

# Examining the Self Using Cultural Influences and the Principles of A (Affect), B (Behavior) and C (Cognition)

Belinda Quarthey\*

Department of Sociology, Humanities Center of Acad, Building HC 212, USA

\*Corresponding author: Belinda Quarthey, Department of Sociology, Humanities Center of Acad, Building HC 212, USA, Tel: 203-396-8463, E-mail: [quartheyb@sacredheart.edu](mailto:quartheyb@sacredheart.edu)

Rec Date: July 25, 2018; Acc Date: August 10, 2018; Pub Date: August 16, 2018

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## Abstract

This article explains what are the students feeling? How are the students interacting? What are the students thinking? It also explains that cultural influences together with the three components A (Affect), B (Behavior), and C (Cognition) of social psychological are linked to how undergraduate students of Fairfield University define their self. This is significant because their self is connected to cultural influences through the students' emotions, interactions and thoughts.

**Keywords:** Students; Psychology; Culture; Behavior

## Introduction

This article describes an in-class activity designed to demonstrate the cultural influences as well as the ABC (Affect, Behavior, and Cognition) of social psychology, to define the individual self of undergraduate students at Fairfield University. The in-class activity showed that some aspects of culture (e.g., learned, practiced, produced) can be used to define the self through affect, behavior, and cognition. The evaluation data and the students' comments demonstrated that the students learned from and enjoyed the activity. For instance, it was obvious that the students' perceptions of who they are, are heavily influenced by some aspects of their cultural background. Suggestions for modifications of this activity are discussed.

Explaining the ABC of social psychology to any phenomenon can be challenging, because of the complex relationships among the three principles. My desire to use the traits of affect, behavior, and cognition in this evaluation is to understand the self from the perspectives of undergraduate students. Ben-Eliyahu, and Linnenbrink-Garcia's [1] study showed that students need to maintain affect, behavior, and cognition to control their learning habits. From their study, the three traits were defined as emotions (e.g., anxiety or excitement), behaviors (e.g., selecting a conducive study environment), and cognitions (focus) [1].

Through various discussions in the classroom, the students have learned that the self is connected to all social phenomena. Therefore, to expand their knowledge about the self, the students were instructed to orally present a concise overview of diverse cultures. The contents of each student's cultural presentation brought to my realization that the sense of self may also stem from aspects of cultural background through the traits of affect, behavior, and cognition.

Wilt and Revelle [2] noted that people define themselves through affect, behavior and cognition. Other authors [3-5] also discussed that affect, behavior and cognition are socially created. Together, all of these

authors' views of the self-support the students' perceptions of who they are.

## Research Methodology

### Participants

I collected data during the Spring semester of 2018. 52 undergraduates enrolled in the Introduction to Sociology course at Fairfield University participated in the activity. Social psychology is usually considered a subfield of psychology and sociology. Although over the past decades, the connection between sociology and social psychology has weakened [6], along the way, social psychological perspectives have been relevant within the sociological field. For example, the ABC of social psychology falls under WEB DuBois' discussions in sociology. DuBois' theory of the double consciousness described how African Americans' experiences can be conceptualized through affect, behavior and cognition. Through affect African Americans experienced a feeling of injustice [7], African Americans changed their behavior to reflect on how they relate to others [8], and as a psychological barrier, double consciousness was fundamental to how African Americans think and how they saw themselves. Therefore, the rationale for using the principles of ABC is to strengthen the theoretical relationships between sociology and social psychology. The sample included 40 female students and 12 male students, who ranged from 18 to 21 years of age. The sample of students included freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors with various academic majors such as sociology, psychology, math, biology, and political science.

### Procedure

At the beginning of class, students listed three to five things that best describe who they are. The students exchanged their written descriptions with their fellow classmates. Although there were some differences in how each student described himself or herself, there were various aspects of culture that were similar in how the self was perceived by the students. From the evaluation data, it was clear that culture and the traits of affect, behavior and cognition contribute to the

students' definition of the self. For example, traits such as caring, sociable, and thoughtfulness were linked to the learned aspect of the students' cultural background.

## Results and Discussion

My data analysis for this activity employed the modified van Kaam method (Table 1). In following the steps of the van Kaam method of analysis [9,10], I removed personally held beliefs and preconceived notions of the self, I identified and extracted every trait that may be relevant to the definition of self, I thematized significant statements, and finally, I validated and analyzed the themes to determine explicit expression of the self from each student participant. 15 students out of the 52 students listed caring, empathetic, sympathetic, and compassionate (affect).

Themes	Definition	Number of Students per Theme	Frequency
Caring, Empathetic, and Sympathetic	Affect	15 of 52	17
Sociable, Outgoing, and Friendly	Behavior	16 of 52	16
Thoughtful, Understanding, Smart, Studious, and Hardworking	Cognition	10 of 52	17

**Table 1:** Data analysis of activity employed.

Sixteen (16) students out of the 52 students listed sociable and outgoing (behavior). 10 students out of the 52 students listed thoughtful, understanding/smart/studious and hardworking (cognition).

Even though the sample was small, the student participants were enough to make a good argument. In some cases, the vast differences in how the self is defined could be due to the fundamental ways in which people differ from each other. However, from the perceptions of the student participants, cultural similarities and the ABC of affect, behavior, and cognition offered a successful explanation of the self. Exchanged responses and comments from the students included the following "It is interesting, I am argumentative and Dan is very studious," "Both Chris and I are funny people," "We have caring personalities," and "Oh my God, both Jane and I are usually the loudest among my group of friends" "I feel as though Jessica is my twin...We have similar thoughts and interests"

The use of students in a classroom setting is suitable for this activity because as human beings, we tend to think, feel, and behave based on the social environment. Aspects of cultural influences and the ABC of social psychology (i.e., affect, behavior, and cognition) build on this theory of the self.

Within the context of affect, a deeper insight into the students' responses revealed conditions such as moods, feelings and the emotional expressions of the self. Social settings (e.g., a classroom) can impact on how students express themselves. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the social environment influenced the students' thinking, which was motivated by pleasurable (feeling good, happy) responses that fully defined who they are.

In taking into account the trait of behavior, the students defined the self in terms of the social environment. This is a typical example of their social interaction with their fellow students. The confirmation is that behavioral responses were influenced directly from their fellow students with respect to common social norms, background, race, and generation.

The students also used their thoughts to define their self and the responses of the self-revealed conscious cognitive activity. The cognitive activities were connected to some aspects of cultural influences. For example, some of the students' comments of the self were influenced by their personal philosophy, how they have been educated and what they believe in.

One of the goals of finding new and better ways to teach undergraduate social science courses is to urge instructors to consider classroom scenarios to explore and help clarify some of the many complex social phenomena.

Instructors should carefully consider some challenges before using this scenario. First, any instructor using a classroom setting to gather information about students' definition of the self should be aware that students' minds and thinking of the self will continue to mature through their years in college.

Secondly, instructors must be careful about distortions or mistakes in the perceptions of the self when analyzing students' responses in relation to affect, behavior, and cognition. Instructors should avoid hostile comments from students that may not be relevant. Moreover, instructors can interpret the data differently by using students' responses and comments to base their opinions in relation to their culture, and determine which cultural norms or values seemed most difficult in defining the self and why.

Third, an instructor may choose to use a different situation. For example, instead of having students list 3-5 things that define who they are, the instructor may divide the class into three groups with each student within a group defining the self through affect, behavior or cognition, or have students within groups alternate in defining the self through their cultural values and norms.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this activity was well received by the students, and increased their understanding of defining who they are (i.e., the self). The conceptualization of the self in terms of affect, behavior, and cognition allows humans to gain a clearer understanding of their respective individuality as envisioned by the American culture. Within the two fields of anthropology and social psychology, the students' statements provide knowledge to implement and challenge theories of the self in sociology and other social science disciplines. Given the important traits of the self, the affirmation is that social psychology and the cultural aspects of anthropology continue to shape human identity. The cultural influences together with the three traits of affect, behavior and cognition make up a useful scientific model in defining who we are as human beings.

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