

## Original Research Article

## The Influence of Culture on Identity Development: A Symbolic Interactionism Study

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**Abstract: Introduction:** Psychologists increasingly see culture as vital in defining our sense of self. Though many theoretical perspectives exist on how culture impacts one's identity, this research seeks to justify these claims and contribute to the existing empirical data. **Methodology:** The current research used a qualitative methodology through thematic analysis and semi-structured interviews to justify the claims that culture influences one's identity through a symbolic interactionism perspective. The participants in the study were four psychology students at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the United Kingdom. They were interviewed with the focus theme question, 'How does culture shape our identity?' The combined transcribed responses were used as the basis for this research study on culture and its implications in shaping one's identity through self, identity, and culture—findings: The results indicated that culture is an imperative theme that defines one's self-construal. The culture in which people are born may be viewed as a psychological phenomenon impacting how they define their identity. Culture and the development of self intertwine in explaining a person's behaviours. The identity of self-development is responsible for framing humans' mental lexicon and their cultural perspectives.

**Keywords:** Culture, Identity, Identity Development, Self, Indigenous Culture.

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### INTRODUCTION

Self-identification is a critical psychological phenomenon that aids in understanding people in their social context (Dickerson, 2012; McAdams, 2024; McAdams *et al.*, 2021; Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Sharma, 2014), and its development is framed from cultural psychology of identity (Hammack, 2008). If you were to stop and critically analyse how you described yourself to others, it would be astounding to see your views. It should be noted that your description of self was very much linked to the cultural-ideological hegemony of the culture in which you were geographically born (Gündoğan, 2021; Langman, 2015). In reality, ideology is formed by the culture, and the hegemonic class (Cortes-Ramirez, 2015; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Jackson, 1985; University of Minnesota, 2016) frames society's culture. Therefore, one's analysis of self must conclude with the culture (Allen, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Usborne & Taylor, 2010), which is intrinsically linked to self-identification or, instead, what we describe as 'cultural identity' (Weaver, 2001). Culture, therefore, shapes the human mind and self-expression (Li *et al.*, 2024) and

goes to Markus & Kitayama's (1991) perspective that self-identity is a process of one's culture (see also Hong *et al.*, 2000; Park *et al.*, 2016). This issue brings to the forefront of discourse the psychology of culture and the interconnectivity between cultural identity and self-identity.

How can a culture influence one's self-identity? This question is the premise upon which this research seeks to explore and attempt to answer in this qualitative exegesis. The primary focus of the study is to identify the themes garnered from the focus research question semi-structured interviews of the three transcribed interviews of my colleagues on how one's culture can crystallise a person's self and identity. A qualitative thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be used to hypothesise the study's findings. This approach was chosen because thematic methodology is one of the most flexible and effective forms of analysis for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

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Symbolic interactionism research has been one of the earliest empirical data to challenge the status quo, stating that the self was an independent variable detached from its cultural environment. It contests the idea of self as decontextualised, implying that self cannot be understood without considering the impact of people and objects on an individual's identity. In other words, the self only makes sense in terms of a network of relationships that can inform people how to make sense of who they are (Dickerson, 2012). Recent studies conducted by Oyserman and Markus (1993, 1998) and Tajfel and Turner (2004) (as cited in Sharma, 2014) indicate that self and identity are social products and further explain that self and identity theories converge in grounding self and identity in social and cultural context.

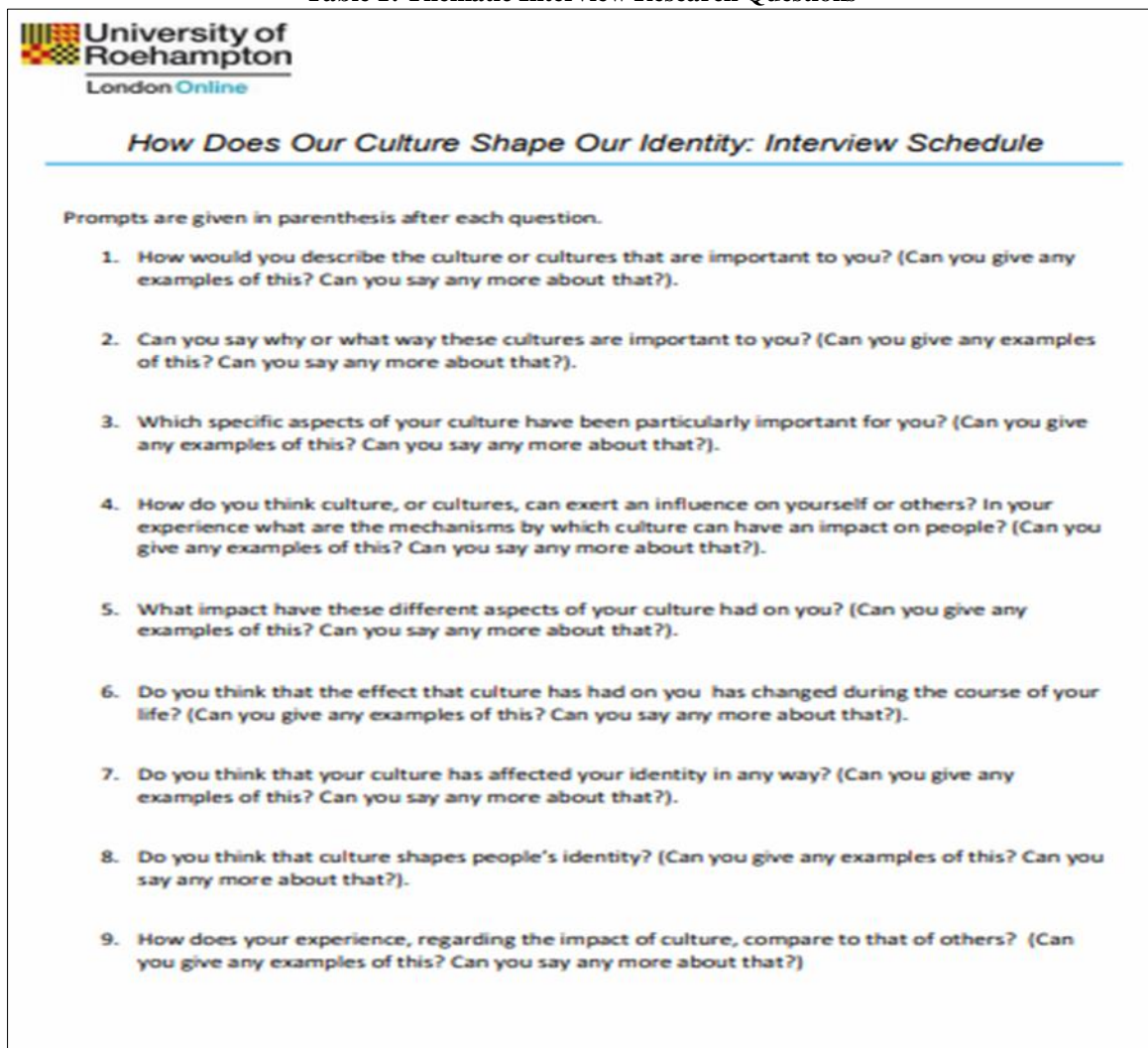
Contextual effects on the self may be distal - parenting practices, schooling, the culture, the time and place in which one lives, and the experiences one has had early in life. Based on past and present research, it is apparent that our individuality is socially produced and is now a known truth (Oyserman & Markus, 1993, 1998; Sharma, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

## METHODOLOGY

### Procedure

Table 1 represents the research questions and data from a semi-structured interview created by the University of Roehampton.

**Table 1: Thematic Interview Research Questions**



**University of Roehampton**  
London Online

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**How Does Our Culture Shape Our Identity: Interview Schedule**

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Prompts are given in parenthesis after each question.

1. How would you describe the culture or cultures that are important to you? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?).
2. Can you say why or what way these cultures are important to you? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?).
3. Which specific aspects of your culture have been particularly important for you? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?).
4. How do you think culture, or cultures, can exert an influence on yourself or others? In your experience what are the mechanisms by which culture can have an impact on people? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?).
5. What impact have these different aspects of your culture had on you? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?).
6. Do you think that the effect that culture has had on you has changed during the course of your life? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?).
7. Do you think that your culture has affected your identity in any way? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?).
8. Do you think that culture shapes people's identity? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?).
9. How does your experience, regarding the impact of culture, compare to that of others? (Can you give any examples of this? Can you say any more about that?)

Each participant recorded and transcribed the interview questions. Four Psychology students at a higher education institution (HEI) in the United Kingdom conducted the qualitative interviews. To protect each participant using informed consent forms, the ethical guidelines were adhered to in keeping with the British Psychological Society Code of Conduct and Ethics. The students were then tasked with collecting the

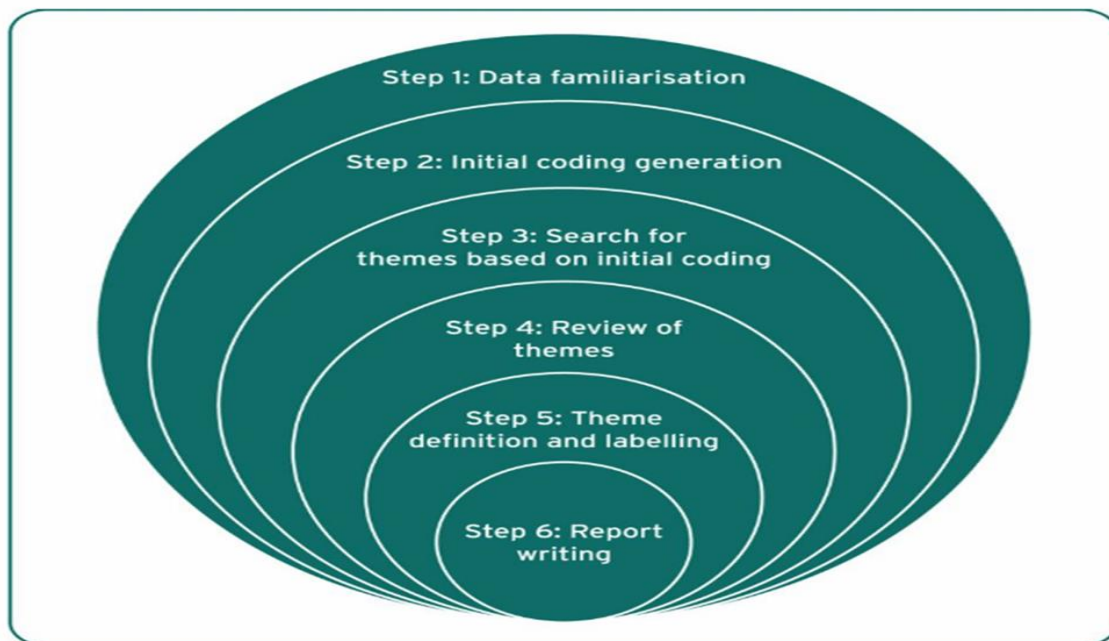
data from three transcribed interviews using the thematic analysis technique to write a qualitative report on the findings on how culture can impact one's identity.

### Thematic Data Analysis of the Research

Thematic analysis involves constantly switching between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data you are analysing, and the analysis of the data you

produce (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Figure 1 represents the six-stage process of conducting a thematic analysis by

Barun and Clarke (2006), which was used as the qualitative foundation for this research study.



**Figure 1: Adopted from Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology's six-stage process. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>**

### Data Familiarisation

To do a thematic analysis, one has to get acquainted with the data given. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as an ‘immersion’ of the data set by the researcher, which is done by ‘repeated reading.’ To effectively complete this approach, hard copies were printed of the transcribed interviews of three of my colleagues, and the data was re-read, searching for meanings and patterns. This matter was done thrice to familiarise myself with the data content (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Generating Initial Codes

Coding is generating labels to describe the contents of a line or two of the transcript (Howitt, 2013). These codings are not the themes the research will develop but a stage in working towards those themes (p. 183). This was done by annotating the text with two highlighters and a pencil. Words were colour-coded, and notes were scribbled on the hard copies of the transcribed interview to capture meaning and similarities through the three transcripts.

### Searching for Themes

This process was coded and collated, and different codes were identified across the data set. This segment, which refocuses the analysis on the broader level of themes rather than codes, involves sorting the

different codes into potential themes and collating coded data extracts within the identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this stage, a T-Chart was created for each transcribed interview to analyse the codes and capture and draw the significant themes from annotating the transcription interview's hard copies. Braun and Clarke (2006) give credibility to this methodology at this stage of the thematic process by stating that it may be helpful at this phase to use ‘visual representations’ to help you sort the different codes into themes by using tables or mind-maps, or write the name each code and a brief description on a separate piece of paper organising them into theme-piles (p. 80).

### Reviewing of the Themes

After listing the most commonly generated codes from the data set in the T-chart for each transcribed interview, the data was further reviewed for similarities among each generated code in each transcription. The data colour-coded each code or phrase, e.g. If music appeared at least more than once across each transcribed interview, the music was assigned a specific colour only for that theme, e.g. blue. This was done to draw out the common themes in the data analysis. The study by Braun and Clarke (2006) strengthens the research by stating that data within themes are coherent and meaningful. Table 2 represents themes from each transcript that was transcribed.

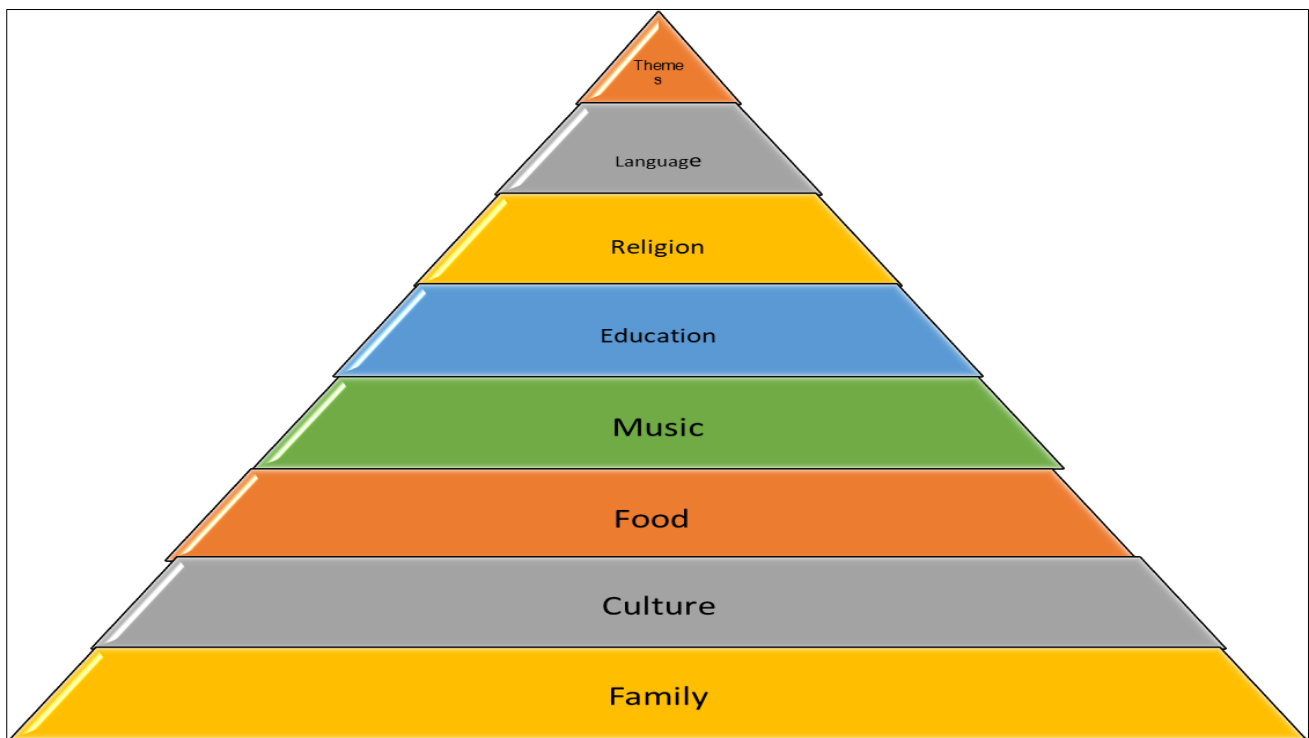
**Table 2: Themes Coming from Each Transcript**

Transcript 1	Transcript 2	Transcript 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Music</li> <li>➤ Food</li> <li>➤ Language</li> <li>➤ Multicultural experiences impact one's Identity and self</li> <li>➤ Slavery</li> <li>➤ Colonization</li> <li>➤ Cultural customs</li> <li>➤ Traditions passed down by Ancestors</li> <li>➤ Sports</li> <li>➤ Dance expressions</li> <li>➤ Culture is dynamic</li> <li>➤ Religion impacts culture</li> <li>➤ Family values</li> <li>➤ Poverty impacts culture</li> <li>➤ Education</li> <li>➤ Ancestors pass on Traditional customs through culture</li> <li>➤ Family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Multicultural experiences influence one's self-identity.</li> <li>➤ Language</li> <li>➤ Discrimination between cultures</li> <li>➤ Religion</li> <li>➤ Freedom of Speech</li> <li>➤ Cultural customs</li> <li>➤ Culture impacts work ethics and motivation</li> <li>➤ Interdependent cultures differ from dependent ones as it concerns Identity</li> <li>➤ Food</li> <li>➤ Social expressions differ in cultures</li> <li>➤ Music</li> <li>➤ Multicultural experiences can make one's self-identity more cultural.</li> <li>➤ Culture Shapes One Identity</li> <li>➤ Education</li> <li>➤ Family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Cultural customs</li> <li>➤ Parents passing on traditional customs</li> <li>➤ Culture Shapes One's Identity</li> <li>➤ Interdependent culture shapes one's Identity</li> <li>➤ Family</li> <li>➤ Education/Teaching</li> <li>➤ Religion</li> <li>➤ Respect for elders</li> <li>➤ Multicultural experiences can impact one's self Identity</li> <li>➤ Communication affects culture</li> <li>➤ Cooking/Food</li> </ul>

**Theme Definition and Labelling**

Accuracy and precision are the watchwords of any academic research to give it scientific credibility (Howitt, 2013). At this stage of the thematic analysis, labelled themes were identified, and each theme was based on the generated codes from the data set. This is

illustrated in a triangular diagram. The significant themes garnered from the data set were used to hypothesise how these themes demonstrate how cultural variables influence self and identity. Figure 2 represents the thematic foundation and significant themes from the transcripts.



**Figure 2:** Depicts the significant themes from the transcription adopted from Reinecke, K., & Bernstein, A. (2013). *Knowing what a user likes: A design science approach to interfaces that automatically adapt to culture. MIS Quarterly*, 37(2), 427–453. doi: 10.25300/MISQ/2013/37.2.06

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The final stage of the thematic analysis justifies the research focus themes that one's culture does influence one's concept of self and Identity. A few themes emerged from the data set to validate this premise. The major themes presented as hypotheses from the data set are culture, music, and family. The themes identified were used within a qualitative context through one's self-identity and culture. The study's result revealed that the focus of the research study was to include self, identity, and culture from an interactionism perspective, combining family and music, which can be shared as a profound connection shaping identity, culture, and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the relationship between family and music is deeply interwoven, influencing life's emotional, cultural, and social aspects. Music acts as a bridge, connecting generations, fostering shared memories, and expressing the essence of familial bonds.

### Self

The self refers to an individual's perception of their identity and personal characteristics. It encompasses self-awareness, self-concept, and the internal narrative that a person constructs about who they are. The self is influenced by individual experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts (Leary & Tangney, 2012).

### Identity

Identity refers to the distinct characteristics, roles, and affiliations that define an individual or group. It encompasses personal attributes, social roles, and group memberships, forming a self-concept that guides behaviour and interactions. Identity is self-ascribed and shaped by societal recognition, evolving through personal experiences and social contexts (Stets & Burke, 2000).

### Culture

Culture has impacted my identity, who I am, my perspective, and maybe even my world perspective on issues (N. Schoenfeld, Transcript, October 10, 2018, L 129). J. Asare (2018) interviewee said, my culture has affected my identity in several ways: how I see people, in the way I relate with, people in the way I communicate with people .... So, my culture has affected my identity greatly (L 131–L 133). One of the major themes reflected in the data set was culture and its influence on individual self-construal. All three interviewees mention this in the transcribed interview. This demonstrates that the participant's reflections on the research questions correlated with the research goals and gave it credibility that the culture in which one is born does crystallise one's self-identity. A participant from Gower's (2018) transcribed interview further iterates this emphasis by describing how culture has influenced identity by stating that my culture shaped and formed me. Growing up, there was only one way to do things (L 121–L 122).

### Interactionism

Interactionism is a theoretical perspective in sociology that emphasises the importance of social interactions in the development of meaning, self-concepts, and societal structures. It posits that individuals actively construct their social realities through face-to-face interactions, interpreting and assigning meaning to the behaviours, gestures, and symbols encountered in daily life. This perspective underscores social life's dynamic and reciprocal nature, where society and individuals continuously influence and shape each other through identifying self, identity, and culture (Carter, M. J., & Fuller, C. (2016). Through interactionism, a symbolic interactionism study emerges. As a result, it is grounded in symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory that explores how people create meaning through their social interactions, symbols, and shared experiences. It focuses on understanding human behaviour, identity, and social processes by examining the meanings individuals attribute to their interactions and environments (McAdams, 2001).

### Family

Bronfenbrenner's theory constitutes that a person's development is impacted by the microsystem, which is the individual's immediate environment, e.g. family, and the mesosystem, which encompasses the interaction of the different macrosystems in which the developing child finds himself. He believes this significantly impacts the developing child's identity (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). His ecological theory of human development reflects how the microsystem of the child's environment, like his family in a cultural context, influences one's persona or identity. The data set highlighted that the microsystem of the family was an artistic theme that contributed to one's self-perspective. J. Asare (2018) participant reflected when asked what important aspect of your culture is essential. The central area or aspect of my culture that is very important to me is... the family element. My family believes so much in the family. We keep a close-knit family, communicate with each other, have each other's backs, and support each other in every activity. It is a culture in my place. They say you do not throw family away (L 46–48).

### Music

Ethnomusicologists believe an essential part of identity formation is the creation of cultural boundaries. Through music, ethnic boundaries are cultivated between groups, thereby shaping and strengthening social identities (Lidskog, 2016).

The relational theme between music and identity was reinforced as a key instrument in shaping one's cultural identity through the data. When the participant from R. Gower (2018) was asked what aspect of the different cultures you have experienced is essential to you, the participant replied by saying, one aspect that culture has had on me has always been music .... ok yes, my culture, so basically I am talking about American

music .... Going along with American classic rock music and those sorts of things would be like YouTube videos and other things. So, I find a lot that if I am having a bad day or something, you know, just turning on the radio and listening to music from home... watching some music videos from home, those are the sort of things that can cheer me up (L 76–L 83).

## CONCLUSION

The culture in which people are born may be viewed as a psychological phenomenon impacting how they define their identity. Culture and the development of self-intertwine in explaining a person's behaviours. The identity of self-development is responsible for framing humans' mental lexicon and their cultural perspectives.

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