

# Impact of Various Cultures on Self-Expression

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**Abstract**

Self-expression is the expression of thoughts or feelings especially through artistic activities (such as painting, writing, dancing, etc.). It is a notion that is closely associated with a horde of positive concepts, such as freedom, creativity, style, courage, self-assurance, and even healing and spirituality. Thus, individuals are urged to express themselves whenever possible, and self-expression is expected to be, by and large, good and beneficial. Self-expression affects people in positive ways (e.g., Freud, 1920/1966; Pennebaker, 1990). It is a display of individuality whether it's through words, clothing, hairstyle, or art forms such as writing and drawing. Self-expression as expressing one's thoughts and feelings, and these expressions can be accomplished through words, choices or actions.

Self-expression means something more specific, but also something more changeable in time, adaptable in context, and something appropriate for each person. It also means something identifiable only by a given person. Expression is often well-described as creativity. The expression might involve the self-improvement of education. However, self-expression need not be verbal or communicative at all, having as many vibrant forms as the full diversity of people, and as many shades as their moments and moods. It might sometimes be invisible to other people, occurring internally. For one whose very identity and greatest purpose involves parenting, self-expression might be witnessed in comforting an infant; that might represent connecting with oneself, for a mother. It does not equate with the purpose of a life, much less "the meaning of life.

**Importance of self-expression**

Self-expression is just as important as free will. Without it we would be a race of mindless preprogrammed zombies. Self-expression is an example of a free world, where would we be without, Music, art, architecture, poetry, even cavemen drew on walls. It's what separates us from the animals. Self-expression is finding creative ways to express oneself. Creative activity often happens when a person is feeling happy, and losing himself in their own world of imagination can create a longer lasting good feeling (Lebowitz).It helps to create well-rounded individuals by teaching that everyone is different (Bailey).

**Role of various cultures in self-expression**

In the Western cultural tradition, expression of thoughts, preferences and feelings is considered to be a way to express one's selfhood and thus, freedom of expression becomes a powerful sign of individual freedom. As the value of freedom and individuality are core ideals that define individualist cultures, self-expression, defined as "assertion of one's individual traits (Merriam-Webster dictionary)," is strongly valued in these cultures. Consequently, one important aspect of individualism is called "Expressive Individualism" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) in which individuals express their inner thoughts and feelings in order to realize their individuality. Freedom of speech, which symbolizes an array of different self-expressive acts, such as written and spoken words, choices, actions, and artistic endeavors, is one of the most fundamental rights in the U.S., enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Whereas expression is clearly prominent in the U.S. and Western cultures, it is also a cultural particularity that cannot be understood unless it is examined in relation to aspects of the individualist cultural context such as the cultural definition of the self and the cultural model of relationships (D'Andrade, 1990, 1995; Quinn & Holland, 1987). The significance of self-expression depends on the concept of the self, because the act of self-expression involves projecting one's own thoughts and ideas into the world. In contrast, in another cultural context where the model of relationships and the concept of the self are different, the meaning of self-expression could also be different. For instance, in a more collectivist culture, the cultural privilege bestowed on expression may not be shared. For example, in the East Asian cultural context, expression of one's thoughts may be neither particularly encouraged nor viewed positively.

Speech and self-expression hold particular importance in individualistic cultures e.g., European American cultures (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Kim & Markus, 2002; Kim & Sherman, 2007). The freedom to express one's opinion, the Freedom of Speech, is one of the legally protected basic human rights in the U.S. The freedom of speech symbolizes one's ultimate freedom to be oneself. Thus, speech enjoys a special privilege in the cultural contexts, and the freedom of speech is one of the most important rights of individuals in the U.S. This social understanding of self-expression and its psychological consequences have been supported by scientific evidence as well. Self-expression is a notion that is very commonly and very positively used in contemporary popular culture in the U.S.

In individualist and collectivist cultural contexts, the perceived importance of self-expression differs. Emphasis on expression is one of integral aspects of individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). People in individualist cultural contexts are urged to self-express as it involves asserting "a unique core of feeling and intuition (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 334)" that makes a person individual. This emphasis on self-expression is represented in many aspects of individualist cultural practices and institutions. But this cultural emphasis is not strongly shared in other cultural contexts in which feelings and thoughts are not considered to be the core of a person. In more collectivist cultures, the practice of expressing one's thoughts and feelings is either discouraged or simply considered trivial and inconsequential, depending on specific situations. Self-expression is constitutive of particular patterns of perceptions, actions, interactions, and institutions that foster individuals' willingness and commitment to engage in the act. Such an emphasis on expression is one of the most integral aspects of individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), as people in these cultural contexts are urged to express themselves in order to assert "a unique core of feeling and intuition (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 334)."

While self-expression is considered fundamental in many individualistic cultural contexts, the same cultural emphasis is not found in other cultural contexts. For example, in more collectivistic cultures, the act of self-expression is in general neither central nor important, and consequently, common patterns of perceptions, actions, interaction, and institutions do not encourage or endow great meaning to self-expression. Speech and self-expression do not hold the same degree of importance in the more collectivistic cultural contexts, such as East Asian contexts. Thoughtful and self-disciplined silence is often valued above speech and speech is practiced with relatively great caution because the potential negative social implications of speech are more salient in these cultures than in the U.S. (Kim & Markus, 2002; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996). Thus, speech and self-expression are not commonly and routinely encouraged or emphasized in East Asian cultures (Kim & Markus, 2002; Kim & Sherman, 2007). These different cultural assumptions and practices influence whether and how individuals express their thoughts and feelings, and in turn, how acts of expression affect psychological and biological outcomes for these cultural participants.

America is a nation that values an individual and non-conformity more than most cultures of the world. Most choose to express who they are through appearance. To most this will be taken as a sign of self-confidence; that they are confident enough with themselves to be so open with how they express themselves (Harris).

Dominant model of the self in more individualistic cultures, such as in the U.S., is an independent self in which a person is viewed to be a unique entity that is bounded and fundamentally separate from its social surrounding. This view holds that the individual is understood, practiced, and uniquely defined as a separate or distinct entity whose behavior is determined by some amalgam of internal attributes, such as thoughts, preferences, motives, goals, attitudes, beliefs, and abilities (Fiske, Markus, Nisbett, & Kitayama, 1998). These attributes enable, guide, and constrain behavior and motivate the expression of personal thoughts and the pursuit of personal goals and well-being (Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus, Mullaly, & Kitayama, 1997; Morris & Peng, 1994). In these contexts, individuals are expected to make decisions based on their own volition, rather than on external influences or social constraints (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Additionally, these assumptions also shape the model of social relationships, which are assumed to be freely chosen and carry relatively few obligations (Adams & Plaut, 2003; Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990). Thus, people view relationships to be a benevolent resource in which they can engage with relatively little caution (Adams, 2005; Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006).

By contrast, in more collectivistic cultures, such as in many Asian cultures, an interdependent view of the self pervades. In these cultures, social relationships define the self, and the basic motives for a person's behaviors are sought externally, rather than internally (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, 1989). Thus, a person is regarded as a flexible, connected entity who is bound to others, conforms to relational norms, and views group goals as primary and personal beliefs, needs, and goals as secondary (Kim & Markus, 1999; Kitayama & Uchida, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In these cultures, people assume that social factors, such as norms, roles, tradition, and a sense of social obligation, guide behaviors (Fiske et al., 1998; Kitayama & Uchida, 2005). Therefore, the motivation to maintain social equilibrium, to enhance others' evaluation of one-self, and to minimize social conflict takes precedence

over the enhancement and assertion of individuality (Leung, 1987; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Kim & Sherman, 2007). The model of relationships also takes an interdependent form in which relationships with others are less voluntary but more “given” and carry greater expectation of obligations (Adams & Plaut, 2003; Miller et al., 1990).

These different self-construals stemming from one’s participation in a given cultural context can implicate a multitude of psychological processes. For instance, people from East Asian cultural contexts tend to attribute more causal explanations of social events to situational and external factors whereas European Americans tend to attribute explanations to internal and personal factors (Morris & Peng, 1994). People from North American cultural contexts show a stronger self-enhancement tendency—the tendency to view oneself in a positive light—compared to East Asians (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Moreover, it appears that for North Americans, a sense of self-worth is more strongly tied to possessing positive abilities, psychological traits, and uniqueness, whereas for East Asians, a sense of self-worth is more strongly tied to having good relationships and maintaining face (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). Consequently, the well-being of the self depends on one’s own beliefs about oneself (hence “subjective well-being”) in more individualistic cultures (Diener & Diener, 1995). Whereas in collectivistic cultures, judgments of one’s happiness are more normatively and objectively determined and one’s beliefs about one’s own happiness are less relevant (Diener & Diener, 1995; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Combined, these different cultural views on what constitute the core of the self and relationships influence the motivation to assert and express one’s personal feelings and thoughts.

Motivation to be valued and accepted might be universal, studies in cultural psychology have shown that what constitutes “being a good member” varies across cultures (Heine et al., 1999; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). For example, the ideal characteristics of a good person in individualistic cultures include uniqueness, positive self-regard, and expressiveness, whereas in collectivistic cultures they include positive social relationships, social standing, reputation, and consideration for others (Heine et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This divergence in ideals implicates culturally specific ways in which people enhance their sense of self-worth and project their self-image. To be a “good person” in a collectivistic culture, one should be motivated to maintain their social standing and relationships. To be a “good person” in an individualistic culture, one should be motivated to convey independent viewpoints and ideas, as these are the contents of self-views one should aspire to have in each respective culture. East Asians and European Americans should differ in their beliefs about the importance of self-expression.

### **Individual and Relational Conceptions of Self in India and the United States**

Individual conceptions of self were represented in the responses of participants from the U.S. and Indian samples in the form of positive and negative affect and self-evaluation, a sense of agency and ambition. For Americans, independent representations were centered on the freedom “to be me”; whereas Indians were more likely to represent the self as simply “free.” For Americans, “free to be me” implies the freedom to express the self, to act naturally without regard for expectations of others. For Indian participants, free implied freedom from social constraints, but this freedom also enables more active engagement with others. For example, one Indian female suggested that feeling private and feeling free were opposite experiences: “Private means keeping a part of you to yourself while free means sharing,

interacting, etc.” Although individuals from both samples use the term free, the American definition is organized around unencumbered self-expression, whereas the Indian conception suggests the ability to pursue social engagement without constraint. For Americans, interdependent representations centered on mutual and reciprocal relations between self and other viewed as equals (as in “we’re there for each other”). For Indians, when interdependent representations of self were provided, they were more likely to reflect a sense of shared experience with the other. As such, although interdependent representations of self were represented in both samples, interdependence among American participants was organized around what Roland (1988) called an “I-self”; Indians organize interdependence to a greater degree than Americans around what Roland calls the “we-self.”

A final model consists of an encompassing sense of self. Encompassing to refer to a sense of the self being subsumed by the other or otherwise embedded in a relationship that extends beyond the self alone. An encompassing sense of self arises in relationships where one person is obligated to, is responsible for, or views himself or herself as the caretaker of the other. Self-experience of this sort is likely to be well represented in hierarchical relationships, which are more salient in India than in the United States. For example, in Indian social life such hierarchical identifications occur within parent-child, superior-subordinate, and husband-wife (and even sibling) relationships. Both the superior and the subordinate have moral duties in relation to each other, even if those duties exhibit hierarchical asymmetry. Where a father, mother, superior, or brother may be responsible for protecting a child, subordinate, or sibling, the latter individual plays a role in actively respecting, obeying, and appreciating the sacrifice and care provided by the other. An encompassing sense of self does not necessarily imply a blurring of boundaries between self and other. One person may know what is expected of him or her even if this duty is experienced as burdensome or sacrificial (Mascolo and Bhatia, 2002). In this way, the sacrificing person is aware that her sacrifice reflects her own suffering. Her act is performed out of duty within the relationship, but also in the context of the positive experiences she adduces from being part of that relationship. An encompassing self may be more prevalent among Indians, but Americans can experience an encompassing self in relationship with children or mentors.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to recognize cultural differences on self-expression and to contextualize the meaning and practices of self-expression to understand why people use or do not use various forms of self-expression. Expression of thoughts, feelings, and intentions, implicates many different aspects of human life and psychology. This paper demonstrates the relevance of self-expression as an important social behaviour that can influence and alter internal psychological processes. More importantly, it shows the importance of culturally represented meanings of the act of expression and how people from different cultures are affected by expression. The act of self-expression holds great psychological significance only in a culture that grants its social significance.

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