

Self as cultural construct? An argument for levels of self-representations

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In this paper, we put forward an interdisciplinary framework describing different levels of self-representations, namely non-conceptual, conceptual and propositional self-representations. We argue that these different levels of self-representation are differently affected by cultural upbringing: while propositional self-representations rely on “theoretical” concepts and are thus strongly influenced by cultural upbringing, non-conceptual self-representations are uniform across cultures and thus universal. This differentiation offers a theoretical specification of the distinction between an independent and interdependent self-construal put forward in cross-cultural psychology. Hence, this does not only allow for a deeper understanding of different self-conceptions, but also for a formulation of new hypotheses regarding the cultural influence on self-representations. As one example, we will highlight the role of the proposed levels of self-representation for emotional experience and formulate some major implications of our interdisciplinary framework for future empirical research.

20 *Keywords: Emotion; Independent/Interdependent Self-Construal; Self*

In contemporary debates about the concept and nature of the self, there seems to be much agreement with respect to the rejection of the Cartesian notion of the self as an irreducible immaterial thinking substance, “residing” somewhere in the head.

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25 However, with respect to the numerous alternatives, which have been suggested to
this account, it is hard to find much consensus. Is it some kind of real entity or
merely a language game or nothing but a convincing illusion? The positions defended
nowadays range from the extreme position that there is no such thing as a self—e.g.,
that “nobody ever *was* or *had* a self” (Metzinger, 2003, p. 1)—to an extreme
30 proliferation of multiple “selves” per person—e.g., Neisser (1988) listed as many
as five (dimensions of) selves, namely the ecological self, the interpersonal self,
the conceptual self, the remembered self, and the private self. But just as it is
questionable whether we can dispense with the notion of self altogether, it may be
doubted whether a multiplicity of selves is necessary (see also Hannover, 1997, 2002).
35 Alternative positions include the view that it is only a grammatically, neurobiologi-
cally or otherwise induced yet useful fiction (e.g., Dennett, 1991), that it is a
narrative construction (e.g., Ricoeur, 1988), or socially and culturally dependent
entity (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1998), and so on.

As these few introductory remarks show, there is still an immense need for
40 conceptual clarity with respect to the concept of self. In the current paper, we
will discuss self-representations, i.e., the mental entities that are supposed to
represent the “self.” Thereby we assume, that the represented “self” is nothing else
than the cognitive system, with its body and its mental states (see Vosgerau,
forthcoming a, for details). Thus, we reject both the Cartesian view and the nihilistic
45 view of the self: there is no entity over and above the cognitive system, and
the self-conscious cognitive system just represents *itself*. From this point of view, the
interesting question is how such self-representations emerge, how they function, and
what structure they have.¹ We propose that it is particularly the interdisciplinary
dialogue and collaboration, i.e., bringing together scientists from philosophy,
50 psychology, and the neurosciences, that can invaluablely enrich not only this debate
on self-representations but also other related debates in the currently flourishing
“mind sciences.” The value of such cross-disciplinary work becomes more and more
recognized and in turn, cross-disciplinary research is slowly becoming established
practice. We wish to contribute to this process by proposing a conceptual framework
55 to approach the problems of self-representation systematically. We argue that
conceptual clarity cannot only be advanced in philosophical debates, but also
in psychological debates. As an example, we enter the debate about so-called
independent and interdependent self-construals² in cultural psychology. This
distinction is drawn with respect to how one conceptualizes oneself, largely
60 depending on one’s cultural background (Marcus & Kitayama, 1991). Our theoretical
framework regarding self-representations not only allows to clarify this distinction,
but also to provoke extensive interdisciplinary dialogue and to design empirical
investigations of these topics.

Thus, in this paper, we wish to put forward a theoretical framework of different
65 forms of self-representations, building on the notion of a mental representation
in general. Following Newen and Vogeley (2003), we propose that in order to
understand self-consciousness in all its complexity, it is worthwhile to consider it in
terms of different levels of mental representations. Therefore, we introduce different

70 forms of mental representation, self-representations in particular, which can take
different formats: there are non-conceptual, conceptual, and propositional self-
representations. According to this framework, we are capable of representing
ourselves in different ways, which differ in complexity and in their cognitive
prerequisites. In order to illustrate our view, we contrast it with a popular view
75 of the self as a narrative construction,³ which will be introduced in the first section
and then be related to the distinction between independent and interdependent
self-conceptions in cultural psychology in the second section. In the third section,
the theoretical framework is introduced and elaborated. The final section discusses
the relation of our account to the narrative account of self, highlighting the advant-
80 ages of the present framework, and makes some suggestions as to how the framework
could be tested empirically with respect to culturally variant and invariant aspects.

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1. Narrative Conceptions of Self

A currently popular view rooted in both philosophy and psychology has it that self
and self-consciousness are essentially social phenomena, i.e., they are ultimately
“narrative constructions”⁴ arising out of discursive practices (Gallagher, 2000).
85 The development of the self starts in early childhood and is in principle an open-
ended constructive process encompassing various changes and revisions. Much
emphasis is put on the temporal and social dimensions of this development.
As Shaun Gallagher puts it, “self-narrative is always already shaped by others, and by
those kinds of narratives that are common and possible in the culture surrounding
90 the child” (2007, p. 204). In other words, the social origin of the self and its
essentially social and cultural character are emphasized. Defenders of such views hold
that the self emerges from narrative and interpretive processes, which are both
socially and linguistically mediated. Like the stories or episodes of a novel, which
focus on one hero, the different narratives (or self-interpretations) in our stream of
95 consciousness result in or merge into a (more or less unified) self-representation.
According to various otherwise divergent views, one’s self-image is conditioned and
determined to a large extent by the community in which one grows up. One may
distinguish between a “weak” and a “strong” version of this narrative approach to
the self. While defenders of the former allow for another, more basic sense of self-
100 representation (e.g. Gallagher, 2000; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2007), proponents of the
strong version usually claim that this narrative account provides for an exhaustive
explanation of self-representation.

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To name only a few examples, Mead (1934) famously construes self and self-
awareness as products of one’s social relations to others, of one’s embeddedness in
105 a specific community. But following James (1890), Mead still distinguishes an
individual, more active self (“I”) from this social self (“Me”). More radically,
Habermas (1987) construes the whole genesis of the self as a social process in his
extrapolation of Mead’s theory. Also, MacIntyre (1985) identifies the unity of self
with the unity and coherence of the many elements that constitute one’s “narrative.”

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110 Last but not least, against the background of recent debates in the cognitive
sciences, Dennett (1991) conceives of the self as a “centre of narrative gravity,”
i.e., as the abstract (and variable) intersection point of various stories about an
individual. Within a neuro-functionalistic framework, he denies that there is a self
over and above the ongoing parallel distributed processing of different “drafts,”
115 which constitute our stream of consciousness and thus combines the narrative
account with the ontological no-self-view later espoused by Metzinger (2003).
The idea is that once you have a number of different representations, or “content
fixations,” to use Dennett’s parlance, you get the self (the represented but fictional
entity) for free as the product of conceptual representations: “our tales are spun,
120 but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness,
and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source” (Dennett, 1991,
p. 418). But importantly, the relevant representations are propositional, expressed
by sentences. We use words to form narratives and thereby create our self. According
to Dennett, written and spoken words are “memes”⁵—just like ideas, skills, habits,
125 stories and other kind of information that is copied from person to person in a
community or in a certain culture. Examples also include such things as driving
on the right side of the road and eating with chop sticks. The self (as well as
consciousness) is thus in effect nothing but a cultural construction, a huge complex
of memes. We take Dennett’s theory to be the paradigm example of the “strong”
130 version of the narrative account, and our framework is meant to argue specifically
against views like these, since in our view, they only allow for one kind of self-
representation, namely, propositional self-representations, while we argue in favor
of three kinds of self-representations, two of which these views neglect.

135 2. Culture-Dependent Self-Representations: Independency and Interdependency

If one finds this view of self-representations as being products of social narrative
practices attractive, then it is plausible to also hold that the ways of conceiving oneself
are subject to cultural differences, i.e., that there are different ways of conceiving
of oneself in different cultures. This view has been put forward in cultural psychology
140 and the social sciences, particularly in the context of answering the question to what
extend culture determines human experience. The basic idea is that the principles
of how the mind works cannot be conceived of as universal, but that “cultural
traditions and social practices regulate, express, and transform the human psyche,
resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind,
145 self, and emotion” (Shweder, 1991, p. 72). In particular, a certain culture-dependent
self-construal is supposed to function as an orienting, mediating background shaping
individual human cognition. The view presented now can thus be conceived of as a
special variant of the narrative accounts of the self.

150 With respect to self-construals, cultural psychologists distinguish between
individualist and *collectivist* cultures, associated with two respective ways of

representing the self, i.e., independent vs. interdependent conception (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1998). The individualist or independent way, which is characteristic of the North American and European context, is distinguished by representing oneself as being essentially separate from others, emphasizing internal attributes like personal traits, skills, motives, and values. The collectivist or interdependent way, on the other hand, which is characteristic of the populations in East Asia, stresses the essential connection of the individual to other people, be it family members, colleagues, superiors or common members of a sports team. Although many researchers hold that these two ways of representing oneself are characteristic of two cultures as a whole (for a review, see Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000), this is not to say that all individuals in a given culture are alike. Rather, individuals with a given cultural background share the same tendencies as far as their self-construal is concerned. Cross-cultural researchers (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1998) suggest that individuals in these two cultures, broadly conceived, may tend to conceive of themselves either as being primarily related to or separated from others. Each of these two ways of representing oneself postulates chronic stable differences between groups depending on what form their self-related knowledge takes which is available within memory takes—an individualist or a collectivist one.

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1998), a cultural group comprises a set of normative assumptions about what it means to be “a good person.” These culture-specific imperatives (implicitly and explicitly) become individually internalized standard values and guide each individual’s development. Individualist societies (e.g., European American context) possess a cultural imperative to be an independent person and to strive for and express personal uniqueness openly. Accordingly, people with this background tend to conceive of themselves as independent, autonomous individuals comprising a unique configuration of internal features like traits, attitudes, and abilities. Call this an independent self-representation (e.g., Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). On the other hand, collectivistic cultures (e.g., Eastern, Southeast Asian context) require a person to be a dependable member of the relevant social communities. As a consequence, the self-construal is predominantly characterized by elements of the social world, such as relationships to others, contexts for behaviors, group memberships, and social roles. Call this an interdependent self-representation (Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1997; Trafimow et al., 1991). Accordingly, a person with an interdependent self-representation will be guided by social expectancies, normative beliefs, and the personal goal to behave in accordance with the position one occupies within the group, or to “fit in.” In contrast, a person with an independent self-representation, individual thinking, feeling, skills and behavior will be directed by an internalized set of unique characteristics. In order to illustrate this cultural “clash” of self-representations, Markus and Kitayama (1994) mention the example of the Japanese prince Naruhito’s decision to get married to Masako Owada, who was considered to be a very modern woman with a promising international business career. According to Markus and Kitayama, the public evaluated this wedding in two radically different ways. While the Japanese were really

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195 happy about the prince's choice and Masako felt it was her "duty" to agree to the
wedding, Americans judged her decision as "self-sacrifice" and could not understand
how she could be happy with it (even if she liked him very much). From the
American culture's individualistic perspective, the future princess is giving up her
freedom and her career in order to perform her duty. But from the Eastern culture's
200 more collectivistic perspective, her compliance with the wedding and fulfillment
of society's expectations means an "affirmation of a more connected, obligation-
fulfilling, social self" which may very well be accompanied by the feeling of
contentment (Markus & Kitayama, 1994, p. 90).

The distinction between interdependent and independent self-representations has
205 inspired an outstanding amount of empirical work within social and cross-cultural
psychology. However, current psychological theories assume that a self-construal is
more than a "memory depot" for self-related knowledge (e.g., Hannover, 1997).
Rather, it is both a set of autobiographic self-representations, and a cognitive
structure associated with cognitive procedures that organize access to and retrieval
210 of the represented contents (Kühnen, Hannover, & Schubert, 2001; Markus &
Wurf, 1987; Oyserman & Markus, 1993). For instance, Hannover (1997; Roeder &
Hannover, 2002) defines the self-construal as a specific knowledge structure
comprising both, independent and interdependent aspects, which can differ in
their chronic and in their situational accessibility. Accessibility is framed as the ease
215 with which contents can be retrieved from memory, and the fact that it is stronger the
more recently (situational accessibility) and the more frequently (chronic
accessibility) it has been used (e.g., Higgins & Bargh, 1987). In turn, the relative
accessibility of both kinds of self-representations is designated by a person's 'chronic'
cultural context, and can furthermore be manipulated by situational cues (i.e., via
220 semantic priming techniques). For instance, Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991)
showed that research participants who had been initially asked to describe differences
between themselves and others (priming of independent self-representations)
characterized themselves by using more individualistic and fewer social character-
istics as compared to participants who had been asked to report similarities between
225 themselves and others (priming of interdependent self-representations). Based on
these and similar findings, it is proposed that irrespective of whether the chronic
self-construal is more independent or more interdependent, individuals will view
themselves as more independent whenever the actual context triggers inde-
pendent self-representations, but as more interdependent when interdependent
230 self-representations have most recently been accessed (Hannover, 1997, 2002).

The distinction between an independent and interdependent self-construal has
thus received considerable attention as it was shown that the self-construal in turn
shapes the perception as well as the content of representations and the way of
processing information in general (e.g., Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001).
235 For example, people with an independent self-construal have been found to be more
susceptible to attribution biases (Choi, Nisbett & Norenzayan, 1999), to be less likely
to memorize contextual information (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001), and to have a less
field-dependent perception (Chua, Boland, & Nisbett, 2005) relative to people with

240 an interdependent self-construal. For instance, when presented with pictures on
a screen, American participants fixated more on focal objects than did Chinese
participants, while the Chinese made more saccades to the background than did the
Americans. In addition, American participants tended to look at the focal object
more quickly as compared to Chinese participants (Chua et al., 2005).⁶

245 Other social psychologists have focused on the particular cognitive mechanisms
by which independent or interdependent self-representations affect the individual's
style of thinking (e.g., Hannover, Pöhlmann, Springer, & Roeder, 2005). For instance,
Kühnen, Hannover, and Schubert (2001) used a corresponding priming paradigm by
Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee (1999) to activate either independent or interdependent
250 self-representations. The authors found interdependence-primed participants to be
more strongly field-dependent than independence-primed participants as indicated
by the Embedded Figures Test; that is, interdependence-primed participants found
it harder to recognize a simple figure that was embedded in a more complex
geometrical shape. Using the same priming technique, Kühnen and Oyserman (2002)
255 found that after interdependence-priming, participants were better in remembering
the (casually perceived) spatial locations of particular objects—resulting from a
perceptual “binding” of object and context. These and other findings support the
view that the way of perceiving and thinking is shaped by the individuals' actual
representation of themselves.

260 A model that claims to explain how and by which psychological mechanisms
the different self-representations affect information processing is the “Semantic-
Procedural-Interface Model” of the Self, SPI-model for short (Hannover & Kühnen,
2002; Hannover, Pöhlmann, Roeder, Springer, & Kühnen, 2005; Kühnen et al., 2001).
It holds that depending on whether an independent or interdependent self-
representation is most accessible within a given situation, people will generally
265 tend to process stimuli either unaffected by the context in which they appear
(context-independent processing mode) or cognizant of the context (context-
dependent mode). More specifically, the SPI model assumes a semantic mechanism
and a procedural mechanism. The semantic mechanism specifies that a person will
interpret newly incoming information against the background of the either mainly
270 independent or interdependent features that are highly accessible in a given situation.
The procedural mechanism, on the other hand, specifies that both kinds of self-
representations differentially influence the person's mode of thinking, i.e., basic
cognitive processes for the perception and interpretation of stimuli: while inde-
pendent self-representations are associated with a context-independent mode of
275 information processing, interdependent self-representations coincide with a context-
dependent information processing mode. Recently, Springer (2005) and Springer
and Hannover (2002) proposed that both thinking styles (i.e., the context-dependent
vs. the context-independent mode of thinking) can be traced back to differences
in more basic cognitive functions: they found that the temporary activation of
280 independent self-representations via semantic priming techniques fosters (1) selective
attention to task-relevant stimulus features, (2) the active inhibition of task-irrelevant
cues, and (3) shifting between different cognitive tasks. On the other hand,

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interdependency primed subjects appeared to process task-relevant as well as task-irrelevant stimuli within a given context in parallel. This pattern supports the view
285 that the experimental activation of different kinds of self-representation causes differences in basic cognitive processes (which are commonly viewed as universal phenomena).

In sum, the SPI model holds that the accessibility of interdependent versus independent contents of the self-construal results in the application of the
290 corresponding—context-dependent versus context-independent—cognitive procedures. Because independent self-representations (e.g., those of individual traits) are stored independently of representations of other persons or social contexts, developing and maintaining an independent self-construal requires a context-independent processing style, i.e., aggregating and integrating information about the self across
295 situations while ignoring situational variance in one's own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Conversely, seeing oneself as interdependent with other persons, contexts, and situations requires a context-dependent processing style, i.e., taking into account the social context. Consequently, there are chronic stable differences between cultural groups regarding the mode of cognitive processing generally applied (Hannover,
300 2002; Kühnen et al., 2001). Thus, recent social-cognitive research has challenged the traditional trait model of the self according to which differences among individual self-representations are stable across situations and stem from the permanent exposure to a pervasive cultural influence. Quite on the contrary, self-representations and associated cognitive procedures have been shown to be highly flexible and
305 adaptive (e.g., via semantic priming techniques). In particular, the common view that cognitive processes are the same among all human groups cannot be supported.⁷

The picture emerging from this empirical evidence is that every person's self-construal is influenced strongly by his or her social and cultural environment and background, including upbringing. Accordingly, the picture of self-representation as
310 narrative construction, which was sketched in the beginning, captures an important aspect of how we conceive of ourselves. However, it is also clear that cultural upbringing and the narratives do not produce very stable effects, since the specific representation formats and processing mechanisms are highly influenced by actual contexts. The implausible consequence of strong narrative views is that there is no
315 room left for any universal element in how human beings conceive of themselves: self-representations are entirely culturally variable. Because of this consequence, we think that the strong philosophical views mentioned in the last section have to be clearly rejected. In the following, we propose that the psychological comprehension of the self-construal as a specific representational structure can be fruitfully extended.
320 In particular, we introduce a theoretical framework of different levels of self-representation, namely, a propositional, conceptual, and non-conceptual level. This framework is applied to the foregoing discussion suggesting that only the propositional self-representation is subject to cultural variation, whereas the conceptual and non-conceptual forms of self-representation are culturally invariant.
325 It is herein that we see the major extension of the theoretical framework in cultural psychology.

3. Different Levels of Individual Self-Representations

As we have seen in the first section, the narrative conception of self-representation emphasizes the strong influence of social and cultural factors on self-understanding. One possible extension of this view has been outlined in the preceding section: given this determination of self-representations by social and cultural background, one can distinguish an independent from an interdependent self-construal and an independent from an interdependent culture. We would now like to introduce a theoretical framework, whereby we can distinguish different levels of representing oneself. Here one should keep in mind that, for example, Dennett has been criticized for his deflationary account of the self (see e.g., Block, 1992), just like the other views mentioned in this context have been found wanting in various respects. One of the fundamental objections to the narrative approach, understood as an *exclusive* thesis, is that it has limited explanatory power with respect to a certain phenomenological dimension of self-representations. While it may capture what others have called the “autobiographical self” (Damasio, 1999), it allegedly fails to capture another more fundamental aspect of self-representation, which is more closely tied to the experiential dimension associated with conscious representations (Nagel, 1974). It has been proposed to distinguish between at least two different dimensions of self-representations, namely the “narrative self” and a so-called “minimal self” (Gallagher, 2000).

However, our argument for another kind of self-representation in addition to the narrative self-representation does not rely on phenomenological considerations. Instead, we allude to a general conception of mental representation and on a philosophical argument for a basic, non-conceptual self-representation. This framework shall be put forward in contrast to the strong narrative conceptions to show that they leave out an essential element of our self-construal, which is universal instead of being culturally shaped.

3.1. Mental Representations

Mental representations are theoretical posits introduced to explain behavior (Vosgerau, Schlicht, & Newen, forthcoming). They are mainly characterized by their contents, and indeed, recent debates have focused on the question which forms such contents can take, especially whether there can be mental representation with non-conceptual content (or non-conceptual representations, for short) in contrast to conceptual content (or representations).⁸

The most obvious area where this issue arises is the content of perception. Arguably, the content of many of our perceptual states is conceptual in the sense that the perceiver must be in possession of (at least some of) the relevant concepts that have to be employed in order to describe the content of the state in question. For example, I can only be in the perceptual state of seeing a microphone on the table if I know what a microphone is and what a table is, i.e., if I possess the concepts MICROPHONE and TABLE (of course, the things can be seen without having the concepts but they cannot be seen *as such*). However, various arguments have been offered to

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the effect that perceptual content is not conceptual tout court. The central idea is that there are ways of representing the world independent of the thinker's conceptual capacities, and that one can enjoy perceptual states even if one does not possess all the relevant concepts which would be necessary to fully describe the particular state's content. One influential line of argument stresses that the fineness of grain of our perceptual experiences outstrips the perceiver's conceptual capacities (e.g., Peacocke, 1992; Raffman, 1995). In general, we can discriminate many more colors, shapes, or sounds perceptually than conceptually. Thus, it seems that our perceptual experiences do not seem to be fully constrained by our conceptual repertoire. The idea is that the perceptual information provided by our senses is non-conceptual and merely serves as input to our cognitive concept-applying system (Evans, 1982). Another line of argument relies on the assumption that infants as well as many non-human animals are capable of perceptual experiences even though they do not yet possess the relevant concepts or do not even have developed the capacity to possess concepts at all (cf. the essays in Gunther, 2003).

Concept possession requires that the perceptual input be not merely classified, but that the used categories themselves are organized in a systematic way. For example, the child cannot only detect red situations, but is able to detect one and the same property red in different objects and different properties in one and the same object (e.g., red and round). Moreover, it is able to understand that red and blue, for example, are properties of the same kind, namely colors, whereas being round, for example, is a property of a very different kind, namely shape (Newen & Bartels, 2007). These concepts are still fully grounded in perception, since they concern only perceptible properties of objects.

It is a further ability to combine concepts in order to form new thoughts and new concepts. The sentence-like combination of concepts (with logical constants) yields new possibilities of thinking and acting. We will call this level of representation the propositional level, since it involves the capacity to represent propositions. In particular, these representations are the basis of what we call logical reasoning, i.e., the transition from particular representations to a new representation on the grounds of inferential rules. At this stage, new concepts emerge on the background of theories. For example, ELECTRON is a concept that can only be grasped when one has understood the appropriate physical theory lying behind it. On the linguistic level, we often express perception-based concepts and theoretical concepts with the same word, e.g., in "This [toy] gun is not a gun." The first occurrence of the word "gun" refers to a perceptual concept (i.e., something that looks such and such), whereas the second concept refers to a theoretical concept that is systematically connected to other representations about the object (e.g., that it can shoot and kill).

Thus, there is a reasonable distinction between non-conceptual, conceptual, and propositional mental contents, or representations. However, for present purposes we need to have a closer look at a special subclass of mental representations, namely those referring to the self.

3.2. Self-representations and Forms of Self-Consciousness

Self-representations form a special subclass of mental representations. They are those underlying self-consciousness, understood as the capacity to become aware of oneself
415 *as oneself* and of one's own mental and bodily states *as one's own states*. However, the notion of self-consciousness is an umbrella term encompassing different phenomena of increasing complexity that can be systematically and hierarchically distinguished in a comprehensive theory of self-consciousness. Accordingly, corresponding levels of self-representation can be distinguished.

420 As mentioned in the first paragraph, the strong version of the narrative approach, which for example Dennett (1991) favors, denies any sense of self-representation prior to the linguistically induced one.⁹ The capability of forming a narrative and thereby constructing self-representations presupposes the capacity to use the first-person pronoun. In a similar vein, Lynne Baker (2000) argues that self-consciousness
425 requires the ability to conceptualize the distinction between oneself and other objects and linguistically express one's grasp of oneself *as oneself* in I-thoughts (Baker 2000, p. 67ff). Thus, it demands the possession of a concept of self in order to be self-conscious at all. This is a particularly high demand on being capable of self-consciousness, since it denies that any being not capable of having I-thoughts or to
430 linguistically express them is capable of self-consciousness.¹⁰

Here, the debate about non-conceptual and conceptual representations sketched in the previous section carries over to the discussion about self-consciousness and self-representations. Bermúdez (1998) deployed the notion of non-conceptual content in his argument for a primitive non-linguistic form of self-consciousness.
435 He argues that a satisfactory account purporting to explain fully-fledged forms of human self-consciousness has to assume a basic form of being conscious of oneself, which is essentially non-conceptual and is thus independent of, and systematically as well as ontogenetically prior to, the capacity to think I-thoughts. Otherwise, we would run into a vicious circle: the capacity to entertain I-thoughts has
440 to be explained by the mastery of the first-person pronoun "I," and the mastery of the first-person pronoun "I" has to be explained by the capacity to entertain I-thoughts.¹¹ In order to escape such circularity, Bermúdez assumes a non-conceptual (and pre-linguistic) self-representation as the most basic form of self-consciousness, which does not yet presuppose the mastery of the first-person
445 pronoun. This is supposed to provide the basis for all higher-order, conceptual forms of self-consciousness (such as, for example, autobiographical self-consciousness).

Based on the abovementioned distinction between various forms of representation (non-conceptual, conceptual, propositional), a theoretical framework of different
450 manifestations of self-consciousness arises (cf. Newen, 2000; Newen & Vogeley, 2003). For our purposes, the relevant forms of self-representation underlying these various manifestations of self-consciousness are, accordingly, (a) non-conceptual, (b) conceptual, and (c) propositional self-representations. They differ with respect to

their representational structure as well as their epistemic status. We will develop the
455 details for each of them in turn in order to elaborate the present framework.

Regarding (a) non-conceptual self-representations: the representational structure
of non-conceptual self-representations is essentially non-attributive. Since in a non-
conceptual representation no concept is used, no concept can be attributed to an
individual (or to the representation of an individual). Thus, non-conceptual
460 representations lack an object-property structure or subject-property structure;
thus, if a non-conceptual representation is self-related, this self-relation can only be
implicit. For example, by registering the feeling of being hungry, the self is implicitly
represented in the representation of being hungry. Therefore, I cannot but implicitly
represent it as *my* hunger. A feeling of hunger comes essentially self-related such that
465 I cannot be mistaken about who feels hungry once I feel hungry.¹²

Therefore, non-conceptual self-representations are essentially subjective since
they are based on information that cannot be accessed by others (in the same way).¹³
As already noted above, the relevant notion of the self corresponding to this
immediate self-acquaintance as it is employed in the cognitive sciences is what
470 Gallagher (2000) calls the “minimal self” and what Damasio (1999) calls the “core
self.” All higher-order, conceptual or propositional self-representations depend on
this basic notion of the self, since the very concept of a self must be grounded in such
a pre-conceptual understanding of the self (as opposed to the “world”).

As regards (b) conceptual self-representations: self-attribution of perceptual
475 properties is the defining characteristic of the conceptual level of self-representation
with the corresponding conceptual self, as manifested in the following example: when
I judge that my hair is black, then I attribute to myself the property of having black
hair. This judgment clearly involves an object- (or subject-) property structure, since
a property is explicitly attributed to someone. It is nevertheless perception-based,
480 such that it can easily be verified by an observer with the judgment “your hair is
black.” Since there is nothing especially subjective about this attribution of a property
based on perception, the epistemic status of this self-representation is objective
(or intersubjective) in the sense that it can be verified by anyone else in the same way.
Moreover, in contrast to the non-conceptual self-representation, such a conceptual
485 self-representation is subject to the “error through misidentification” (Shoemaker,
1968): it is well possible that I see, for example, a green sleeve to my right and
wrongly attribute this to me by thinking “I’m wearing a green shirt.” In this example,
I may be right that *someone* is wearing a green shirt, but I may mistakenly attribute
this property to the wrong person.¹⁴

490 Finally, regarding (c) propositional self-representations: since propositional
representations are marked by the (logical) combination of different concepts in
a sentential manner, the difference between conceptual and propositional self-
representation amounts to a difference in the nature of the concepts involved: in the
conceptual case, we are dealing with perception-based concepts only, while in the
495 propositional case, we are dealing with “complex” concepts that are based on a whole
theory (i.e. a set of sentences).¹⁵ For example, when I say “I am too heavy,” then this
judgment is indeed based on my perception (just as the attribution of black hair),

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Table 1 Levels of self-representation.

Level of self-representation	(a) non-conceptual self-representation	(b) conceptual self-representation	(c) propositional self-representation
Representational structure	non-attributive (immune to error through misidentification) e.g., “My legs are crossed”; “I am hungry”; “I am joyful”	attributive (culturally shaped?) e.g., “My hair is black”	attributive, involving theoretical (i.e., culturally variable) concepts e.g., “I’m too heavy”; “I’m a cheerful person”
Epistemic status	subjective	objective	theoretical

but the peculiarity of this judgment is that an observer—based on his own perception—may either agree by saying “Yes, you are too heavy!” or disagree by objecting “No, you’re in good shape!” This difference in evaluation stems from the difference in the theory underlying the concept in question. BEING HEAVY is a theoretical concept in the sense that it essentially depends on a “theory” of aesthetics, i.e., a whole inferential system of representations about ideal weights, body mass indices, and the like.¹⁶ Obviously, aesthetic norms and according evaluations are not only a matter of perception but are relative to a social community and cultural background such that the “meaning” of a predicate like ‘being heavy’ is in large part socially and culturally determined. Therefore, we conjecture that propositional self-representations are indeed culturally determined. Thus, to the extent that the concepts picking out the features that one attributes to oneself are theoretical in this sense, the propositional self-representation will be socially and culturally determined. The following table sums up the framework of self-representations and gives some examples of bodily representations and attributions of emotions.

4. Levels of Self-Representation and Cultural Influence

According to the level-theory of self-consciousness and the corresponding self-representations sketched above, the question of cultural influence on self-representations is no longer a yes- or no-matter. Rather, there are different levels of self-representation, which are differently affected by the cultural upbringing of a person. The non-conceptual level of self-representation is certainly not subject to any cultural difference, since at this level only implicit self-relatedness and basic perception (without conceptual influence) play a role. At the level of conceptual self-representations, cultural influences might enter the story for the first time, since here the (still perception-based) concepts might already be shaped by linguistic communities. One example is the division of the continuous field of perceived colors in the different languages, which varies greatly (Berlin & Kay, 1969). For example, the threefold distinction in English between brown, grey and blue corresponds to an

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only two-fold distinction for this section of the color field in Welsh. Nevertheless, at the level of propositional representation, i.e., on the level of theoretical concepts, the influence of culture is obvious: the cultural background can be understood as a specific *theory* applying to all kinds of things. Thus, theoretical concepts are highly
530 influenced by cultural upbringing, since they can only be understood against the background of the cultural context (i.e., the background of socially established rules, norms, stories, interests, etc.).

As outlined above, psychological research has repeatedly shown that an individual's cultural background and his/her self-construal have considerable
535 impact on perception and cognition, the content and way of processing information (categorization and interpretation of stimuli). Moreover, if one holds on to a narrow and sophisticated account of self-consciousness according to which it is confined either to the capacity to think I-thoughts or to the ability to form narratives about oneself, then the underlying self-representation must be essentially socially and
540 culturally variable. A consequence of the combination of these two claims is that not only can there be no universal (abstract) kind of fundamental self-acquaintance (based on a non-conceptual self-representation) common to all individuals, but all cognitive and affective intentional activities are consequently culturally formed. As should be clear from the previous paragraph, we propose that this consequence
545 is to be avoided. Such an extreme account puts too much weight on the extent to which social and cultural factors determine self-consciousness and self-acquaintance. For example, in Dennett's account, consciousness in all its facets collapses into a cultural construct (Block, 1994).

Thus, the claim that self-representations are cultural constructions, as it is put
550 forward by the advocates of the narrative approach, must and can be differentiated with the help of our framework: following this philosophical framework of different levels of self-representation, there are propositional self-representations which are doubtlessly subject to cultural variation, because they involve theoretical concepts. Cultural upbringing shapes our social and anthropological "folk-theories," such
555 that the propositional self will be culture-dependent, while other forms of self-representation will not.¹⁷ Since propositional self-representations contribute (like any other mental representation) to the explanation of behavior, certain types of behavior are predicted to differ with culture, while others are not.

However, the converse is not implied (and is obviously false, since there are
560 other explanations of cultural differences in behavior, namely for behavior learned by imitation). In addition to culturally shaped propositional self-representations, there are also non-conceptual self-representations, which are immune to cultural influences, since they are based on perceptual discrimination alone. The intermediate level, i.e., the level of conceptual self-representations, is harder to classify: on the one
565 hand, there might be cultural differences in how we conceptualize the world (and this applies also and foremost to perception-based concepts), such that cultural influences might be at work already on this level. On the other hand, these cultural influences should be rather minor, since the ability to form perception-based concepts seems to be independent of language abilities (cf. Newen & Bartels, 2007).

570 In other words: whereas it is quite easy to conceptualize the division of the color spectrum according to the Welsh standards without speaking Welsh, it is impossible to conceptualize what an electron is without understanding a (culturally influenced) theory of electrons.¹⁸

We suggest that the distinction between independent and interdependent self-construal is drawn on the level of propositional self-representations. Thus, they become two different variants of propositional self-representations. There are differences between cultures that manifest themselves in theoretical concepts, which in turn result in different contents and structures of self-representations. For instance, members of different cultures hold different views about the social norms that a person has to fulfill in order to become an accepted and appreciated member of his or her cultural group. As a consequence, depending on which norms guide behavior (e.g., “to save face of others” vs. “to stand by own failures”), a person will attend to, retrieve and enlarge the corresponding input more strongly. In turn, the person will conceive of herself more strongly and frequently with respect to the particular cultural imperative, i.e., relative to other persons, or rather, to individual features. As a result, the person’s propositional self-representation will emerge to be either mainly independent or interdependent in content and structure, associated with a tendency to apply either context-independent or context-dependent cognitive procedures, respectively (cf. Hannover et al., 2005; Kühnen et al., 2001).

590 Thus, against the strong versions of the narrative approach, we suggest that the influence of the social and cultural background is confined to the propositional self-representation, and, possibly, to the conceptual self-representation, but that there is a fundamental non-conceptual self-acquaintance, which is independent from cultural variation and thus universal.¹⁹ So far, this claim is based largely on philosophical considerations. Nevertheless, we propose that this question can be empirically approached. The challenge is to design a paradigm to test this hypothesis.

5. Accessing Different Levels of Self-Representation: The Case of Emotions

In our view, emotions are ideally suited to develop and apply such a paradigm in order to test our framework. But before we can justify this and address the question whether and to which extent the individual’s emotional or affective experience may differ depending on cultural variations or levels of self-representation, some remarks about the notion of emotion are in order. The term “emotion” refers to a variety of phenomena, which can initially be understood as complex responses to events, which are typically of special concern to a subject, comprising at least the following aspects: they manifest themselves in somatic changes, motivate characteristic behavior and affect conscious experience as well as cognition. At first glance, one might hold that in contrast to perception and cognition, emotions are universal, that is, constant across cultures. For example, it seems to be well established in the light of cross-cultural research that a number of basic emotions like happiness, sadness, fear and anger have inter-translatable names and universally recognizable expressions

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(Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969). On this basis it might be argued that it is impossible to detect any effects of cultural differences in two individual's emotions stemming from differences in the self-construal. But this view seems to presuppose a conception of emotion restricting the phenomenon to a mere feeling. Thus, for example, according to proponents of the so-called James-Lange theory, an emotion occurs as the conscious effect of physiological reactions initiated by the nervous system (increased heart-rate, muscular tension, perspiration etc.) to an arousal based on the perception of an exciting event (Damasio, 1999; James, 1884). In our view, this conception of emotion is too narrow, if only for the one important reason that such a theory cannot adequately account for all emotions (apart from other objections that may be put forward to this account). Because even if it covers basic emotions like fear and anger, which are widespread among animals, it does not seem to adequately capture less widespread (and possibly uniquely human) emotions like shame, envy and jealousy, which are more sophisticated simply because of their essential cognitive component.²⁰

According to the "component process model" (Scherer, 1987), for example, emotions can neither be reduced to a subjective feeling, as the James-Lange tradition would have it, nor do they stand in complete contrast to cognition. We submit that in addition to the felt experiential aspect, which might very well be universal, emotions may also involve a propositional element. This can be illustrated by drawing attention to the distinction between basic emotions like fear, anger and sadness on the one hand, and so-called secondary cognitive emotions like shame, jealousy and envy on the other. While it might be sufficient to describe basic emotions merely by reference to the characteristic feeling associated with them, this strategy will not do for an adequate description of secondary cognitive emotions, which are more complex and more demanding. This is because emotions like shame and envy presuppose certain cognitive capacities on the side of the individual as necessary preconditions in order to have these emotions. According to a recently suggested classification (Zinck & Newen, 2008), emotions like shame and envy require a "mini-theory" as one of their constitutive elements. This includes the possession of a concept of the self, being the intentional object of this emotion, beliefs about social relations to others and about social norms, the capacity to cognitively evaluate certain situations, and the capacity for an understanding of propositional attitudes in general, especially other people's attitudes towards oneself (cf. Sander, Grandjean, & Scherer, 2005). The possession of a concept of the self plays an important role for a number of emotions, especially for those where the self is the intentional object of the emotion, e.g., shame. After all, shame is evaluated against other people's interpretations of me and my behavior via the ascription of propositional attitudes.

Interestingly, our view that secondary cognitive emotions like shame require the possession of a "theory of mind" seems to be further supported by research on autism, which is frequently described in terms of a "theory-of-mind"-deficit, i.e., as a deficit with respect to the understanding of propositional attitudes (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith 1985). If this diagnosis is correct,

655 it becomes plausible that autistic patients are merely capable of exhibiting as well
as recognizing and detecting a small number of basic emotions such as fear, sadness,
joy and anger,²¹ and that they have problems in understanding as well as in
expressing more demanding cognitive emotions such as shame and envy. This
660 observation also motivates our broader notion of emotion. But if this conception is
adequate, then the question immediately arises whether and to what extent this
propositional element of some emotions, including a propositional self-representa-
tion, which is subject to cultural variation, may have an impact on emotions—
despite their universal factor. Whether and with what intensity someone feels envy or
jealousy may clearly be modulated by a difference in the underlying propositional
665 self-representation, since the propositional elements of the emotion are differently
evaluated against the different “theoretical” backgrounds, which may be either
independent or interdependent (according to the classification in section 2 above).
For example, the emotion of pride should be more pronounced in independent
subjects if the object of pride is some personal accomplishment, while it should be
670 more intensive in interdependent subjects if the object is an achievement of the
peer group. The reason for this is that the propositions that are part of the emotion
(“I/we did this and this is great”) have different significance according to the specific
self-construal. Thus, the intensity of a particular emotion in a certain context should
differ between independent and interdependent subjects.

675 Taking these considerations about the propositional aspect of (at least certain)
emotions into account is sufficient motivation for an investigation of emotions
against the theoretical background put forward in this paper. The present framework
allows us to make some predictions with respect to the outcome of experimental
investigations. Starting with a component model of emotion, one research question
680 might be which elements of emotion are influenced by the propositional self-
representation (and therefore, by cultural upbringing), and which elements are
not (and are thus independent of cultural background). Applied to emotions,
our theoretical framework allows for (at least) the following two predictions.

685 First, *the culture-dependent propositional self-representation affects the intensity of
emotion expression in a given context* (and, therefore, the detailed judgment of
emotion). But it neither affects the more implicit elements, i.e., physiological
reactions, which are likely to be grounded in non-conceptual representations, nor the
broad categorization of emotions (Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969), which is likely
to be grounded in conceptual representations. If this can be established, it can be
690 interpreted in favor of our claim that one and the same emotion may contain
different elements according to the different levels of representation. If so, it should
be possible to empirically dissociate these elements of one particular emotion.

Second, *emotions per se can be found on different levels*. So-called basic emotions
like fear, anger and sadness can be classified as non-conceptual, whereas other
695 emotions like anxiety and annoyance as conceptual in nature. Still more complex
emotions like love, shame and envy strongly depend on background assumptions
and are therefore to be classified as propositional (Zinck & Newen, 2008).
Indeed, such “propositional emotions” have also been called social emotions

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(Tangney & Fischer, 1995), since they are particularly grounded in social relationships. Hence, *our framework predicts that the propositional self-representation should affect the processing of propositional emotions but not the processing of other, less complex emotions*, because only the former require the understanding of a background story.

705 While we assume that detailed emotion judgments and categorizations of complex emotions are propositional and therefore depend on the individual's self-representation, associated autonomic reactions and categorizations of less complex emotions should not differ among the two types of self-representation. For instance, one empirical hypothesis that we are currently investigating assumes people with independent and interdependent self to differ in their categorization of propositional emotions when presented with one and the same emotional cue. To create and further develop such paradigms allowing us to measure the impact of (culture-dependent) propositional self-representations on emotions and emotional processing remains our task and challenge for future research.

6. Summary and Conclusion

715 In this paper we have put forward an interdisciplinary framework of different kinds (levels) of self-representation. In contrast to theories according to which self-representations are exhaustively determined by social and cultural factors, we suggest that there are also universal aspects of self-representations, comprising at least non-conceptual representations (e.g., basic representations of the own body) and, maybe to a lesser degree, conceptual representations (e.g., how the body looks like from another's point of view). We further argued that while propositional self-representations are culturally variable, non-conceptual representations do not depend on a culturally and socially mediated background. According to our framework, the distinction drawn in cultural psychology between independent and interdependent self-construals applies on the level of propositional self-representations. This differentiation not only allows for the acceptance of universal, culturally invariant self-representations, but also for concrete empirical predictions regarding the impact of cultural background on cognition, behavior and emotions. Finally, we proposed that this model can be empirically tested for the case of emotions.

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725
730 If our framework is correct, then at least the experience, evaluation and processing of secondary cognitive emotions like shame and envy should exhibit universal as well as culturally variable aspects based upon the kinds of representation that we approve to distinguish from our interdisciplinary point of view.

Notes

735 [1] Although most of the sketched theses are stated in ontological terms, they also contain detailed accounts of the structure of self-representations. It is in this respect that we discuss these theories.

- [2] The term “self-construal” is mostly used by cross-cultural psychologists. According to our philosophical vocabulary, a self-construal is a self-representation or a set of self-representations (which was also labeled a self-image; Vosgerau, forthcoming a).
- [3] In a representational reading of the narrative approach, the thesis is that self-representations originate exclusively from narratives and have no other sources of information. Thus, self-representations are viewed as purely fictional in these accounts. The ontological claim made by the narrative approach, namely that the self itself is a narrative construction, is not the focus of this paper.
- [4] And thereby necessarily representations, as every narrative.
- [5] Dennett borrows this notion from Dawkins (1976).
- [6] Social psychologist Richard E. Nisbett (2003) has recently related these cognitive differences to two different “systems of thought” arising from the different sociocultural, philosophical traditions of the Eastern and the Western world. Nisbett proposes that Westerners process information in an analytic manner, while the Easterner’s way of thinking is described to be holistic: “Asians see the big picture and they see objects in relation to their environments Westerners focus on objects while slighting the field” (2003, p. 109). However, as already mentioned, these effects do not only stem from cultural upbringing since they can be influenced by priming techniques.
- [7] For instance, in the studies by Springer (2005), the cognitive differences between persons classified as either independent or interdependent (nearly) disappeared by time, since the interdependent group of participants profited more strongly from practice than the independent group. Interestingly, this effect of adaptability was found only for chronically interdependent persons (classified by Singelis’ Self-Construal Scale in Singelis, 1994), but not after a continuous priming of interdependency.
- [8] There is a debate about whether the distinction between non-conceptuality and conceptuality should be applied to contents or to states. But since this question does not affect the present argument, it is left aside here.
- [9] Gallagher (2000), contrary to Dennett, argues for a “minimal self” in addition to the narrative conception and likens this notion to Damasio’s (1999) notion of the core self. Thus, Gallagher does not endorse the strong narrative account but votes for a hybrid account that allows for various levels of self-consciousness with different underlying representations.
- [10] Baker (1998) distinguishes between a weak and a strong version of the first-person perspective, where only the strong version requires linguistic abilities. Thus, she seems to allow for non-linguistic levels of self-consciousness broadly understood.
- [11] This is a very condensed version of the argument. For details see Bermúdez (1998).
- [12] This is the familiar point made by Wittgenstein (1960) regarding the “self as subject” and by Shoemaker (1968) regarding the “immunity to error through misidentification”. However, differing from Shoemaker, the reason for the immunity is here analyzed as the missing attribution instead of a missing identification (see Vosgerau, forthcoming b).
- [13] Others may “observe” or “presume” that I am hungry, but they cannot register that I am hungry in this immediate and non-inferential way in which I do when I feel hungry.
- [14] More precisely, it is the error through misattribution which is important here; for details see Vosgerau, forthcoming b.
- [15] Theoretical concepts are relying on a theory in the logical sense, i.e., on a set of sentences. Such a set of sentences can only be represented if propositional representations are at hand. Thus, theoretical concepts are dependent on propositional representations.
- [16] Here it is not presumed that such a culturally shaped theory is either fully independent or interdependent; it rather comprises both ways of encoding information, while it is a matter of cultural upbringing which kind of information is predominant.
- [17] This is not to say, however, that cultural differences are only found in propositional representations. Indeed, habits like manual gestures or eating habits are strongly

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- 790 cultural-dependent, yet they do not involve propositional representations. They are rather
patterns that are learned by imitation, but they are certainly not representations themselves.
The distinction between propositional and non-propositional levels, however, is only drawn
for mental representations.
- [18] The understanding of the Welsh division of the color spectrum could also rely on
795 propositional abilities. Yet, it is unclear whether a propositional understanding of colors is
really needed for such an understanding.
- [19] Since weak versions of the narrative approach to the self admit a more fundamental level of
self-consciousness with a corresponding self-representation, as for example Gallagher (2000)
800 emphasizes, these versions are compatible with our proposal; however, our account offers
a more detailed explanation of cultural differences than any weak or hybrid version of the
narrative approach.
- [20] In contrast to feeling theories, cognitive theories emphasize the importance of propositional
attitudes as constitutive elements of all emotions (e.g. Nussbaum, 2001). Just like feeling
theories, they cannot account for all emotions. Many animals may be capable of basic
805 emotions without being capable to have propositional attitudes.
- [21] Cf. Temple Grandin, *personal communication*.

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