

Individual Self, Relational Self, Collective Self: Hierarchical Ordering of the Tripartite Self

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Abstract The individual self comprise unique attributes, the relational self comprises partner-shared attributes, and the collective self comprises ingroup-shared attributes. All selves are fundamental components of the self-concept, with each being important and meaningful to human experience and with each being associated with health benefits. Are the selves, however, equally important and meaningful? We review a program of research that tested four competing theoretical views suggesting that the motivational hub of human experience is (a) the individual self, (b) the relational self, (b) the collective self, or (c) determined by contextual or cultural factors. The research furnished support to the view that the individual self is the primary form of self-definition. We discuss alternative explanations and implications. We end with the introduction of a theoretical model, the boomerang model, that has the potential to integrate the diverse literature on the topic.

Keywords Self · Individual self · Relational self · Collective self · Feedback

The self-concept is not a singular, monolithic cognitive structure. Instead, it comprises three fundamental components: the individual self, relational self, and collective self (Sedikides and Brewer 2001a, b). This is to say that people pursue and achieve self-definition in terms of their personal, relational, or group characteristics. Are the three selves

equally indispensable to the individual? Is one more primary than the others? Does it all depend on context and culture? These are the issues we address in the present article.

The Three Selves

The *individual self* highlights one's unique side. It consists of attributes (e.g., traits, goals and aspirations, experiences, interests, behaviors) that differentiate the person from others. This self-representation is relatively independent of relational bonds or group memberships. The *relational self*, on the other hand, highlights one's interpersonal side. It consists of attributes that are shared with close others (e.g., partners, friends, family members) and define roles within the relationship. This self-representation reflects valued interpersonal attachments. Finally, the *collective self* highlights one's intergroup side. It consists of attributes that are shared with ingroup members and differentiate the ingroup from outgroups. This self-representation reflects membership in valued social groups.

The three selves co-exist, such that persons can alternate between perceiving the self as a distinct individual, as a relational partner, or as an interchangeable group member (Sedikides and Brewer 2001a, b). In addition, each self is associated with psychological and physical health benefits, and each self is important and meaningful to human experience (Berkman et al. 1992; Correll and Park 2005; Deci and Ryan 2000; Gable et al. 2004; Hardie et al. 2005; Haslam et al. 2009; Hawkey et al. 2005; Myers and Diener 1995; Sheldon and Filak 2008; Taylor et al. 2003a, b; Uchino et al. 1996). However, the selves may not be equally important and meaningful. The selves may have different motivational utility. If so, which self is primary?

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Theoretical Views on Motivational Self-Primacy

Individual-Self Primacy

This view asserts the primacy of the individual self. The core attributes of this self-representation are positive and important, influence the processing of subsequent information, and are resistant to unfavorable feedback but welcoming of favorable feedback (Markus 1977; Sedikides 1993). Indeed, persons are motivated to maintain or elevate their self-image and to protect against possible deflation of their self-image. For example, persons regard themselves as better than the average other, claim credit for a dyadic or group success while displacing blame to others, derogate conveyors of unfavorable feedback, and, when they cannot negate such feedback, recall it poorly or devalue the feedback dimension (Alicke and Govorun 2005; Brown 1998; Sedikides and Gregg 2003; Shepperd et al. 2008). In all, existing literature is consistent with the possibility that the motivational hub of the self-concept is the individual self.

Relational-Self Primacy

This view asserts the primacy of the relational self. Persons manifest a paramount desire for formation of stable interpersonal attachments, enhance and protect their relationships, resist the termination of existing relationships, and feel psychological and physical pain when socially excluded (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Eisenberger et al. 2003; Murray et al. 1996). In addition, close relationships influence perceptions, affective reactions, and behaviors toward new acquaintances, as well as goal pursuit (Andersen and Chen 2002; Sedikides et al. 1993; Tice and Baumeister 2001). In all, the existing literature is consistent with the possibility that the motivational hub of the self-concept is the relational self.

Collective-Self Primacy

This view asserts the primacy of the collective self. Persons are profoundly influenced by their social groups in terms of conformity and belief polarization (Asch 1951; Myers and Lamm 1976). In addition, persons are motivated to elevate and protect a positive group image, as they manifest favorable perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward their ingroup members (Boldry and Gaertner 2006; Brewer 1979; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Finally, the collective self may accord the optimal level of self-definition by simultaneously meeting competing needs for assimilation through intergroup comparisons and differentiation through intragroup comparisons, respectively (Brewer and Roccas 2001). In all, existing literatures is consistent with the possibility that the motivational hub of the self-concept is the collective self.

Contextual Primacy

This view asserts the primacy of the contextual self. Neither the individual nor the relational or collective self is inherently primary. Rather, the relative primacy of these selves depends on contextual factors that influence their accessibility. Indeed, research on the working self-concept (Markus and Wurf 1987), symbolic interactionism or role theory (Stryker and Statham 1985), and the kaleidoscopic self (Deaux and Perkins 2001) demonstrates shifts in self-definition as a function of norm salience, role importance, or fleeting social circumstances, respectively. In addition, research on self-categorization theory (Onorato and Turner 2004; Turner et al. 1994) suggests that self-definition fluctuates between the individual and collective self as a function of contextual features, with the collective self becoming salient in intergroup contexts and the individual self becoming salient in intragroup contexts. In all, the literature is consistent with the possibility that the motivational hub of the self-concept is the self rendered momentarily accessible by the vagaries of the social context.

Comparative Testing

All four theoretical views are plausible and all can boast selective evidence in their favor. But to avoid impasses familiar to philosophical debates, the literature needs to move forward through comparative testing (Platt 1964). Which of these four views *best* accounts for motivational primacy in self-definition? We initiated a program of research to address this question.

As stated above, persons are motivated to enhance or protect all three selves. We used this motivational tendency as a medium, a metaphorical microscope of sorts, in our attempts to test for motivational primacy. In particular, we compared the relative functioning of the three selves in the face of threat (e.g., negative feedback) or flattery (e.g., favorable feedback) under the rationale that the self that serves as the motivational hub of human experience will react more strongly to events that either weaken or bolster its integrity. The motivationally primary self is the self that more strongly avoids or rejects threat and more strongly approaches or endorses flattery.

We carried out multiple studies, each with its own methodological nuances, in an effort to meet methodological considerations for effective and diagnostic hypothesis testing. We introduced various controls over variables that could compromise comparative testing. For example, across studies, we implemented different procedures for controlling the accessibility of the selves, enacted various forms of threat or flattery, measured a variety of reactions to threat or flattery,

sampled an assortment of collective selves, and assessed the independent reaction of each self. Below, we provide representative empirical examples.

Relative Primacy of Individual Self, Collective Self, and Contextual Self

Self Accessibility In our first study (Gaertner et al. 1999, Experiment 1), we tested female students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). We ventured to activate both the individual and collective self (i.e., UNC women). We activated the individual self by highlighting participants' "unique background, personality traits, skills, abilities, and hobbies." We activated the collective self by stating that participants were "female and you share membership in the group UNC women." All participants, then, completed a fake personality test and received fabricated feedback that was either threatening ("moody") or flattering ("emotionally expressive"). Importantly, the feedback pertained either to the individual self (e.g., you are moody vs. emotionally expressive) or the collective self (e.g., UNC women—excluding you—are moody vs. emotionally expressive). Subsequently, participants were offered the opportunity to define themselves in accordance with either their individual self ("I am a unique individual," "My personality attributes are totally unique," "My beliefs and values are totally unique") or their collective self ("I am very similar to UNC women," "My personality attributes are quite similar to the attributes of UNC women," "My beliefs and values are quite similar to the beliefs and values of UNC women").

Participants could buffer themselves from the threatening feedback by escaping (i.e., shifting away) from the threatened self. According to the individual-self primacy view, threatening feedback to the individual self would be more impactful than threatening feedback to the collective self; hence, participants would shift to the collective self to buffer a threat to the individual self. According to the collective self-primacy view threatening feedback to the collective self would be more impactful than threatening feedback to the individual self; hence, participants would shift to the individual self to buffer a threat to the collective self. Finally, according to the contextual primacy view, when both selves are made accessible, threatening feedback to the individual self will be as impactful as for the collective self; hence, participants would be equally likely to shift to the collective self when the individual self is threatened, and to shift to the individual self when the collective self is threatened. The results were consistent with the individual-self primacy view. Participants more strongly deemphasized their uniqueness and increased identification with their ingroup when they received threatening feedback about the individual self.

Ingroup Identification These findings may be limited to low group identifiers. Could it be that threatening feedback to the collective self is more impactful for high than low group identifiers (Branscombe and Wann 1991; Spears et al. 1997; Voci 2006)? In a follow-up study (Gaertner et al. 1999, Experiment 2), we first assessed strength of identification with the group (UNC-CH). Then, we asked participants to complete an ostensibly valid creativity test and provided them with bogus and threatening performance feedback about either the individual self ("you scored at the 31st percentile") or the collective self ("UNC-CH students—excluding you—scored at the 31st percentile.") Finally, we recorded participants' feelings (e.g., sadness, anger).

Participants would experience bad mood following the feedback and would manage their mood by strategically lowering the personal importance of creativity (i.e., feedback derogation; Wyer and Frey 1983). According to the individual-self primacy view, negative mood and feedback derogation would be worse following threat to the individual self than collective self regardless of strength of group identification. According to the collective-self primacy view, negative mood and feedback derogation would be worse following threat to the collective than individual self regardless of strength of group identification. Finally, according to the contextual primacy view, mood and feedback derogation would depend on strength of group identification: low group identifiers would manifest an individual-self primacy pattern, whereas high identifiers would manifest a collective-self primacy pattern. Again, the results were consistent with the individual-self primacy view. Regardless of strength of group identification, participants experienced a more negative mood and derogated the feedback to a greater degree (i.e., rated creativity as less important), when the threatening feedback pertained to the individual self.

Idiographically Important Group Are the above results patterns obtained when participants choose their own group (idiographic selection) than when the researcher chooses it for them (nomothetic selection)? In another study (O'Mara et al. 2007), we adopted an idiographic approach. Some participants selected their own group—in fact, the most important group to which they belonged—and proceeded to describe it (*collective-self condition*). Other participants described what makes them a unique person (*individual-self condition*). Then, all participants read a story ostensibly written by a recent university graduate who faced difficulties finding employment and life fulfillment. Finally, participants wrote a narrative stating what could cause either a member of their most important group (*collective-self condition*) or themselves (*individual-self condition*) to have a negative experience similar to the student's. The narratives were

coded for the degree to which the negative events befell the targeted self.

Participants could engage in a strategic self-protection move (Sedikides and Green 2000; Sedikides and Strube 1997a, b). They could disengage from face future threat and thus write an off-topic response. They could bypass the potential threat of future negative events by disregarding the request to describe how such negativity could occur. According to the individual-self primacy view, future negative events would be more threatening for the individual than collective self; hence, participants would ignore future threat to the individual self. According to the collective-self primacy view, future negative events would be more threatening for the collective than individual self; hence, participants would ignore future threat to the collective self. Finally, according to the contextual primacy view, negative future events would be equally threatening to the two selves; hence, participants would be equally likely to ignore future threat to either self. The results were, once again, consistent with the individual-self primacy view. Most participants (93%) were willing to write about how a future negative event could befall another member of their group. However, far fewer participants (60%) were willing to write about how the same future negative event could befall them personally.

A Meta-Analysis We wondered whether the results generalized beyond the observed data to a population of possible studies that differed in procedural characteristics. We also intended to expand the scope of our research by testing meta-analytically whether the selves respond differentially not only to threat but also to flattery. Through literature searches, we arrived at a set of 37 studies that varied in terms of the threat or flattery they used, the types of reactions they assessed, and the groups that represented the collective self. To pay full justice to the collective self and contextual self views, we coded studies in reference to two contextual variables. The first involved strength of group identification. A group is a more accessible basis of the collective self for high than low identifiers. The second variable involved whether the group on which the collective self was based was laboratory-formed or natural. Such groups differ in several ways (e.g., member commitment, member investment; Ostrom and Sedikides 1992). The result is that natural groups are a more readily accessible basis of collective self than laboratory-formed groups.

According to the individual-self primacy view, participants react more strongly to both threat and flattery of the individual than collective self. According to the collective-self primacy view, participants react more strongly to both threat and flattery of the collective than individual self. Finally, according to the contextual-primacy view, it all depends on group identification and type of group. Low identifiers and studies

using laboratory groups will manifest individual-self primacy patterns, whereas high identifiers and studies using natural groups will manifest collective-self primacy patterns. The results were consistent with the individual-self primacy view. Participants responded more strongly when their individual than collective self was threatened or flattered. These responses occurred for both low and high group identifiers, and for both laboratory and natural groups.

Summary We applied particular care in order to control or manipulate factors that could yield misleading conclusions. In particular, we (a) integrated various aspects of threat such as varying its type (e.g., received vs. future), controlling the feedback dimension, and controlling feedback importance; (b) assessed a variety of reactions such as strategic self-shifting, mood state, feedback derogation, anger, and (un)willingness to face a future threat; (c) used a variety of groups to represent the collective self such as groups that are ascribed (e.g., gender), achieved (e.g., university affiliation), and idiographically designated as most important; (d) threatened the selves independently and assessed their independent responses; and (e) recorded meta-analytically responses not only to threat but also to flattery. The findings attested to the motivational primacy of the individual self versus the collective or contextual selves.

These findings are consistent with relevant literature. Participants evaluate the individual self more positively than the ingroup (Lindeman 1997), regard the individual self more capable than the ingroup of resisting media propaganda (Duck et al. 1995), and take personal responsibility for the successes of the ingroup while blaming it for its failures (Mullen and Riordan 1988). Participants accentuate intragroup differences more than they accentuate intragroup similarities (Simon et al. 1995), a pattern that attests to individual self's strivings for uniqueness. Group members disengage from successful ingroups when intragroup comparisons threaten the individual self (Seta and Seta 1996), whereas employees decide on staying or leaving their companies on the basis of personal gain (e.g., resources, satisfaction, promotion opportunities) rather than corporate identification (Rusbult et al. 1988). Finally, persons allocate more resources (i.e., money) to the ingroup than the outgroup only when they are likely to maximize their own earnings via this ingroup favoritism (Gaertner and Insko 2000).

Relative Primacy of Individual Self, Relational Self, Collective Self, and Contextual (Cultural) Self

The Relational Self Where does the relational self fit in the motivationally hierarchy? As the literature review that we presented in the first part of this article illustrates, the relational self has as much at stake in topping the

motivational hierarchy as any other self (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Murray et al. 1996; Tice and Baumeister 2001). At the very least, the relational self may be more primary than the collective self. We conducted three studies to address this issue (Gaertner et al. 2010).

Goals Motivational primacy is manifested not only in reactions to feedback but also in proactive functioning such as the construction of goals and ideals (Carver and Scheier 2002; Elliott and Dweck 1988). Persons pursue goals pertinent to their individual, relational, and collective selves (Gore and Cross 2006; Sheldon and Houser-Marko 2001). Such goals, when achieved, contribute to subjective well-being (Emmons 1986; King et al. 1998) and, when thwarted, produce deeply unpleasant feeling states (Duval and Wicklund 1972; Higgins 1987). Even imagining successful goal completion elevates subjective well-being and improves physical health 5 months into the future (King 2001). In our motivational primacy research (Gaertner et al. 2010), we explored whether the selves are associated differentially with life goals.

Culture (or Context) What is the role of culture in the motivational primacy debate? The cultural-self perspective (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1989), which is generally compatible with the contextual self approach, suggests that the cognitive, emotional, and motivational elements of the self-system are forged by culture, and in particular by internalized cultural norms. Norms in Western culture (e.g., USA, Canada, Northern and Western Europe, Australia) underscore agency, uniqueness, and personal success, giving way to an independent (i.e., separate, individualistic) self-system. However, norms in Eastern culture (e.g., East Asia, Latin America, India, Middle East) underscore communality, connectedness, and the importance of others, giving way to an interdependent (i.e., connected, collectivistic) self-system. (For more nuanced perspectives, see: Dubois and Beauvois 2005; Oyserman and Lee 2008). It follows that motivational primacy will fluctuate with culture. According to the cultural-self perspective, the individual self will be on top of the hierarchy in the West but at the bottom of the hierarchy in the East. Instead, the relational and collective selves will have primacy in the East.

The findings, however, appear to favor a universalist-self perspective. In self-description tasks, participants write a higher proportion of individual-self aspects than collective-self aspects. That pattern replicates across (a) participants both with an independent and interdependent self-construal (Gaertner et al. 1999, Investigation 4), (b) Chinese and American or Canadian participants (Ross et al. 2002; Trafimow et al. 1991), Philippino, Mexican, Australian, and American participants (del Prado et al. 2007), and (c)

experimenter-activated priming of individual and collective self (Trafimow et al. 1991; Ybarra and Trafimow 1998, Experiment 3). Moreover, at the implicit level, participants from the US, China, and Japan evaluate the individual self more positively than the relational friend (i.e., best friend) or the collective self (i.e., ingroup member) (Yamaguchi et al. 2007). We (Gaertner et al. 2010) proceeded to test more directly whether culture moderates motivational primacy.

The Evidence In Study 1, we used an idiographic paradigm that allowed participants to represent their relational and collective selves with whichever interpersonal relationship or social group they deemed appropriate. We first rendered the three selves accessible by supplying participants with detailed definitions of each self. Then, we assessed participants' reactions to the imagined loss of the activated self (i.e., individual, relational, or collective): what the emotional impact of the loss would be, whether participants could be the same person following the loss, whether their life would be meaningless following the loss, and whether they would experience more intense negative or positive emotions as a results of the loss. Finally, we assessed which self participants regarded their true or real self.

Participants manifested stronger reactions (i.e., larger effect on life, less positive mood, more negative mood) to the imagined loss of the individual than the collective self (thus replicating conceptually our past research), and to the imagined loss of the relational than collective self. Also, the majority of participants regarded as more true or real their individual than collective self, and their relational than collective self. But how about the comparison between the individual and the relational self? Participants expected the loss of the individual self to impact more severely on their life than the loss of the relational self, and they also regarded as more true or real their individual self than collective self. However, participants reported an equally intense mood at the loss of the individual and relational selves. In all, the findings point preliminarily to a three-tiered motivational hierarchy among selves, with the individual self at the top of the hierarchy, followed by the relational self, and trailed by the collective self.

In Study 2, we engaged in another test of the motivational hierarchy using different methodology. First, we activated either the individual, relational, or collective self by supplying participants with relevant and detailed definitions. Then, we assessed threat avoidance by examining whether participants complied with instructions to describe how negative events could befall that self (as in O'Mara et al. 2007). Participants were more likely to avoid a threat to the individual self than either to the relational or the collective self. However, participants exhibited only a weak tendency to avoid threat to the relational than collective self. The findings were generally congruent with the three-tier

motivational primacy model in which the individual self is at the top. Yet, given the weakness of the relational-to-collective self comparison, and given our goal to find out if the findings are qualified by culture, we carried out another study involving a different methodology.

Study 3 assessed the relative proactive capacity of each self. Do the three selves contribute differentially to life goals? The self-accessibility task came first. Participants from China and the US described themselves in terms of one of the three selves. Next, they listed their future goals, rated the importance of each goal, and indicated the self with which each goal was linked. Our reasoning was that selves with higher motivational potential would play a more pivotal role in the establishment of a desired future. That is, the motivationally primary self would influence disproportionately future life goals, such that the primary self would be linked more frequently with goals and would be associated more strongly with important goals. Study 3 also intended to test whether motivational self-primacy is moderated by culture. If the motivational hierarchy is a product of culture, then the individual self would be most primary in the US and least primary in China. In the US, future goals would be linked more strongly with the individual than relational or collective selves, whereas in China future goals would be linked more strongly with the relational or collective selves than the individual self. On the other hand, if the motivational primacy of the individual self is pancultural, then both cultures would manifest individual-self primacy.

The results were consistent with the individual-self primacy view and the pancultural perspective. Patterns of individual-self-primacy were remarkably consistent across cultures. Chinese and Americans attributed over twice as many goals to the individual self than the relational or collective selves. Both Chinese and American participants regarded the most important goal associated with the individual self as more important than the most important goal associated with the relational or collective selves. In addition, the weight of the evidence points to the higher motivational potential of the relational than collective self. Participants attributed more of their future goals to their relational than collective self, with the exception of American males who attributed goals equally to those selves. Nonetheless, females and males of both cultures regarded the most important goal linked with the relational self to be more important than the most important goal linked with the collective self.

Summary When it came to expected emotional impact of loss of each self, as well as the number and importance of goals ascribed to each self, the individual self came on top, followed rather narrowly by the relational, which was followed distantly by the collective self. In addition, this

pattern emerged cross-culturally. The proximity of the individual and relational selves is, perhaps, not surprising, as the two develop in tandem and influence each other greatly (Cassidy and Shaver 2008; Crocker et al. 2008; Kumashiro and Sedikides 2005; Vohs and Finkel 2004). Likewise, evidence suggests that, when the stakes (in terms of esteem or emotion) are high, the individual self tends to take precedence over the relational self. In prosocial exchanges between close relationships, the give focuses on the costs of the prosocial act, whereas the receive focuses on the benefits she or he obtains (Zhang and Epley 2009). Persons are more intolerant of personal disequilibrium (i.e., the thwarting of personal goal pursuits, growth, or exploration) than relational disequilibrium (i.e., the thwarting of a relational partner's goal pursuits, personal, or exploration); alternatively, they are more keen to modify relational than personal dedication (Kumashiro et al. 2008). Finally, when one perceives the superior performance of a close other as threatening, one distances the self from (i.e., one perceived the self as more dissimilar than) the close other in a strategic attempt to alleviate the threat (O'Mahen et al. 2000; Tesser 1988).

Consideration of Alternatives

Our research suggests that the individual self is at the motivational core of the self-system. Our research also suggests that the collective self, albeit important in its own sake, is at the bottom of the three-tier motivational self-hierarchy. What are some alternative explanations for these findings?

One such explanation is that the positioning of the collective self is the outcome of the specific social groups that we used to represent it. However, our findings generalized across ascribed groups (e.g., gender; Gaertner et al. 1999, Study 1), achieved groups (e.g., university affiliation; Gaertner et al. 1999, Study 2), context-dependent groups (e.g., laboratory-formed ones; Gaertner et al. 1999, Study 3), and idiographically generated most-important groups (O'Mara et al. 2007). Thus, this alternative is rather questionable.

There is another explanation. Our findings are due to differential level of specificity of the individual and collective self. Past research (Giladi and Klar 2002; Klar 2002; Klar and Giladi 1997) has shown that singular referents (e.g., a specific group member) are evaluated more extremely than generalized referents (e.g., the group as a whole). In our research, we operationalized the individual self as a singular referent and the collective self as a generalized referent. However, this alternative cannot explain why we obtained the same results pattern when

we operationalized the collective self as a singular referent, that is, in terms of pondering how negative events might befall a member of the ingroup (O'Mara et al. 2007). In addition, the singular versus generalized referent account is valid only when the two referents are evaluated in direct comparison with one another (Giladi and Klar 2002; Klar 2002; Klar and Giladi 1997). Most of our studies, however, used between-subjects designs, in which participants experienced threat or flattery of one self but not of another. Thus, the two referents were not directly compared.

Yet another alternative evokes a social impact theory (Latane 1981) explanation. Our findings may be due to a reduced impact of threat or flattery on the collective self, given that this impact was distributed and diffused across multiple ingroup members. However, we obtained the same findings for single ingroup members (O'Mara et al. 2007), small and face-to-face three-person groups (Gaertner et al. 1999, Study 3), and very large and anonymous groups (Gaertner et al. 1999, Study 1).

A final alternative challenges the universality of our findings and confines it to Western culture. After all, Western culture prescribes norms of independence and uniqueness, whereas Eastern culture prescribes norms of interdependence and connectedness. This alternative anticipates the individual self to be primary in the West but tertiary in the East. However, the empirical evidence is consistent with the idea that the individual self has a strong presence in the East (Brown 2010; Gaertner et al. 2008; Sedikides et al. 2003; Sedikides et al. 2005; Yamaguchi et al. 2007). Both in the West and the East participants give preponderance to the individual self in their self-descriptions (del Prado et al. 2007; Gaertner et al. 1999, Study 4; Trafimow et al. 1991). In our research (Gaertner et al. 2010, Study 3), we found that both Chinese and American participants valued the individual self more than the relational or collective self.

A Theoretical Model

As stated in the introduction of this article, all three selves are vital to the identity of the person, all three selves are resourceful, and all are linked with psychological and physical health benefits. In addition, there is evidence that the balance of concerns (e.g., goal pursuit, growth, exploration) associated with the individual and relational self (Kumashiro et al. 2008) is crucial for wellness, as is the balanced satisfaction of individual, relational, and collective self needs (Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky 2007). The question, though, is how exactly this balance among the selves is achieved.

We wish to sow the seeds of a theoretical model, the *boomerang model*, that addresses this question. The model begins by postulating that the individual self is the

experiential home base. That is, the individual self is both the emotional and the motivational center of the person (Andersen et al. 1998; Sedikides and Skowronski 1995; Sedikides and Gregg 2008). This relative stable (Bem and Allen 1974) and self-preserving (Greenwald 1980) home base constitutes the essence of the person.

According to the second postulate of the boomerang model, relational partners (Aron et al. 1992) or groups (Smith and Henry 1996) become relevant to the person only when they are incorporated into the individual self. Relationships and groups gain in personal value to the extent that they become psychologically glued to the individual self. Psychological reduction of close others or groups into the individual self is achieved through expansion (Aron et al. 1992) or attachment (Cassidy and Shaver 2008) processes.

The third postulate of the boomerang model is that the person uses this home base as a springboard for social exploration. The person relies on the individual self as she or he engages in psychological excursions to the social world, that is to relationships and groups. Stated otherwise, the person deserts the individual self for the purpose of relational or group activities. The frequency and duration of these desertions depend on how functional relationships or groups are for one's personal concerns. Such functions include the provision of intimacy, social support, reduction of uncertainty, self-esteem elevation, or practical (e.g., monetary) benefits.

The fourth and final postulate of the boomerang model assumes that the person may indeed develop strong relational or group ties even to the point of experiencing a fusion between the individual self and the other selves (Aron et al. 1992; Hogg 2007; Swann et al. 2009). Yet, the person, while oscillating often between the individual self and either the relational or collective self, will always return to the home base: the individual self. The person will boomerang back to the individual self for refuelling in her or his explorative forays into the social world.

Arguably, the boomerang model summarizes satisfactorily a good chunk of data on the three selves. Yet, the model will need to be tested directly. In particular need of empirical verification is the idea of consistent and persistent boomeranging of the relational or collective selves back to the individual self.

Concluding Remarks

The individual, relational, and collective selves are both basic forms of self-definition that contribute crucially to human experience. However, the contribution of the three forms of self is not equivalent. The motivational structure of the self-concept is arrayed hierarchically and the

individual self has a motivational status elevated above that of the relational and (especially) collective self. Metaphorically speaking, screams are most distressed and smiles are most euphoric in response to events that involve the individual self. Our findings have implications for theory-building. The findings suggest that theories on the link between self and social perception will do well to base their premises and hypotheses predominantly on the individual self. This type of self, it appears, sits closer to the motivational core of being human.

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