**Response 1:**

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**Is there an essentially western concept of the self, and is it different from non-western notions?**

When questioning the idea of a ‘western concept of the self’ it is important to first define it. A collective understanding of this would be elusion to an egocentric self, which in summary sees the person seeing itself as the dynamic center that interacts with the rest of society. The parallel to this would be the idea of a sociocentric self which would be defined as how the person interacts with society not the other way around (Geertz, 1974). This would be said to be a non-western notion of self. I, however, am inclined to follow Spiro’s idea being that there are no essentially western concepts of self (Spiro, 1993).

Through ethnographic case studies it can be argued that there’s evidence that reinforce this ‘essentially western’ perception of self. In Karen Ho’s Liquidated she queries the way these investment bankers of Wall Street, juggernauts of western culture, are concerned with their self-attributed “smartness” and how that aids them in succeeding in their sector (Ho, p. 40, 2009). They are egocentrically concerned with how their personal self can impact the financial markets although the system has marked them out to be “the smartest” it is ultimately them that have determined that, not society. Herein lies a classic example of the western concept of self surely. However, it is important to understand the limitations of this case study. This one sect of western society; a capitalist endeavor that obviously would emblazon this concept of self-concern as a product of its environment. It does not speak for the whole of the western world, there are many examples of sociocentrism found within the west.

The opposing of this conception, the idea that non-western societies would be more sociocentric can be seen in kinship structures in Bali. A society viewed mostly as socially concerned with each other can be found to have “ego-centered” formations in their language when describing kinship terms which may also reflect in the society they live within (Geertz, c1973). Additionally, a case study conducted into the way European American mothers and Central American mothers at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Bethesda, USA found that although European American mothers tended to instill individualism into their children more so than their Central American counterparts, they still would encourage similar traits in their children (Leyendecker *et al.*, 2002) thus it seems to vary case by case not necessarily always by intrinsic eastern and western perceptions.

Confusion between the self that anthropologists discuss causes these problems (Bloch, 2011) and in the western / non-western Dichotomy. It ultimately comes down to the idea of ‘Episodics’, those who do not value defining the self through autobiographical moments seen in their lives and Diachronics, those who do (Strawson, 2004).

Overall, how the society an individual lives in interacts with places value on self-reflection is what defines someone’s self-perception, not some ‘essentially western’ or ‘non-western' contributor.

**Response 2:**

**Is Childhood a universal stage in the life course?**

It is not presumptuous to assume that childhood is one of the cultural universals in the life course, however the concept of childhood varies vastly from culture to culture and even within the same culture over the course of time. There’s no true definition of childhood that would encompass all societies or even define how different cultures view the progression of a human being. Childhood, therefore, may not be a universal stage.

Cultural shift on the view of childhood was observed in the transitional periods from Medieval Europe, where children were dismissed and there was little to no concept of childhood, to Renaissance Europe where it could be argued influenced the modern day conception of childhood in the majority of the western world (Ariès, 1962). Some societies may even begin to place children as equal to adults such as the monks of Tibet selecting the next Dalai Lama, a religious leader in Buddhism, through Reincarnation; children born with that of all the past memories of the previous Dalai Lama (Gupta, 2002) thus making them distinctly separate to what many here in Britain would call a child.

Returning to the concept of reincarnation not just in Tibet but throughout most of South Asia case studies see children recounting memories from a past life challenging the idea that ‘memories’ perse don’t come from something these children have experienced in during the stage in life of childhood as many western cultures would argue. As Gupta writes in his article ‘Reliving Childhood’, “The age classes that so shape the experience of childhood in the West are neither natural nor universal. There may be other ways of organizing children’s activities and children’s abilities rather than by chronological age.” (Gupta, p. 52, 2002). The inability to answer what childhood is contributes to its lack of universality. When different societies, namely southern Asian societies in contrast to western European ideas, cannot come to an agreement on what exactly childhood is it becomes impossible to call it a universal stage.

Childhood may not even be perceived within some cultures. One such example being the Piro people of the Amazon. Babies are said to be ‘helpless’ (translation of the native term “wamonuwata”) and not a part of the “kinspeople”, they only have the potential to become one (Overing and Passes, 2000). Elsewhere on the continent in north-eastern Brazil are the groups of children who perform manual labour from as young as 7 and at the latest 14. In their culture this is seen as an essential form of education for the children and an essential stage in childhood and their moral education in order to gain “coragem” or courage (Mayblin, 2010). Both examples convey the diversity between cultural and social perceptions of childhood. What can be described as the devaluing of babies and child labour whilst alien to us are valid steps of progression for these South American children. When confronted with many juxtaposing life stages it’s difficult to say with certainty that ‘childhood’ is universal.

Ultimately, with many pieces of evidence showcasing how difficult it is to see where childhood can even begin to be defined, start and end, viewed and valued it is perhaps not fair to say that childhood is a universal stage in the life course, rather that, childhood is understood very differently across different societies and therefore the only true universal fact is that from birth, the physical human body will age.

**Response 3:**

**In what ways do debates about personhood shape contemporary social and political debates?**

Debates about personhood, more specifically defining what it means to be a person and who or what can be classified as such have a profound effect on wider interactions between social and political institutions (Taylor, 1985). Within contentious issues such as human interaction, disabilities and arguments over the conception of life in relation to personhood influence beyond an anthropological sphere into much more polemic ones in society.

Such debates that can be observed in the American concern of the lives of disabled citizens and the many steps taken to ‘correct’ them through technology. The example of how hearing aids or ‘stimoceivers’ help people hear and by extension communicate therefore contributing to their personhood (Wolf-Meyer, 2020). The idea that technology become integral to the devloping certain members of society into people sometimes juxtaposes the traditional political neoliberal believes that personhood is defined by self-expression and as Wolf-Meyer says in his article ‘Facilitated Personhood’, “…explicit technologies of facilitation are taken as varying from these norms. This can result in the apperception of ‘disability’; it can also lead to forms of discrimination and bias.” This showcases that even through medical advances to bring disabled people within American society the traditional liberal political belief of many citizens reflects in their interactions with other people, i.e., the defining of personhood, and because people differ in what is the norm they are thus contributing to social discrimination.

Additionally calls to grant foetuses ‘personhood’ in America shape the political debates over abortion rights as the word entered the mainstream with debates over whether abortion is murder (Gersen, 2019). Moreover, the act of granting personhood to foetuses allows for political influence and control over women in society as seen in debates centred around black women performing them by themselves during the period of slavery became a tool for them to counter control held over them by slaves’ masters. Then, in contemporary America when politicians limit access to abortion it represents power over black and brown bodies (Davis, 2019). Whilst this link may be tenuous and a stretch, it still highlights how defining what can be attributed with the term ‘personhood’ carries heavy political implications for the everyday lives of people in a country, America in this case.

In summary, constituting the ‘person’ and how they are formed involve interaction between multiple parties of people. When abnormalities in personhood or debates on personhood in each society are questioned it inevitably establishes a new landscape for political debates to take form because they are revaluating, in essence, what it means to be a person in their eyes.

**Response 4:**

Adjusting to university life was a dramatic change in pace compared to anything I had experienced before. Not just my anthropology degree but everything that came with it. Not once in the first 18 years of my life did, I ever move house, let alone live by myself. Emancipation came with newfound freedom that was both a blessing and a curse. Academics to me had never been so independent and free and truthfully, I had no initial strategy.

I think the best anecdote that summarises how the first couple weeks of academic life at university went for me was a conversation I had with my flatmates in Week 2. One of them is an exchange student from America, in her third year, and very experienced with academics. I was stood with another one of my other flatmates watching her lecture on Witchcraft and Religion just out of mild boredom when I noticed her writing down things the lecturer was saying. I questioned her, “What are you writing down?”

“I’m taking notes.”

“Notes?” I replied in disbelief. I was mortified but maybe not quite so as my two flatmates who stared at me as they realised that I, in fact, did not know that lectures were more than just watching the recorded videos.

Conversations like these, with many others, both outside and on the Social Anthropology 1A course helped me to develop practical steps for completing my work. I now, find it helpful to on one page of A4 do my essential reading and write a one sentence summary of every page or so. I then, go into watching the lectures and note down any gaps in the reading and analyses on them.

My main aide in this degree has been the tools that help me stay motivated. Previously in my old institution my procrastination was ultimately what got the best of me but what has helped here is getting excited about the material I cover. Having never done anthropology, or even a social science before, it was so interesting to learn about other cultures. The lecture on gender and sexuality, and more importantly the reading “Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship” by Aimee Meredith Cox really caught my attention. The assigned chapter, chapter 4, opened with a vulgar poem by LaTonya (Cox, 2015) and was the most interesting reading, partly due to shock factor but also because of the theories it posed. Black women caught between sexuality and gender (seen in the later masculine presentations of lesbian women in the homeless shelter [Cox, p.176, 2015]) expanded on topics I was already interested in but expanded on them.

Applying this same passion to learn topics I found difficult such as Personhood articles (Bloch, 2011) or less interesting ones helps tremendously. Reading around the topic or applying them in wider contexts such as political ones due to my inclination from my combined politics degree but irrespective of that fact anthropology and the ethnography that constitutes it helps study the discipline because it realises it for me. Anthropology is founded on human experience and that is simply what I’m doing now.

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