

**PERSONHOOD, SELF, DIFFERENCE, AND DIALOGUE  
(COMMENTARY ON CHAUDHARY)**

Susan Rasmussen  
*University of Houston, USA*

**ABSTRACT.** The “self,” or “person” is an intriguing but challenging topic in the social sciences. Relationships and interactions among self/person, body, mind, and sociality are universal cultural preoccupations, although these categories are not delineated in identical ways across cultures, or even within the same culture, and they do not remain the same over time. Local concepts of personhood or “self” are notoriously difficult to detach from the culture-bound analytical classifications and a priori assumptions of researchers. Chaudhary’s essay on self-other dynamics in India (Chaudhary, 2008) paves the way toward opening up new theoretical spaces to explore the concept of person contextually and dynamically, revealing more nuanced aspects of self/other negotiations in dialogical constructions. Here, the person or “self” emerges not as a reified, static attribute, but as part of a dynamic process. This commentary takes up Chaudhary’s article, exploring ways in which it resonates with anthropological discussions of personhood/self and more general theorizing on culture.

**Keywords:** intersubjectivity, interobjectivity, family, nucleus of self, dividual, Africa, Asia, Melanesia, Tuareg healing, egocentric/sociocentric societies

One important topic in the social sciences and humanities, particularly anthropology and psychology, is the concept of person or “self”. Chaudhary’s essay opens up fresh perspectives and raises important issues regarding this topic, as well as key concerns in wider theories of culture, comparison, and difference. This commentary will take up these issues. But first, I shall play ‘devil’s advocate’ and ask, why has there been such burgeoning interest in dialogues between self (or personhood) and society? Could it not be said, somewhat mischievously, that the study of persons and selves is implied in all studies of humankind? Perhaps personhood, like the term “ethnicity”, is too broad a concept to be useful analytically, somewhat of an “odd-job” cover-term, or perhaps it is a construction of Euro-American philosophical thought. Indeed, the person or “self”—though present everywhere—may not be universally salient as a conceptual category, and as such, may be more in the “eyes” of the beholder or researcher.

Notwithstanding these problems, there is no question that relationships among self/person, body, mind, and sociality are universal cultural preoccupations, and are also

**AUTHORS’ NOTE.** Susan Rasmussen is professor of anthropology at the University of Houston, with research interests in religion and symbolism; gender; aging and life course; healing and personhood; verbal art and performance; anthropology and human rights; culture theories, in particular in relation to aesthetics and the senses; ethnographic analysis, in particular in relation to memory and personal narrative; African humanities. E-mail: sasmussen@uh.edu

centrally relevant to many topics in anthropology and psychology, for example, studies of the life course and healing systems. Personhood or, as some call it, “self” yields insights into cultural and social differences in many domains, but also points to broader challenges in theories of culture and cross-cultural comparison. On the one hand, all human beings and the communities where they interact with others, within and beyond local relationships, have some concept of what it means to be human and very precise ideas concerning more specific identities and relationships: for example, gender, age, class/caste, and ethnicity, as well as the roles of individuals vis-à-vis the wider group, ideas of belonging, of exclusion, sameness, difference, hierarchy, equality, and otherness. On the other hand, deployment of the concept of person or “self” to anchor discussion of dialogical construction of difference carries a heavy cultural baggage from the experience of researcher as local resident and product of complex historical, political, and cultural forces which make it difficult to detach analysis from culture-bound assumptions. Preoccupation with personhood/ self has a long history in “western” (i.e. Western European and North American) systems of thought—theories in science, religion, philosophy, and economics. These theories cannot be detached from their political and historical contexts: of concerns with individual/society relationships in Platonic philosophy, Freudian psychoanalysis, and utilitarian economics, for example.

Hence the danger of reification of culture-bound associations of personhood/self, and the value of indigenous knowledge and local researchers who study concept of person in their “home” cultural settings (Moore, 1996). Yet even this strategy does not eliminate all problems because often, local theorists emerge from colonial and post-colonial educational systems where Euro-American paradigms are influential (Mudimbe, 1994). In other words, culture, experience, and sociality are at the root of ideas concerning the person, and these arenas require a relativizing perspective, but this relativity is difficult to attain in cross-cultural analysis—whether of one’s own culture or another, alien one—because there is much taken for granted in a priori categories of the researcher.

Chaudhary’s essay (2008), a careful analysis of how the person/self is negotiated in India, reminds us that the foregrounding of individual (autonomous) and dividual (social relational) aspects of personhood varies across different cultures and in different contexts within the same culture. Meanings of person/self are, in effect, indexical, dependent upon their dialogical construction during social interaction. First, I shall briefly summarize this essay. Its focus is upon contextual and interpersonal constructions of the self, through dialogical self theory. The major contribution of dialogical self theory of the person is to incorporate relationships with other as fundamental to self-processes. Meaning, in other words, is created through basic incongruity between several perspectives: I and Other (Ferreira, Salgado and Cunha,

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2006). Regarding intersections between self and culture, this approach facilitates the dialectical study of self as culture-inclusive and of culture as self-inclusive (Hermans 2001, p.243). The assumption here is that self-structures and processes are divergent across cultures. I might add that theories of about self-structures and processes in anthropology and psychology are themselves also culture-bound, a product of researchers' own cultural, historical, political, and philosophical traditions.

Ideologies of personhood prevalent within any culture predispose specific ways of approaching relationships with self and others and with action. Again, I would add a caveat here, that one must nonetheless be aware that there are also multiple differences within a cultural setting based upon, for example, rural/urban, class/caste, and religious differences, as well as historical changes over time. Chaudhary acknowledges, but does not pursue, these differences or transformations, but does add finer nuances to concepts of person/self in relation to other in sensitivity to dynamics of immediate contexts. Chaudhary separates the following planes of human activity: individual-individual (self-self, self-other, other-self); individual-group (individual-group, group-individual); and group-group relations (Chaudhary, 2008, p. 1). The purpose is to open up instances of human interactions not customarily addressed in psychology and discuss the importance of integrating inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives to gather more wholesome understanding of people; this is a valuable contribution of the essay, though the author does not explicitly engage much anthropological literature on person/self and other dynamics. Thus this Commentary will discuss Chaudhary's article against the backdrop of work on this topic in anthropology, the "home" discipline of this writer. I shall assess how anthropological attention to person/self and cultural difference can enhance our understandings of Chaudhary's article, and also, vice versa, how Chaudhary's article can reciprocally open up perspectives for anthropology.

First, Chaudhary presents a brief theoretical overview and critique of dialogical self theory. Here, the self is created through dialogue between external and internal positions, self as knower and self as known; I as author and me as actor (James, 1892): the person is a conglomerate of everything considered his or her own. Depending on emotional attitudes toward objects, gradually, there arises differentiation between material, social and spiritual selves. A nucleus of self is created through experience with reality. There is an assumption also of a reasonable degree of choice, however (Hermans, 2001). Alternate selves are literary characters, each with its own voice (James, 1892). From an early age, a person has multiple perspectives on the self, first person and third person. Dynamics between voices and positions are dialogical, in a heterogeneous society, created through narrative activity. In socialization, one observes selves from the other's point of view; other persons are always brought into one's horizon. Yet according to Hermans, in concealed thoughts, we are more monological than we think. In early experiences, imitation is the first evidence of recognition of a

third person information: gradually a person learns to integrate this first person with an imagined third person. Dialogue becomes monologue, albeit temporarily.

Chaudhary also elaborates on Moghaddam's (2003) proposal that interobjectivity, the way in which people understand others, is also a significant plane of activity in addition to self-self and self-other activity constructing a network of associations, sometimes, complementing, sometimes reversing, often contradicting, but never neutral or concerned with multiple levels of activity. In this, there is high correspondence between patterns of interobjectivity and intersubjectivity, either to create similar patterns or to generate a dialogicality. Interconnections are important. Threads run through other additional planes of activity besides interobjectivity and intersubjectivity: between individual and group: individual-individual; individual-group and group-group relations. One must consider all levels, and ideally, one needs both cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives. In Moghaddam's (2003) concept of interobjectivity, relationships between self and other constitute only one dimension of reality. An integral part of human activity is transacted at the collective level; this process is termed "interobjectivity", i.e., those dimensions of culture or society that characterize people's understanding of others. Interobjectivity also configures intersubjectivity among people, for example, beliefs about individuality, autonomy, and self-control form the basis for evaluating a person as difficult, self-indulgent, or mentally ill, individuals are assessed as flexible or not, depending on the degree of dissonance tolerated by a given society. In this, the broader implication is that discourses on the person are jointly authored, in dialogical and mutual meaning construction. Local processes influence global ones, just as global processes influence local processes.

Chaudhary refines concepts of person/self and other dynamics by situating self-other-group dynamics in India at complex levels of activity, in different contexts of interaction, and discerns social activity at levels other than self-other and self-self. Self-learning from viewing proceedings at these levels is argued to be critical. Everything we know is not something we have to be participants within. Thus, it is argued, we can see the following levels: self-structures (self-self); socialization and self-other relations (other-self); interobjectivity and intersubjectivity: linkages between group and individual (group-individual); group-group relations; other-other; and group-other. Then, Chaudhary analyzes persistent patterns in Indian social dynamics. This researcher's focus is upon the Indian family; correctly, Chaudhary does not claim that this represents cultural homogeneity or some monolithic whole; rather, these family interactions are illustrations of ways of living and understanding interpersonal relations. Chaudhary starts with group dynamics and ends with self-study. It is also argued here that democracy in India is generated by group identity and acceptance of multiplicity (in religion, caste, region, and language) rather than on interpersonal equality (Chaudhary, 2008, page 12). The presence and acceptance of a multitude of groups and group

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identities leads to intersection of collective representation that results in a peculiar version of democracy.

Chaudhary insightfully argues that, in its implications, these data challenge any tendency of dichotomizing cultures on the basis of generalized or opposed traits like individualism/collectivism, since either or both would find application depending on situation (Chaudhary, 2008, page 14). These concluding points speak to major debates in anthropological theories of person/self, as well as contributing to ethnographic findings on this topic, in particular, South Asian studies (Lamb, 2000; Marriott, 1990; Spiro, 1993). This essay makes a valuable contribution to efforts to further deconstruct and refine personhood/self, and more broadly, reformulate methods of intra-cultural and cross-cultural comparison and theories of culture in general. What is needed is more explicit engagement with, and critical overview, of the ongoing conversations in anthropology on these topics.

Chaudhary concludes by reviewing dialogical self theory in light of these data from India. The importance of experiences with significant others, proposed within dialogical self theory, are in fundamental resonance with the ideology of personhood in Indian culture. There are, however, many issues that emerge. The focus is upon group-group and group-individual levels of activity, since individual-self positions are already integrated within the theory. In particular, the focus is upon contentious issues of group identities, equality, and power at both these levels of activity. There is also the need to acknowledge vicarious learning at levels V and VI, when the individual watches social activity between others or groups and others. Chaudhary feels, correctly in my view, that dialogical self theory falls short of recognizing the consolidated nature of social groupings (Chaudhary, 2008, p. 17). Although cultural levels of activity are sometimes invoked, groups like the family, political party, peers, extended kin, village, etc., often collect and act in a manner where dynamics can be likened to a self. Hence the need to recognize that linkages between self and society can also work in the other direction, that societies can act in self-like ways. This point recalls Ruth Benedict's cultural configurations and Clyde Kluckhohn's superorganic theories of culture in early twentieth century anthropology. The point relevant to contemporary concern is that society and selves are both imagined entities, so transference is possible in both directions.

Chaudhary's essay therefore enhances anthropological and psychological understanding of some, though not all, aspects of person, self, and difference. It raises issues pertaining to personhood and self-other studies, and studies of difference more generally. Chaudhary's observation that theory and practice need to be better reconciled within a unifying discourse of a larger discipline resonates with current anthropological theories of culture, as well as personhood, self, other, and difference. I shall now discuss some of these theories in greater detail, and then return to Chaudhary's contribution.

**Studies of Concept of Person and Broader Issues in Cultural Theory:  
Anthropological Approaches to Cultural Differences in Constructions of  
Person/Self and Others**

In anthropology, there is a large ethnographic and theoretical literature on concepts of personhood/self. In particular, there is a rich baseline of data from Africa, Melanesia (Oceania), and South Asia. Recently, there have been efforts to critically reformulate approaches to this topic. These critiques are informed by the broader stream of theory on studying self/others and difference, not solely as a topic of ethnographic description, but also in terms of the construction of knowledge underpinning ethnography and the need to critically deconstruct, rather than take for granted, conceptual categories used by scholars themselves (Asad, 1973; Herzfeld, 2001).

In my view, three major problems identified by wider anthropological cultural theory on studying “others” are relevant to more specific focus upon personhood, self, and difference. First, anthropologists until recently, usually studied cultures outside Europe, and much study of cultural differences tended, until recently, to essentialize and totalize cultures outside the so-called West, glossing them all (regardless of how varied they are) as “non-Western”. Secondly, many studies have tended to oppose the West and “the rest,” and to portray the latter as having attributes that are static inversions of the former, for example, in “orientalism” (Said, 1978). In studies of person/self, this has produced the assumption that there is a monolithic “Western” concept of personhood that emphasizes individualism, and that there is another, monolithic “non-Western” concept of personhood that emphasizes sociality, the collectivity, or “dividuals”. Thirdly, more recently identified, is the problem of generalizing about the West, that is, European or Euro-American culture, which like other cultures, have often been viewed as monolithic or homogeneous, in what has been termed “Occidentalism” (Carrier, 1995), when this latter category is just as complex and internally differentiated as are those cultural settings outside it traditionally designated as “non-western”.

In cultural theory more broadly, many anthropologists have also recognized the challenges of designating a single “culture” in light of global interconnections (Herzfeld, 2001), but have nonetheless affirmed the continuing importance of culture (and also politics and history) in the construction of knowledge and identity (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993; Lambek and Strathern, 1998). In ethnography, there have also been critical reformations of method and writing strategies; prominent among these are efforts to refine problems of translation of culture by moving away from static textual (monological) and structural (abstract binary) representations toward more dialogical representations (Geertz, 1973; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993). Recent theory and ethnography in anthropology, in other words, have become

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more concerned with theorizing culture and representing this ethnographically in more dynamic, processual, and relational terms.

How do these critiques in wider anthropological theory and method inform the focus upon the specific topic of person/self? The relationship between the person and other persons and domains—for example, the family, the body, healing, and child-rearing—are important topics in cross-cultural analysis. Yet these very categories themselves are hard to define prior to such analysis; definitions should ideally be the result of analysis, rather than its logical precursors (Lambek and Strathern, 1998). Any approach must be resolutely dialectical, focusing upon ways in which these processes are differentially highlighted in different places, on how different moments of these ongoing processes become objectified and singled out for cultural attention, as core symbols, foci of power, vehicles of identity, or loci of struggle. Lambek and Strathern (1998, p.6) propose a series of questions to ask: How are particular self-related practices institutionalized? In what ways is personal experience used to legitimate authority or to subvert or challenge it? How are differences between moral and jural personhood realized, and what role does socialization and body and life course play in each? How does personhood/self serve to symbolize other constructs and roles, such as gender, body, age, connection and disconnection, dependence and independence, dividuality and individuality, hierarchy and autonomy? What, if any, are the limits of socialization in these tasks?

Lambek and Strathern also warn that one must be skeptical toward arguments which romanticize the self or use it simply to invert older ideas; for example, one must avoid assumptions of structural dualities or oppositions between mind and body, reason and emotion, self and society; for these are culture-bound notions (Lambek and Strathern, 1998, p. 7). Before looking for the self elsewhere, therefore, we have to problematize our own local constructs.

Hence the need to start with more a critical and dialectical approach, one which problematizes, rather than takes for granted the relationship between person and self and person and other relevant and overlapping domains, such as the life course or healing systems, and an approach which understands this as a problem for investigation simultaneously within researchers' own thought and in the thought and practice of our subjects. This does not imply that we should consider the self only at a conceptual level, but rather, that we examine how cultural concepts impact on personal/self experiences and practices, and likewise how our personal condition affects theoretical paradigms, cultural concepts, and social practices. One must guard against self and individual slippage, for example.

Indeed, much ambivalence and debate surrounding the cross-cultural study of personhood stems from vagueness about what is meant by the terms "person" and "self." Self often implies what we might consider to be a psychological entity, such as

an ego or a subjective experience of one's own being. Some scholars—for example, Lamb, in an ethnography of Indian aging (2000) and Rasmussen in ethnographies of Tuareg spirit possession (1995) and healing specialists (2001), prefer to use the broader, more open term “person.” Beliefs about what it is to be a person in any cultural-historical setting might, or might not, include notions of subjective sense of self. “Self” implies individuality and carries introspective, psychoanalytic connotations—as Chaudhary (2008) argues, introspection is practiced only in some contexts in India, for example, in spiritual/religious contemplation; in other contexts, the individual without family is considered “incomplete.” Thus notions of personhood should emerge, not from our own Euroamerican philosophical or social science a priori categories, but rather need to be approached as they are in their own right. These notions might include beliefs and practices concerning some, or all of the following: a soul or spirit; body; mind; emotions, agency; gender or sex; race, ethnicity, caste; relationships with other people, places, or things; relationship with divinity; illness and well-being; power; karma or fate, as ingrained in or written on body or soul in some way; and the like (Lamb, 2000, p. 250).

The task of anthropologists studying personhood is to investigate what defines being a person, or being human, for the people they are striving to understand, but it is difficult to approach this topic without reifying our own categories. This task appears deceptively straightforward, however. Becker (1995, p. 3) notes how the general western conception of person—as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, center of awareness, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes—is not only invalid across cultures, but also is itself partially misrepresented in this monolithic, over-generalized depiction. Thus we must be aware of the power of cultural assumptions used as lenses to examine others' concepts. Rasmussen (2001, p. 213) is inspired by this insight, but does not consider it sufficient to merely debate which elements of person/self have precedence in other cultures' philosophical and psychoanalytical systems of thought. She does not try to point out binary contrasts with “western” notions; for so-called western or even Euro-American may be equally “Occidentalized” just as nonwestern has been “orientalized”.

These debates over personhood/self study also result from another, wider theoretical conundrum: they emerge from a dual, and in some respects, contradictory tradition in anthropology: of emphasis upon the radical cultural relativity of notions such as person and self and the need to understand these concepts from within their cultural world, yet also the opposing critique of the older concept of culture as too neatly-bounded. Corin (1998, p. 83) argues that this apparent contradiction is overcome by the current approach to culture which incorporates interactive practices, as a fluid, shifting, elusive reality, more akin to the dialogical self theory that Chaudhary draws upon, but also critically refines.



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Chaudhary notes, in her conclusions, that dialogical self theory has an ambivalent approach to the construct of monologicality. Experiences with his/her own culture urge this author to test the limits of dialogicality and advantages of monologicality (Chaudhary, 2008, p. 19). In the Indian community, monological voices of authority are believed to be reassuring and favorable in most situations. In most situations more generally, shared understandings of people are characterized more by monologicality than otherwise. Although this author does not specify exactly which Indian community (only a passing reference to heterogeneity is made) or exactly which situations over the life course (one wonders for example, about changes, conflicts between the generations, in rural and urban settings, emergent new socioeconomic classes as opposed to older caste affiliations), the data do suggest that, in general, dialogical self theory needs to deal more directly with these pervasive, habitual attributions that we make. Here indigenous knowledge of the person/self provides a very useful insight, although one should not conflate local ethnography with general theory—yet anthropologists do this all the time; anthropological theory, like that of the other social sciences, is also the product of local ethnographic ideas, for example, of nation-state, rationality, neo-liberal economics, etc. Dialogical self theory is useful in transcending simple associations of internal individuality and external sociality—old structural dualities now recognized as misleading in much cross-cultural analysis. Chaudhary proposes another dimension, of external individuality, as a phenomenon, and describes a common need of people who have grown up with individuality as an essential human attribute. Indeed, the notion of individuality is an attribute of all humans, the difference lies in the degree and detail that we choose to disclose or disguise (p.19). For example, self-assertion truncated in socially oriented socialization, yet this does not mean absence of opinion or spine. In India, argumentation and debate are age-old practices. Also, argumentation, protest, and disagreement can take many forms, for example, Gandhi's passive resistance comes to mind. So more broadly, categorizations are creations of the mind to economise attention and simplify understanding, and this writer adds, to consolidate power, as well. The value of this essay is that it sensitively explores the spaces between the individual and humanity as a whole, critiquing static bases of difference and deconstructing the old structural binary oppositions.

In other words, anthropologies of the person/self reflect debates that are analogous to debates over culture. These debates tend to cluster around two poles which correspond to different kinds of questioning and to different approaches to culture, influenced differentially by American and European anthropology, reflected in their relative importance in studies conducted in the Pacific and in Africa. On the one hand, authors attempt to describe 'lived worlds' and experiential, subjective dimensions of human life. On the other, authors focus on the cultural coordinates of the notion of

person and upon what a person's position towards culture and society is founded upon (Corin, 1998, p. 83).

The first set of studies tend to refer to "selves" rather than to "persons." Key words are those of intentionality, emotional expression, cognition, will, action. Culture and society are conceived as exercising their influence through concrete interactions; their influence is captured through details of interpersonal practices and through analysis of critical events (White and Kirkpatrick, 1985). This ethnopsychology emphasizes the need to understand subjective phenomena from within particular cultures, and from ways they conceive person and self-other relationships. At the same time, culture remains elusive, always becoming rather than a finished product, derived from recurrences and convergences in discourses, narrative forms, exchanges, or conflicts. The centrality of work on emotions and embodiment in some North American cultural and psychological anthropology today reflects a similar perspective, enriched by Bourdieu's and Foucault's analyses of the role of the body in mediating imprint of social order and of power relationships on individuals (Lock, 1993).

The second set of studies has been more influential in European writings, and draw on the Durkheimian sociological and structuralist methods of Mauss in his classical essay on the notion of person considered as a category of the human mind (Mauss, 1985). Mauss's essay reviews various forms of person-related beliefs across societies and through time. Analysis is also framed in cultural evolutionary perspective, which describes a progressive transformation from a person's character (personnage) organized around ascribed roles, to a person-subject of rights and duties, and to an autonomous self-centered individual. Earlier approaches (Fortes and Dieterlin, 1965; Bastide, 1973) were powerfully influenced by Mauss's classic distinction between sociocentric and egocentric societies. Others, such as Karp and Jackson (1990) have been inspired by Mauss to distinguish between the social person, as normatively defined, and the self as internally-defined (*la personne sociale vs. le moi*).

In classical studies influenced by Mauss, papers published on the notion of person in Africa by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, (Bastide, 1973), the degree of "individuation" appears as a central issue. Here, this refers not to concrete social contextual experience, but to structural possibility, framed from within the culture itself, of distancing vis-à-vis the defining power of social and cultural order (Corin, 1998, p.84). Most papers approached this notion through analysis of those categories and representations through which a society elaborates its image of Man (sic), its constitutive elements, and its place within the world. The person is defined in terms of a series of components which relate him/her to a genealogical frame and to the social and cosmological order through notions of entourage, heritage, and innateness. Although these essays leave open the degree to which mythical categories are experienced and actually frame everyday life, they illustrate the presence of two apparent "anti-principles of individuation" in African societies: the plurality of elements which make

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up the person, and the merging of the individual with his/her environment, his/her alterity (Bastide, 1973).

The vision of the African person as being embedded within a collective framework has been reinforced and legitimized by the work of two psychoanalysts, Marie-Cecile and Edmond Ortigues (1973), and also by a psycho-analytically trained anthropologist, Meyer Fortes (1958) in their descriptions of an African version of the Oedipus complex. The Ortigues collected data from psychoanalytically oriented clinical practice with children consulting for school and emotional problems, and from discussions of multidisciplinary teams of anthropologists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, and psychiatrists. Fortes analyzed his ethnographic data on Tallensi society (in then Gold Coast, now Ghana). The Ortigues considered the Oedipus complex from a perspective which emphasizes the need for a child to detach self from mothers' world and to become integrated in society's symbolic order, through processes of identification, opposition, internalization. According to both these studies of both Fortes (1959) and the Ortigues (1973), this process is significantly influenced by fact that in African traditional societies, one's father merges with figure of ancestors with which is no competition or opposition is possible, aggression toward the father is therefore deflected toward brothers and, repressed by imperative of solidarity; this repression comes back to haun in African psychopathology. Beliefs involving sorcery, witchcraft, misfortunes, and spirit possession are collective constructions of this process, and imply a relational and collective field of personhood.

In the more classic Maussian perspective, "modern" and "western" societies are considered the paradigm of egocentric societies, African (Collomb, 1965) and Asian (L. Dumont, 1986) societies are presented as typical examples of sociocentric societies. But much current literature tends to recast this feature as an "anomaly", rather than as the ultimate trait of cultural evolution (Shweder and Bourne, 1991)—for example, a feature of capitalism (LiPuma, 1998). As noted, there is now the awareness that these models overgeneralize and stereotype both the West and "the Rest," and many scholars emphasize a range of internal variation within each society (Lambek and Strathern, 1998; Lamb, 2000; Rasmussen, 2001, 2006). Chaudhary's article (this volume) investigates these internal variations along several axes of belief and practice, though she still tends to place somewhat greater emphasis upon the relational self or "dividual" as dominant in India; this is puzzling in light of Chaudhary's finer-grained, more nuanced and contextual data analysis.

Most recent anthropological studies point to the presence of both dimensions—relatedness and egocentrism—in all societies and their complex interplay (Lambek and Strathern, 1998). Some scholars, for example, have described cases which do not fit the supposedly dominant model, and more interestingly, some have also shown that both dimensions are intertwined in language, folklore, and tales (Lienhardt, 1985). Thus the

category of individual has to be qualified in relation to, not solely a larger cultural frame, but also in relation to practice and agency. As such, the person is never static.

One important domain where contextual analysis of practices constructing personhood reveals its dynamic transformations and fluidity, is in healing. Rasmussen (2001), in an ethnography of the semiotic meanings of medicine and the sociopolitical surrounding healing in Tuareg communities of northern Niger, warns against rigid polarities and generalizations in any comparison: for example, ascription and achievement are all present in Tuareg concepts of person, but are drawn upon selectively in different contexts (Rasmussen, 2001, p. 64). In Tuareg healing transformations, Rasmussen argues, the problematics of indeterminacy and agency are central to processes of signification and classification of medicine. For example, healing knowledge and powers can be used for good or ill. Local responses to healers are markedly skeptical; many sick persons need medicines, but tend not to easily trust healers who are feared as authority figures, or who misuse their skills. Medicine can become poison. Until trust is established, the boundaries between healer and patient are not always clear-cut or predictable; there is a coming and going between them. Threats to personhood, for example, altered states and powers may result in either outcome, or alternate back and forth from one to other status: of ill person or healer. This ambiguity and indeterminacy are shown when a possessed person does not succeed in becoming a recognized medium/diviner healer, but rather remains defined as “mentally ill”, or as when the opposite occurs, when the possessed person establishes a “contract” with tutelary spirits and becomes recognized and trusted by the community as a healer. Significant here are technologies, rather than rigid concepts/categories of the person: those instrumental means and practices of self-action as understood by others in time. Here, indeterminacy and agency, rather than static categories or constructs, play important roles (Jackson and Karp, 1990; Becker, 1995; Battaglia, 1995).

Corin (1998, pp. 90-102), similarly, analyzes contexts for individuation that exist alongside the dominant collective identity in therapeutic rituals of spirit possession in Zaire, now Congo, and explores symbolic contexts in which the subjective experience of patients is gradually transformed over time from subjection to new and active forms of relationship. Corin finds that, for the adepts of the Zebola ritual, the goal is not the creation of autonomous subjects, but rather a personal repositioning within the collective order (Corin, 1998).

To their credit, some pioneering Maussian essays also attempt to describe diverse and competing forms of individuation framed dynamically in African cultures. Bastide (1973) outlines specific features of an African principle of individuation in response to a question regarding degree to which an African person is defined by events, personages, components, or unifies these elements from within herself. According to Bastide, (1973), individuation in Africa must be conceived as a balance between different principles or forces: it represents a dynamic formal unity which

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expresses a person's position within a symbolic order; attributes derived from a person's participation in various systems of classification that define her singularity.

The question arising here is where does singularity arise, and what does it result from? Heritier-Izard (1973) described how, among the Samo in Africa, the idea of individual destiny emerges at the interface between two radically distinct worlds: that of men, dominated by social rules, principles, and customs, within the framework of agnatic principles of descent, and that of women escaping the boundaries of the male social order, yet with its own rules of transmission and solidarity beyond the lineage.

Hence the significance of gender here, which Chaudhary argues is not as central to the Indian self as is kinship and the family. The African settings are, of course, different from the Indian settings, but nonetheless one wonders about different trajectories of personhood that impinge in contexts Chaudhary does not explore, such as gender and the life course.

### **Studies of Personhood/self in South Asian Ethnographies**

Thus it is now instructive, in discussing Chaudhary's contribution, to turn to additional studies from South Asia, in particular India. Some of these studies suggest the salience of gender and age, as well as caste, in personhood/self. In an ethnography of aging in rural Bengali Indian communities, Lamb (2000) finds pervasive in rural India "a vision of persons as open and partly constituted by what comes and goes; aging illuminates dynamic personhood because aging involves simultaneous, contrary pulls in kinds of ties that make up persons" (Lamb, 2000, p. 37). On the one hand, Lamb argues, these ties are felt to grow more numerous and intense as life goes on. On the other hand, aging is thought to involve the difficult work of taking apart the self or unraveling ties, in preparation for many leave-takings of death. Chaudhary hints at this in mentioning the concept of withdrawing or disengagement of elders (Chaudhary, 2008, pp. 14-16), especially in the concept of *sanyana* (Chaudhary, 2008, p. 16), but does not pursue this aspect of self; rather, Chaudhary emphasizes the more relational aspect of younger persons (children and young adults) within the household.

Melford E. Spiro (1993) disagrees with findings of several anthropologists, including notable South Asianists (Shweder and Bourne, 1991; L. Dumont, 1986; and Marriott, 1990), who have suggested that, while many non-westerners de-emphasize individuality, westerners view persons largely as bounded or autonomous individuals. Spiro's article was stimulated by another article on the self by two social psychologists expert on Japan (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), who cited Clifford Geertz's characterization of this western conception as "a rather peculiar idea within context of world cultures" (Geertz, 1983, p. 59, quoted in Spiro, 1993, p. 107). Geertz, like Mauss before him, argued that westerners see the person as a "bounded, unique more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively

against other such wholes and against its social and natural background” (Geertz, 1993, p. 59).

Lamb believes that Bengali ethno-theories of the person resolve some of Spiro’s conundrums (Lamb, 2000, p. 38). Spiro founds his argument on that previously dominant supposed bounded-unbounded and western-non-western dichotomy; he wonders what it could mean to be relatively unbounded as a person. Markus and Kitayama (1991, p. 245) observe that in case of many non-western selves, others are included within boundaries of the self. Spiro responds: “This proposition...struck me as strange, because it seemed incomprehensible—what could it mean to say that others are included within boundaries of myself?” (pp. 108-09), Lamb argues that the answers rest in large part on what Spiro, Markus and Kitayama, and other scholars mean by the terms self” or “person” (Lamb, 2000, p. 38). Spiro entertains briefly the notion that Markus and Kitayama could be referring to the Japanese self as a psychobiological organism, bounded by skin. Such a self could be permeable to others—e.g., germs or spirits. However, such boundary crossings entail only impermanent and abnormal conditions, and Spiro therefore concludes that ethnographers who describe notions of unbounded selves could not be using the term “self” for “person” to denote the psychobiological organism (1993, p. 110). The more likely referent, Spiro believes, is some psychological entity: an ego, soul, or I. But this is still a problem, according to Spiro, because all those who believe that others are included within boundaries of their psychological self would have little, if any, self-other differentiation. That is, they would lack a sense that one’s self, or one’s own person, is bounded, or separate from all other persons (Spiro, 1993, p. 110). Since all people must be able to differentiate themselves from others, they must think of themselves as bounded and separate from all other persons. This, Spiro argues, is a distinguishing feature of the very notion of human nature.

In these arguments, Lamb identifies several interesting questions. Clearly, an unbounded psychobiological self might entail a broader range of possibilities than invading germs or possessing spirits (Lamb, 2000, p. 38). Bengalis whom Lamb knew viewed sharing and exchanging of bodily and other substances—not only with other people but also with places in which they live and things that they own and use—as vital to ways they think about the define selves and social relations (Lamb, 2000, p. 39). Parts of other people, places, and things become part of one’s own body and person, just as parts of oneself enter into bodies and thus persons of others. Bengalis viewed such exchanges as neither abnormal nor temporary, though some are more or less desired, more or less lasting, but rather as an elemental part of everyday life and practice (Lamb, 2000, p. 39). But this does not mean that the Bengalis Lamb knew could not differentiate themselves psychologically from others—like all people, they perceptually perform self-other differentiation. But Lamb disagrees with Spiro’s assumption that the ability to differentiate one’s consciousness from others is dependent on a notion of self

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as bounded, or separate from all other persons. Spiro therefore tends to conflate a sense of personal identity with that of personal boundaries: either people view themselves as perfectly bounded and separate, or they lose all capacity to differentiate selves from others. One can, like those Bengalis whom Lamb knew, have a clear sense of a differentiable self that includes bodily and emotional ties with others. Indeed, these ties make up very stuff of who and what a distinct and differentiable person is.

Furthermore, Spiro's added argument that Hindu and Buddhist theories of karma prove there can be no unbounded Hindu or Buddhist selves seems problematic to Lamb (Lamb, 2000, p. 39). To Spiro, Hindu and Buddhist theory of karma holds that every living person is a reincarnation of myriad karmic consequences of actions of "his or her, and only his or her, own person (Spiro, 2000, pp.112-113). To Lamb, Spiro provides only one of multiple theories of karma held by Hindu Indians. Lamb's Bengali findings, as well as some other Indian ethnographies, imply how karma may be transmitted and shared among members of a family or community, making it not always simply an individual affair (Lamb, 2000, pp.39-40). Susan Wadley and Bruce Derr (1990) tell of how a devastating fire in north Indian village of Karimpur spurred a debate among villagers over extent that karma is shared—extent that the deeds of one person affect the lives of others. Karimpur residents viewed the fire as a community punishment, not merely an individual one (Wadley and Derr, 1990, p. 142). Lamb's consultants/informants also offered theories of shared karma to explain a person's or group's misfortune (Ibid.). Thus much South Asian ethnography shows that, although Hindu South Asians also offer individual theories of karma to explain a single persons' own life circumstances, they frequently view this force as something that is shared by whole families of communities, for example, some asserted to Lamb that "when a father does sin, his sons have to eat the fruits" (Lamb, 2000, p. 40).

Although Chaudhary (2008, p. 7) discusses some more individual aspects of personhood, for example, in the individual consequences of karma over a long term, her other examples, (e.g. dharma) illustrate more collective relational personhood. This author's general argument re-affirms the broader implications now recognized by many contemporary works, that dichotomies between western and non-western, individual and non-individual, bounded and non-bounded conceptions of self or person should not be overdrawn (Spiro, 1993, p. 116; Lamb, 2000, p. 40). These warnings represent recent refinements of previous generalizations in South Asian and Indian studies regarding the person. The older ethnographic literature on South Asia tended to portray Indians as de-emphasizing individuality (for example, Dumont, 1980, p. 185, pp. 231-239; and Shweder & Bourne, 1984). More recent literature tends to emphasize South Asian "individuals" (McHigh, 1989; M. Mines, 1994; M. Mines and Gourishankar, 1990; Parish, 1994, pp. 127-29 and 186-87). But another problem with both older and more recent studies of personhood in South Asia is that individuality is a polysemous term whose implications have differed among these scholars. Marriott's (1990) position is

more complex, variable, and nuanced than simply holding Hindu persons to be unbounded; much of his work is devoted to what he sees as strenuous Hindu efforts toward closing boundaries (e.g., cooling oneself, minimizing interactions, unmixing, etc.), but there is variation on this in scholars' findings (Lamb, 2000, p. 250).

Personhood therefore cross-cuts many dimensions and social levels (psychological, linguistic, political, juridical, medical). LiPuma (1998, p.56), drawing upon data from Melanesia, takes issue with theories of personhood which posit the "self" as fully individualized and defined in terms of internal attributes, thereby presuming that "individual" is an ontologically privileged transhistorical and transcultural or non-cultural category. LiPuma also takes issue with the view that western and Melanesian images of personhood are fully incommensurable because "western" constructs are individuals while societies of Melanesia construct individuals or relational persons. This and other related theories tend to reify difference and also to mask political processes such as colonialism and globalization.

#### **Wider Implications: Issues Raised and Directions for Future Research**

Hence the need to clear a theoretical space to explore the conception and historical relationship between researchers' own cultural classifications and those of other peoples concerning human identity and relatedness. In Chaudhary's essay, there is progress toward this goal, in exploring the space between self and society at multiple levels. Yet there is still the need to examine additional contexts of interaction in India, such as that between the generations, between the individual and state-sponsored institutions, and between the towns and the countryside.

Chaudhary's essay confirms some other contemporary scholars' findings that multiple perspectives of personhood and other beliefs exist in any society or culture, and moreover, suggests how one might illuminate these multiple perspectives. What are often taken as mutually exclusive values of individuality and relatedness may in fact co-exist and overlap within the same cultural setting. Also, persons steeped in Asian, African, Melanesian, and other cultures often reside elsewhere, for example, in Europe or the United States, and vice versa. Thus it is difficult to draw rigid boundaries between western and non-western conceptions.

It is also difficult to distinguish between "traditional" and "modern" beliefs and practices within a single cultural setting. What does Chaudhary mean exactly by "traditional" in the Indian setting? Rural? Urban? Older persons? Youths? Also, what is meant by the gloss 'western'? Euro-American? East European? Mediterranean? Needed here is further deconstruction of the term "traditional." Is "traditional" associated with what is older, or something in the past but no longer exists or is in decline, or does it mean an ideal that is not always practiced? Does it imply a belief or practice that is sanctioned by religion? Is the traditional always opposed to the modern and/or to the secular? Chaudhary acknowledges that India's regional diversity and



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social dynamics resist generalization, but suggests the importance of democracy, caste, language, regional ethnic diversity in history; a heterogeneous social life; secularism implying acceptance of all religions, not their removal; and religion as serious business. Belief in the incompleteness of the individual is linked with the ideology of the centrality of family. By declaring that individual is unable to live alone, the family is arguably default group for self. The question arising here is whether, and how, this is changing in large cities or with new socio-economic classes among youths? Intergenerational relationships would shed further light upon these questions, and would also enrich the author's thus-far basic functionalist argument, that the high emphasis on sociality in early childhood in fact attempted to be balanced by later detachment (notion of *sanayas*); otherwise would be little renewal of relationships, and people would stay absorbed in life long filial absorption (Chaudhary, 2008, page 16). Another question is, what does the family here mean: A household? A residence? Cognatic or agnatic kin? Affines? One needs greater precision and specification.

The difficulty here is in delineating or situating the temporal and spatial aspects of culture more generally, as well as concepts of person/self. What does it mean, for example, in child-rearing practices, to describe child socialization as “traditionally” emphasizing more group-oriented personhood, in which the individual is viewed as “incomplete”, as Chaudhary terms it. Does this formulation of personal identity and affiliation derive from the parent or grandparent, from the school, or the state? If there is conflict between them, what forms does this take? Leenhardt (1947) described how, in context of Melanesian culture change, the structure of person is released from the breaking up of mythical social domains. The person, however, cannot be confused with actual individuals, and encompasses the broader human reality of participation, sociality, and communion, and depends on a mythical basis. Contrary to the individual, the Melanesian person could be enriched by an indefinite assimilation of outside elements. This process would itself be grounded in unconscious debate in those confronted with the mythical world of traditional society; it would also be foreshadowed by positioning of heroes or heroines who have rejected constraints of their social role (LiPuma, 1998).

In India, what about persons who reject or resist constraints of traditional personhood? Also, what about power relationships in classification of persons? Chaudhary addresses this issue, but only briefly and indirectly, in her conclusion that belief in group distinctiveness has cohered and divided people so intensely that the dynamics of social distancing is a matter of serious concern; we are capable of creating groupings of human kinds that are results of unspoken contracts between “fickle minds and changeful reality, making human groupings highly mutable” (Berreby, 2005, p. 44; Chaudhary, 2008, p. 18). On occasion, affiliation with group identity can even become strong enough to dissolve a sense of self, resulting in over-identification with a group or a cause, what Valsiner refers to as ‘hyper-identity,’ (Valsiner, 2000, p. 498), an instance

of the other completely eclipsing the self. Categorizing is an activity that assists in an economizing our encounters with reality, but anthropologists have pointed out that “regimes” of symbolic classification, for example those conducted by the state or other powerful organizations, can be just as powerful as literal schemes (Malkki, 1995; Rasmussen, 2001). Human categories are based not just on shared characteristics, but the criteria are selective and based upon power (Herzfeld, 2001). Chaudhary builds on these insights by noting that, in most categories we use, there is a basic assumption of equatibility, although the category in itself may have arisen on another criterion, and importantly— this is tethered to specific assumptions and conditions, and attributed features may be hidden, disagreeable or unacceptable. In our investigation of self-other dynamics, we mostly assume a theoretical equality among people; yet in our conduct, serious attributions of inequality persevere. Dialogical self theory accepts such divergences, but does not apply this to the level of social groups interacting with individuals and with each other, or, this writer adds, to powerful entities such as the state or global corporations, whose presence in India is surely felt, at some levels of interaction and in some contexts.

Chaudhary constructively refines the old model of “dividuality” (connectedness to the group) in the dialogical self framework. Conversely, we also have to balance this work by delineating ways in which the dividual aspects of western personhood have been masked and the individual aspects overdrawn. Americans, too, may not always consider themselves to be as neatly bound, closed, and individual as many scholars have presumed. Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin (1994) examined the so-called contagion concept among adult Philadelphians, the majority of whom believe that some kinds of essences (vibes, cooties, germs, moral qualities) are transferred from person to person through everyday exchanges such as sharing a sweater. Also, some feminist theorists have suggested further that models of self emphasizing individual autonomy do not adequately describe self-conceptions of American women, who are more likely than American men to focus more on connectedness to others (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Lykes, 1985).

Additional areas in need of further research concern how closely individuality is connected to capitalism and neo-liberal economic programs in globalization, and what is occurring in India here? Also, are all non-capitalist or pre-modern societies similar in their emphasis upon dividuality? If not, then how are their differences best understood, and what other factors account for the relative emphases, across and within cultures, upon dividuality and individuality? LiPuma (1998, 54) describes the emergence of nation-states of Melanesia oriented toward and encompassed by “western” culture and capitalism, and argues that this process entails the evolution of “western-like” conceptions of the individual, e.g. in the World Bank’s policy about how these nations should organize their economies in terms of a new market. How far has there been a similar impact in India on the self/person, for example, in rights not known or needed

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before, such as the right of privacy, or, in the case of kinship, women's rights for example, protection of daughters-in-law from the authority of mothers-in-law?

Is there emergence of an individual aspect of personhood in some newly emerging contexts in India, identified with modernity? In particular, concepts such as nationhood, liberal democracy, civil rights, and electoral politics—Chaudhary mentions, but does not pursue, India's role as the world's largest democracy—suggest the possible emergence of images of autonomous, self-animated, and self-enclosed agents.

There is also the need to explore how personhood everywhere is constructed historically; many theorists agree that the stereotypical (now questioned) Euroamerican notion of person as wholly individual, as an autonomous, self-contained, self-moving agent is characteristic primarily of capitalism (Bourdieu, 1984; Postone, 1993; LiPuma, 1998). The person in capitalist society has two defined features: 1) the person is composed, historically and culturally, of dividual and individual aspects; and 2) paradoxically, the person appears as natural and trans-historical individual. There is a double character of the person here, and this is bound to the character of commodity-determined labor (LiPuma, 1998, p. 59). How does this occur? Labor replaces ties of kinship and community by serving as a kind of objective means by which products of other are acquired, such that a new form of interdependence comes into being, where one's own labor functions as necessary means of obtaining products of others, thereby liberating one from dependence on lineage ties, for example, elders, but at the same time, submitting one to other authorities of the market. Social relations of capitalism are thus based on a quasi-independent structure that stands apart from, and opposed to, persons understood as individuals. Labor, here, as a socially mediating activity creates relations among persons which, though social and containing dividual elements, assume a quasi-objective and individualist character (LiPuma, 1998, p. 60). The person becomes progressively reified as a self-contained, self-shaping, independent agent—at least in ideology, though in practice there are new constraints and power-relationships, for example at the workplace.

LiPuma (*ibid.*) argues that some of these features of person/self connected to capitalism apply both to the western and post-colonial Melanesian concepts today; the key issue here is how far this is true for the case of India, and also how, when, why, and consequences? Are there overlapping concepts? Exceptions? Changes? Debates over Indian personhood? Hence the need also to focus on intentionality and agency. Is there a politics of emergence of the individual which is challenging the dividual in India? Chaudhary hints of this, in briefly mentioning new choices and commodities, and school contexts, but only glosses over them and should elaborate more on them in future work. Also an issue here is, just how far does the commodity form define the character of personhood in a given society? This is an important question in globalization. For example, by “democracy”, does Chaudhary mean neoliberal

economics and capitalism, or does she mean something else, more in line with local concepts of human rights?.

Person and self are slippery concepts. When I began to write this Commentary, I believed that perhaps these terms should be abandoned, replaced by another presumably more neutral term, such as identity or even humanity. Chaudhary's essay makes it possible to salvage these terms, although it also highlights the need for specification in these studies and cultural theory more generally. Issues of belonging, exclusion, equality, hierarchy, difference, and their interconnections are crucial to the topic of personhood/self and its dialogical positioning to others; understanding these topics requires a wider lens which incorporates problems of cultural scale. The goal should be to uncover conditions in which dividual and individual—and additional aspects of personhood not subject to this binary—emerge alternately, in cultural change and encounters.

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