

Do people everywhere believe there is a true self – a moral true self, what is more? This is a question of obvious anthropological relevance. Most anthropologists, however, would question the basic assumptions of the hypothesis, not to mention its validity for many of the societies they have studied. After Marcel Mauss's famous 1938 essay ["A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self"](#) that made this a standard anthropological issue, the universality of the category of self or personhood has been contested. It has been argued rather that the "self" has a particular intellectual genealogy, a history which makes it some version of it available to Western minds but not necessarily in all cultures or in all historical periods.

There is a rich social psychology literature on the notion of the self with a focus on comparisons between so-called interdependent cultures (typically Eastern) and so-called independent cultures (Western, in most cases the US), a contrast that many if not most anthropologists find way too vague and broad to be even worthy of discussion. Out of this literature, Strohminger Newman, and Knobe extract evidence to show that moral features are, across cultures, seen as more central to the self. This speaks only indirectly to the issue of whether the self/true self distinction is a universal one. They also quote a forthcoming article (De Freitas, J., Sarkissian, H., Newman, G. E., Grossman, I., De Brigard, F., Luco, A., & Knobe, J. (2017). *Consistent belief in a good true self in misanthropes and three interdependent cultures*. Cognitive Science) presenting experimental evidence in direct support of their thesis. This evidence consists in experiments done in the US, Colombia, Russia, and Singapore (these last three treated as "interdependent" cultures). Participants in these three countries were, as is typical in this social psychological literature, university students.

To what extent do such studies with university students as participants genuinely capture the relevant range of cultural diversity? Can these studies really support the claim that belief in a true self is universal? University students in Bogota, Singapore, or Tomsok are likely to understand what is expected of them in a way more similar to that of American participants than would Colombian, Russian or South-East Asian peasants. They are likely to have their notions of the self strongly influenced by Western inputs. Serious cross-cultural comparisons should, moreover, involve people with little or no Western-type schooling, living in small-scale societies not dominated by a "moral" religion. They should be carried with methods that have some ecological validity, or to put it more simply, that make good sense in such cultural surroundings.

During my own fieldwork in a Romanian village, I studied cultural representations of personhood that are problematic for the idea of a "true morally good self". For one thing, villagers portrayed certain individuals as truly immoral deep down, and their flawed character was feared and avoided even despite appearances to the contrary. This "misanthropism", to use the term mentioned in the article, was selective, and did not extend, for example, to many other people believed to be fundamentally good – for example relatives and friends. A further example comes from a study with Catalina Tesar, where we compared these Romanian peasants' and Romanian Roma ("Gypsy") beliefs about ethnic essentialism. In our "switched-at-birth" scenarios, we found that Romanian peasants believe that Roma-born Romanian-adopted children will develop characters associated with their ethnic group of birth rather than of adoption. Tellingly, some traits in these hypothetical children (such a lack of inhibition against stealing or begging) are seen as rather immoral by Romanian peasants. Could we say that they are a reflection of a "true self" that villagers associate with Roma (but not Romanian) essence?

Even in Western societies, there is plenty of historical instances where people do not assume that, except for a few individuals, everyone has an essentially good and true self. An essentialized view of the self is compatible with the attribution of essentially bad "true self" (if this is the right way to describe it) to members of despised groups.. To take an extreme case, consider what Anti-Semites in Nazi Germany believed about the "true self" of Jews. For them, while Jews presented themselves as moral and law-abiding, they hiddenly behaved quite immorally, according to their true nature. Even

partially Jewish origins were seen as implying that the “true self” was Jewish and hence evil. Note that negative essentialism is orthogonal to misanthropy (as discussed in the article). A Nazi could easily fuse, on the one hand, a deep negative assessment of Jewish essence with, on the other, strong trust and cooperative inclinations towards fellow Aryans assumed to have good, true moral selves.

I end with an exotic, but not less relevant example, of human reasoning about evil deep inside people. In some cultures, this idea of core evil is formulated in terms of either sorcery or witchcraft, two related but importantly different notions, as argued by Evans Pritchard in his classical work on the Zande. The sorcerer, it is thought, intentionally harms his enemy with magical techniques, while the witch may harm them unintentionally and even unknowingly. Yet in both cases there is a source of evil, or wrongdoing deep inside the person. We may not necessarily think of the evil intent of the sorcerer or of the witchcraft substance inside the witch as part of their “true self”, but it is nevertheless thought of an essential aspect of who they are: How do such cases fit, if at all, in the picture proposed by Strohming, Newman, and Knobe?