

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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