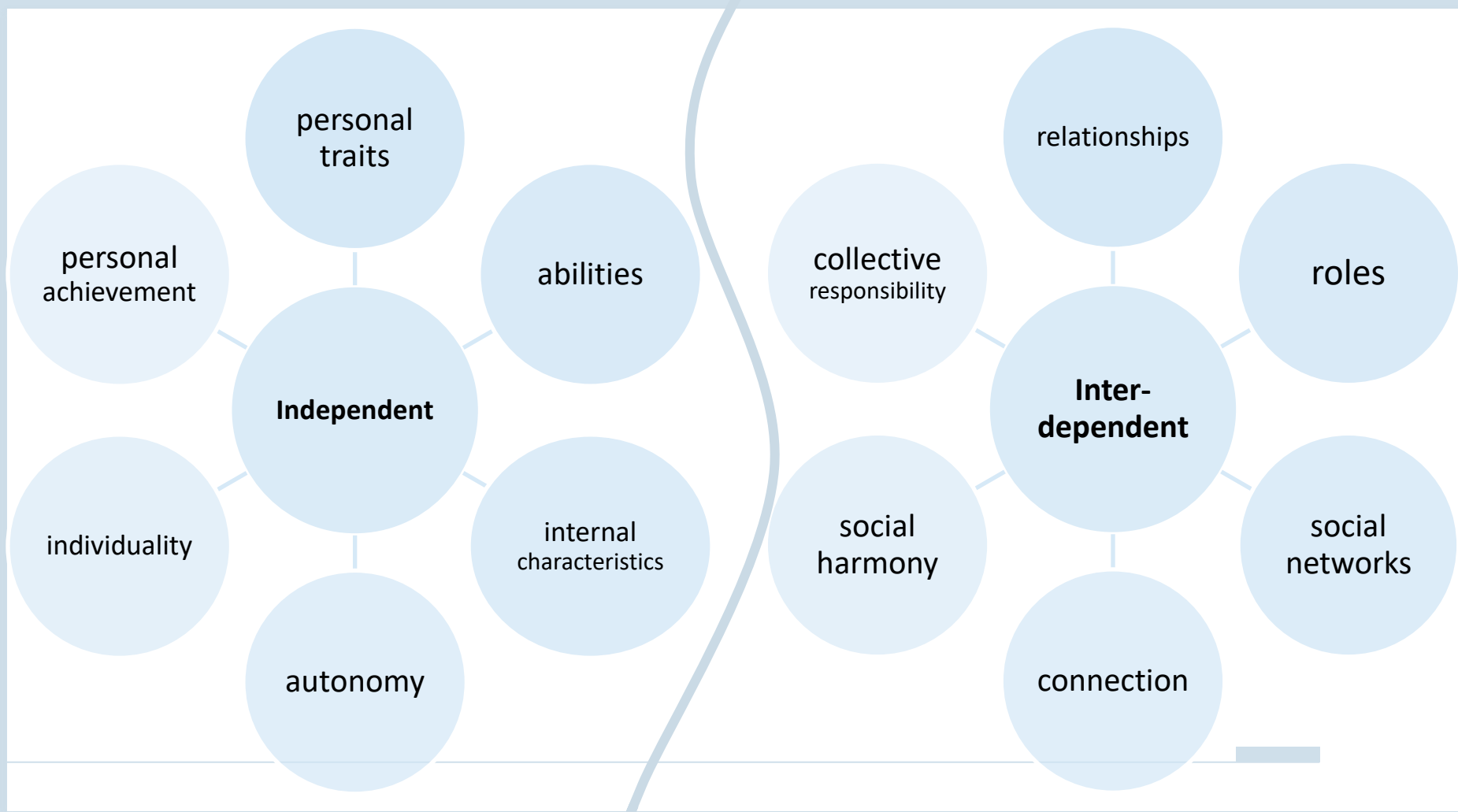
1. You will be placed into Teams
2. Each Team to develop:
 - A Team Name
 - A Team Motto
 - A Team Logo
3. Team Competition: Which Team should receive:
 - £50,000 funding?
 - Better facilities?
 - Extra scholarships?
4. Vote
5. Discussion



Culture & The Self



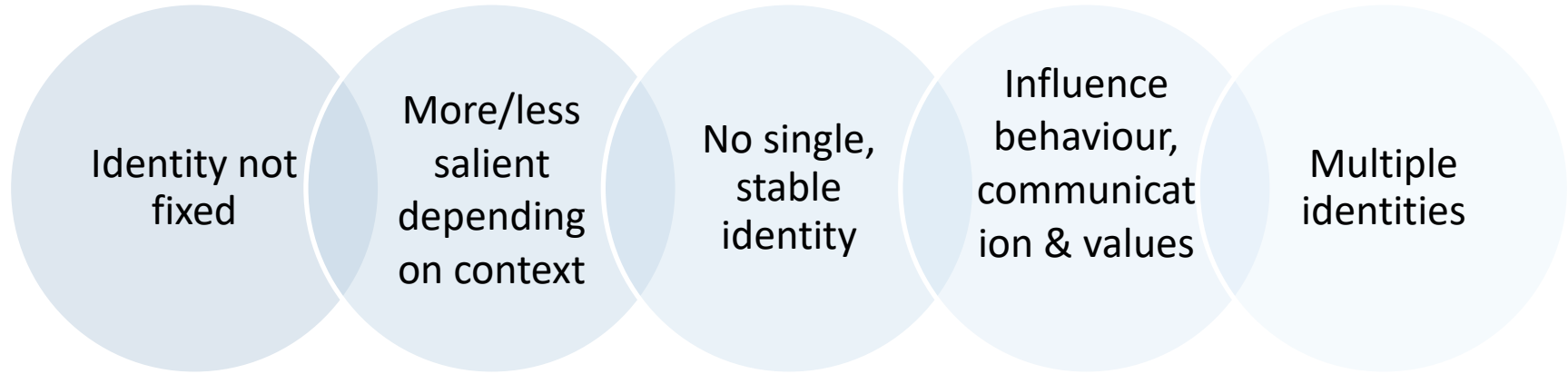
- Culture shapes the standards we use to evaluate ourselves
 - Ideas about success, ambition, or achievement often reflect cultural expectations
 - Norms around behaviour vary across cultural contexts
- Culture often becomes internalised - cultural norms and values shape how we think about ourselves at a very deep level
- Self is not universal – theories developed in one culture may not apply in the same way across cultures
- Always consider WEIRD samples!
- Culture as a central component of contemporary self and identity research (McAdams et al., 2021)



Independent vs Interdependent

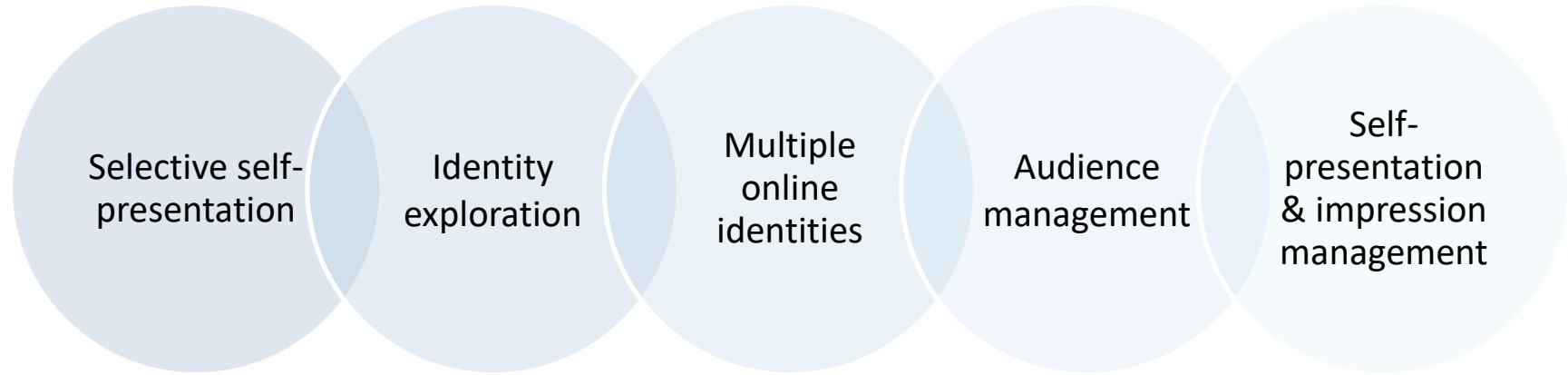
- The distinction is not absolute
 - People are not one or the other - rather, these are cultural patterns
 - Most people have access to both, but different contexts will make certain aspects more salient In more
- Important implications for behaviour. For example:
 - In more independent contexts, behaviour may be guided by personal preferences/internal values
 - In more interdependent contexts, behaviour may be guided more by social expectations/the needs of others
- Differences can influence:
 - Communication styles (direct vs indirect)
 - Emotional expression
 - Decision-making

Contextual Identity



- Context can shape identity in several ways (Crocetti et al., 2023):
 - Social context = who is around us (e.g., in-group vs out-group)
 - Cultural context = norms and expectations
 - Situational context = the setting we are in (e.g., formal vs informal)
- These shifts are often automatic; we don't necessarily choose which identity becomes most prominent

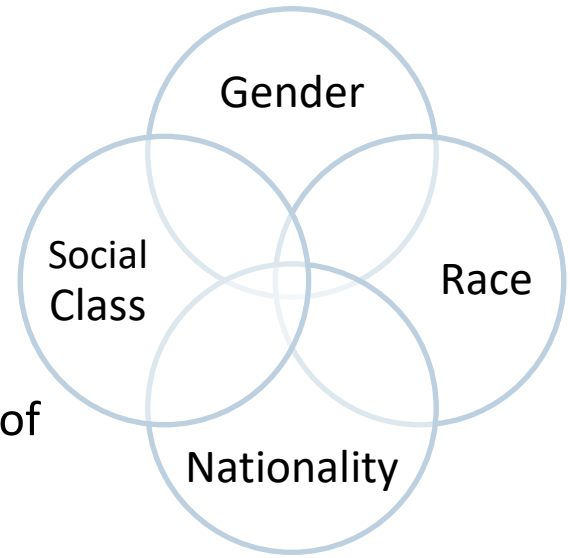
Digital & Online Identities



- Digital identities and self-expression in online environments (Davis, 2016).
- Facebook profiles can influence self-concept through self-reflection (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011).
- Technology enables people to explore and perform different identities (Turkle, 2011).
- Social networking sites provide opportunities for identity construction and self-presentation (Manago et al., 2008).

Intersectionality

- Identities don't exist in isolation
- They overlap and interact.
- Individuals experience the world through the combination of multiple identities, rather than through just one at a time (Crenshaw, 1989; Moffitt et al., 2023)
- Move away from simplified, one-dimensional explanations of identity, and towards recognising that identity is layered and multidimensional
- Intersectionality helps us better understand:
 - Differences in lived experience
 - Inequality and discrimination
 - Why one-size-fits-all explanations often fall short



Identity and Power

Privileged

- Greater social value
- Visibility
- Access to opportunities

Marginalised

- Devalued
- Overlooked
- Associated with disadvantage

- Not just personal or psychological - it is also political and structural
- Identity can shape not just how we see ourselves, but:
 - How others see us
 - How we are treated
 - And the kinds of experiences we have in everyday life

Task: Identity Case Detectives

Investigate how identity might shape a student's university experience

Group A

- First-generation university student
- Works 20 hours each week
- Lives at home

Group B

- International student
- English is second language
- Living away from family

Group C

- Mature student
- Parent
- Returning to education

1. Split into three groups – each group will receive one student profile
2. Read your profile and think about:
 - Who are they?
 - Which identities stand out?
 - Which identities may become important in different situations?
3. Complete the questions on the next slide

Task: Identity Case Detectives

1. Which identities are likely to be most significant? Examples:
 - Student/ International / First-generation / Mature
 - Parent
 - Worker
 - Cultural identity
2. Where might this student feel:
 - Included?
 - Accepted?
 - Supported?
3. What challenges might they experience? Examples:
 - Language barriers
 - Financial/Time pressures
 - Feeling different/Lack of representation
4. Consider:
 - Which identities might provide advantages?
 - Which identities might create challenges?

SIT

- Which groups might this person identify with?
- Which groups provide belonging?
- Which groups might make them feel excluded?

SCT

- Which identity might become most important in different situations?
- How might identity shift across contexts?

Intersectionality

- How do multiple identities interact?
- Would their experience be different if only one identity changed?

Imagine you work for Student Support.
Think about your student profile.

What could the university do to improve:

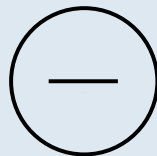
1. Belonging?
2. Inclusion?
3. Confidence?
4. Opportunities?



Critical Evaluation



- Extensive empirical support
- Cross-cultural research growing
- High real-world relevance



- WEIRD samples (Henrich et al., 2010)
- Self-report bias
- Identity difficult to measure
- Cultural variation challenges universality

Contemporary Perspective

- Open science and replication
- Growing interest in intersectionality (Moffitt et al., 2023)
- More culturally diverse research

Key Takeaways

The self is:

Social

Cultural

Context-dependent

Identity shapes behaviour and experience