



## Being oneself through time: Bases of self-continuity across 55 cultures

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#### ABSTRACT

Self-continuity – the sense that one’s past, present, and future are meaningfully connected – is considered a defining feature of personal identity. However, bases of self-continuity may depend on cultural beliefs about personhood. In multilevel analyses of data from 7287 adults from 55 cultural groups in 33 nations, we tested a new tripartite theoretical model of bases of self-continuity. As expected, perceptions of stability, sense of narrative, and associative links to one’s past each contributed to predicting the extent to which people derived a sense of self-continuity from different aspects of their identities. Ways of constructing self-continuity were moderated by cultural and individual differences in mutable (vs. immutable) personhood beliefs – the belief that human attributes are malleable. Individuals with lower mutability beliefs based self-continuity more on stability; members of cultures where mutability beliefs were higher based self-continuity more on narrative. Bases of self-continuity were also moderated by cultural variation in contextualized (vs. decontextualized) personhood beliefs, indicating a link to cultural individualism-collectivism. Our results illustrate the cultural flexibility of the motive for self-continuity.

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Identity; culture; self-continuity; mutability; personhood beliefs; mindset

Self-continuity can be defined as the sense that past, present, and future time-slices of one’s identity are meaningfully connected. Philosophers (Taylor, 1989; Wiggins, 2001), as well as both classic (Erikson, 1968; James, 1892) and contemporary (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Vignoles, Sani, Easterbrook, & Cvetkovska, 2017) psychologists, portray self-continuity as a defining feature of personal identity. Both personal and societal functioning arguably depend on people’s forming identities that are seen to persist over time – not just from past to present but also into the future. Without self-continuity, people could not learn from experience, be held accountable for their past actions, make plans for their future, nor cooperate with others in the present to secure future benefits.

During the life-course, however, people experience physical, psychological and social changes, and neither past nor future selves can be directly experienced in the present. Hence, people’s sense of being the same person through time is not a given, but must be actively constructed – and both individuals and cultural groups may prioritize different bases of self-continuity within identity construction (Chandler et al., 2003). In the current paper, we examine the role of cultural and personal beliefs about personhood in moderating the ways in which people construct their personal sense of self-continuity.