

SELF Project Line 6: Individualization and Social Morality

Dissertation projects in this project line will investigate the relationship between **self, social morality, and solidarity** in advanced welfare societies. As Music (2014) put it: "The values of the society we live in, and the kind of social messages we receive, have a profound impact on how self-reliant and selfish, or kind and altruistic, we are" (p. 169). This is not only true for our culture as a whole, but also for different subsystems of the society (welfare system, economy, politics, family), which activate different aspects of the self. Likewise, societal change alters the balance between different aspects of the self. According to sociological research, current social change in many Western welfare societies coincides with an **increasing relevance of independence**, individual autonomy, and competition in social interaction systems. In many conservative and social-democratic welfare systems, **social policy regulations are increasingly individualized** and privatized, while the related discourse stresses individual autonomy and responsibility (e.g., Bothfeld & Betzelt, 2011; Macnicol, 2015). These developments bring about increasing inequality.

Psychological research, in turn, has shown that higher economic inequality leads to an independent self-construal, whereas lower economic inequality leads to an interdependent self-construal (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). Based on the mutual constitution of culture and self, we propose that social relationships in many parts of the society are increasingly dominated by the logic of economic rationality ("**economization**") as well as individual accountability, the dictum of self-optimization and pursued individual uniqueness (dimension of "**individualization**", Scherger, 2010), with self-construal being one of the crucial mediators. Evidence from previous studies suggests that such a development can foster strategic rationality, moral decay, and antisocial behavior in social interaction or against third parties (Herrmann, Thöni, & Gächter, 2008; Falk & Szech, 2013; Falk & Tirole, 2016; Wang, Zhong, & Murnighan, 2014; Music, 2014; Utz 2004). However, these effects strongly depend on the very institutional conditions in social systems, such as markets, as well as on personal contexts of individuals. In any case, interdependence as being manifested in social solidarity, personal as well as institutionalized commitment could lose ground. Rational reasoning in terms of individual performance and success may even affect intimate and parent-child relationships (Wimbauer, 2012). At the same time, increasing economization and individualization may contribute to the **emergence of (especially right-wing) social movements**, which seemingly oppose economization and individualization by propagating a strong we-group with pronounced interdependent ties. These groups may be attractive to those who, faced with increasing requirements to act independently and rationally, feel overwhelmed and at the risk of failing (Rippl & Seipel, 2018).

More specifically—given that the development of the self is the basis of individual agency (I) as well as the capability to cooperate in social interaction systems by following social rules (Me) —one may ask questions like the following ones: What does the "economization" of social interaction imply for individual development as well as for welfare societies as a whole in the future? Do the moral bases of Western welfare societies crumble? Which socio-cultural and institutional settings in social interaction systems can foster the relevance of social morality and norms of cooperation in individuals' behavior?

In order to answer such questions, dissertation projects could follow a **threefold research strategy**. First, self-perception and individual decision-making under different institutional settings (e.g., market and non-market conditions) can be investigated through an online-survey applying a vignette design. Second, experiments can be conducted to study public-good cooperation in social interaction systems. For this purpose, different stimuli connected to independence and interdependence frames (priming) could be given, while accounting for heterogeneity in individual traits. Third, the relationships between features of, or changes in, different welfare systems (or other subsystems) and the discussed dimensions of the self could be studied based on suitable (secondary) survey data.

Possible dissertation projects on individualization and social morality:

- Does fostering interdependence also foster pro-sociality? Investigating socio-cultural and institutional factors.
- What effects do institutional and discursive economization as well as individualization (e.g., in the area of welfare, or other areas) have on the independence-interdependence dimension of the self? Tracing changes and (or) comparing societies.

Potential supervisors:

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