



The shape of self-extension: Mapping the extended self with multidimensional scaling[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Self
Self-extension
Multidimensional scaling
Well-being

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the three domains of self-extension proposed by William James' Constituents of Self — the psychological, social, and material domains. A novel analytic method, Multidimensional Scaling (MDS-T), was used to represent the structure of James' self-extension domains in geometric space for a large sample of American adults ($N = 1181$). Differences in the structure of self-extension by gender, race, age, and emotional health were also explored. Results suggested that the extended self, as conceptualized by James, has a clear and robust structure. Each of James' self-extension domains were distinctly represented in geometric space; yet, findings suggest a slight refinement of the self-extension subdomain groupings. Additionally, potential links between the structure of self-extension, age and emotional health were also observed. Findings from this study should be viewed as heuristic, lending empirical support to long-standing theory on the configuration of the self, characterized through extension.

1. Introduction

There are many ways in which the self takes shape (e.g., Baumeister, 1998; Leary & Tangney, 2011; McAdams, 2013; Mead, 1934); but, one of the most basic forms of self-specification may be the extension of the self into entities *within* and *beyond* the physical body, such as people, places and things (Allport, 1937; Belk, 1988; James, 2013; McClelland, 1951; Prelinger, 1959). The process of self-extension requires parsing “self” from “not self”; and, how the self is extended is believed to substantively impact behavior and well-being (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001). William James (2013) was among the earliest thinkers to hypothesize common domains into which the self is likely to be extended. He proposed that psychological processes, interpersonal relationships, and material possessions would likely be considered extensions of the self. Yet, despite the longevity of James' theoretical influence on the self, the basic structure of James' domains of self-extension has not been examined empirically.

William James theorized that the narrative self could be divided into three, primary self-extension domains (SEDs), into which the narrative self could be extended: the psychological self,¹ the social self, and the material self (James, 2013). The psychological self reflects the private, internal landscape of sensation, emotion and cognition –

“ourselves as thinkers” (p. 296). The social self emerges from interpersonal exchanges and is influenced by the opinions of others. The material self is comprised of the physical body, the family, and personal possessions. James suggested that, collectively, these three domains of self-extension were the primary means by which the narrative self is organized and assembled.

James concluded that the three SEDs (i.e., psychological, social and material) were universal components of the narrative self, observing that individuals “[arrange] the various selves. . . in an hierarchical scale according to their worth” (p. 315). Hence, James posited that some SEDs were more central to the subjective experience of self than others, in other words, more “self-salient”. At the top of James' hierarchical scale was the psychological self. Below the psychological self fell the social self. Descending incrementally down the scale were the “extra-corporeal” (James, 2013, p. 315) material selves, the familial self and the acquisitive self. Finally, the bodily self, was fixed at the bottom of the scale.

While James claimed that the SEDs represented a relatively stable set of domains, he also asserted that the SEDs were not evenly distributed within or between people, such that intra- and interpersonal fluctuations in self-extension could be expected. Thus, each individual's structure of self-extension is idiosyncratic, emerging from personal

[☆] Eric Garland was supported in the preparation of this manuscript by Grant R01DA042033 from NIDA and Grant R61AT009296 from NCCIH.

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¹ William James' original term for the psychological self was the spiritual self, but current connotations are likely to render James' appellation confusing.

experience. Despite each SED being potentially accessible to each individual at birth, experiences shape self-extension over time. For example, an individual raised in isolation is unlikely to possess a richly extended social self. Furthermore, James suggested that the narrative self, emerging from the SEDs, is dynamic, “a fluctuating material” (p. 292). This dynamism has temporal and spatial implications. First, the self changes over time, and distinct domains of self-extension are likely to be more or less salient during distinct developmental periods. Second, the self is likely to be expressed in distinct ways in specific environments. Indeed, cultural environments are likely to shape self structures (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Similarly, race may also influence self-extension, with minority individuals potentially extending the self further into social and cultural groups due to the increased salience of race in their daily lives.

1.1. Modeling the self

As a testament to the utility of James's thought, dedicated lines of research have emerged around these three SEDs. For instance, research on self-construal (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991) addresses aspects of social self-extension, and research on the extended self (e.g., Belk, 1988) captures a subdomain of James' material self, represented in this study by acquisitive self-extension. However, there remains a dearth of direct inquiry into psychological self-extension. Despite examination of psychological self-extension being implicit in much clinical psychology research, psychological self-extension typically receives overt attention only in examinations of metacognition (e.g., Nelson, Stuart, Howard, & Crowley, 1999). Furthermore, the disparate lines of research furthering James' Constituents of Self rarely converge, leaving the various SEDs to be explored in isolation. So thoroughly are James' SEDs segregated that they have never been statistically modeled as a whole. A unified, empirical analysis of the extended self appears warranted and long overdue, as the three SEDs are plainly unified in each human being. A unified analysis will lend empirical support to a long-standing theoretical model of the self, as known through self-extension. Examining how these three SEDs are interrelated will provide valuable insight into the basic structure of the extended self.

Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) is a statistical technique well suited to model relationships among the hypothesized SEDs (Papazoglou & Mylonas, 2016). MDS is a multivariate approach designed to plot data structurally in dimensional space, much like a map. Thus, relationships between data elements can be visually depicted, with relative proximities indicating the strengths of associations. Traditionally, MDS has been used to model data in two- or three-dimensional planes, yielding axes that can be interpreted similarly to latent constructs. However, recent analytic advances suggest that MDS can also model data in circles and spheres when appropriate. Indeed, Papazoglou and Mylonas (2016) encourage circular modeling when theoretically consistent, or when geometric axes do not readily lend themselves to interpretation.

A circular configuration of the self has both historical and psychological precedent. Historically, circles have been used to symbolize the self, representing a unified whole (Campbell & Moyers, 2011). Bridging the historical and psychological, Jung's (2013) interest in symbology likely influenced his representation of the successfully individuated self with a circle. The circle also appears to be the preferred visual model of the self among modern psychologists, as evinced by the circular models of self proposed by Allport (1961), Brewer (1991), and Dennett (1991), among others. Circles also denote movement and dynamism, concepts present in James' writing and well aligned with recent conceptualizations of the self as a dynamic system (Berkovich-Ohana & Glicksohn, 2014). Berkovich-Ohana and Glicksohn (2014) use a sphere to represent their Consciousness State Space, a theoretical model unifying consciousness and the self. Finally, organizing the self as a circle is also consistent with the overarching aim of this study: to create a unified, empirical model of James' SEDs. Thus, partitioning elements of the self

into distinct quadrants appears contraindicated.

In this pursuit, this exploratory study examined the three SEDs identified in James' Constituents of Self, mapping their empirical relationships in two dimensional space. James discusses the social and the psychological SEDs in roughly unitary terms. However, in elaborating on the material self, James explicitly postulated that the material self was comprised of three self-extension subdomains: the physical body, the family, and material possessions. Thus, five distinct markers of the self-extension were examined in this study, 1) psychological self-extension, 2) social self-extension, 3a) bodily self-extension, 3b) familial self-extension, and 3c) acquisitive self-extension, or the self extended into possessions.

The relative self-salience of each of the SEDs was measured. In accordance with James' hierarchical self scale, it was hypothesized that psychological self-extension would be the most self-salient SED, followed by social self-extension and then the material self-extension subdomains. Multidimensional scaling was then used to model the structure of self-extension in the entire data set. It was hypothesized that the SEDs would emerge as distinct spatially, but interrelated. It was further hypothesized that the three domains of the material SED would cluster together. Multidimensional scaling was also used to model the structure of the extended self in four distinct clusters of analysis. These analyses examined sex differences (female vs. male), cultural differences (non-white vs. white), age differences (youngest vs. middle-aged vs. oldest), and emotional health differences (depressed vs. anxious vs. flourishing). It was hypothesized that demographically distinct individuals would evidence unique structures of self-extension given evidence that the self is shaped by both development and environment (e.g., Kitayama & Park, 2007). However, no formal hypotheses were proposed given the exploratory nature of these analyses.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants ($N = 1181$) were recruited from two sources, the college of education research subject pool at a large university in the Southeastern U.S. ($n = 635$, 54%), and Amazon's crowd-sourcing website Mechanical Turk (MTurk; $n = 546$, 46%). The full sample was comprised of three distinct samples of college students ($n = 96$, $n = 424$, $n = 112$), as well as three distinct MTurk samples ($n = 236$, $n = 104$, $n = 206$). College students were awarded 0.5 h of research credit for their participation and MTurk participants were paid 50¢. Multiple recruitment platforms were used to diversify the sample. Participant demographics are reported in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Self domains

Each of the SEDs were assessed by a single-item, pictorial measure. This item design was modeled after the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), a measurement style that has since been used to examine self-extension more broadly (e.g., Schultz, 2002; Shvil, Krauss, & Midlarsky, 2013). For each self-extension item, respondents were presented with a set of seven Venn-like diagrams in which two circles overlap to differing degrees. The degree of overlap increased uniformly, yielding a linear, seven-point scale (Fig. 1).

Participants were told that one of the circles represented their self and the other circle represented the target construct. They were instructed that when the circles were totally separate, this represented the self being completely independent from the target construct. They were further instructed that when the circles were totally overlapping, this represented the self being completely identified with the target construct. For each of the five SEDs, respondents were prompted to indicate “How closely do/does your ____ represent *yourself* or *your identity*?”.

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