

# Research reveals the cultural origins of self-esteem

13 February 2014, by Jacqui Bealing



What gives you self-worth? University of Sussex research shows our self-esteem is based on the prevailing values of our culture.

(Medical Xpress)—Whatever our personal values, we largely base our self-worth on living up to the prevailing values of our culture, new University of Sussex-led research reveals.

Sussex social psychologists Dr Vivian Vignoles and Dr Maja Becker collaborated with a global team of researchers to address a long-standing debate about what influences our [self-esteem](#). Their findings are published online this month (12th February, 2014) in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

More than 5,000 adolescents and young people in 19 countries spanning Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South America, Africa and Asia took part in the research. Participants were found to base their self-worth on living up to the prevailing values of others in their cultural contexts, but—surprisingly—their own personal values appeared to have little or no influence on

self-esteem.

Dr Vignoles explains: "We can all think of different things that make us see ourselves positively, whether it is succeeding at work or school, our relationships with friends and family, behaving morally towards others, or having the right possessions—as well as other aspects of ourselves that we may feel less good about. But what gives these things their importance?"

"An intuitive answer would be that every individual bases their self-esteem on living up to the values that they personally see as most important—and this has been the dominant view in psychology for over 100 years. But firm evidence for this idea has been surprisingly elusive.

"Our new findings paint a very different picture, suggesting that it is the value priorities of others in the surrounding context, not the individual's own value priorities, that predict which aspects of ourselves will give us the greatest sense of self-worth."

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK), the research was conducted by the Culture and Identity Research Network, directed by Dr Vignoles.

Research participants were initially asked to list ten aspects of themselves in answer to the question "Who are you?". Their answers were very wide ranging, including descriptions of their personality characteristics, important relationships, social roles and group memberships. Participants were subsequently asked: "How much does each of these things make you see yourself positively?" The researchers used further data from the questionnaires to predict which aspects of themselves each participant would see as providing the greatest sense of self-esteem.

The results showed that participants derived the

most self-esteem from aspects of their identities that best fulfilled the values of their surrounding culture. For example, participants in cultural contexts where people most emphasized values such as self-direction and having a stimulating life (e.g., the UK, Western Europe, and some parts of South America) were more likely to derive self-esteem from controlling their own lives, whereas those in cultures where there was relatively more emphasis on values such as conformity, tradition, and security (e.g., parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia) were relatively more likely to derive self-esteem from doing their duty.

Dr Vignoles comments: "Popular psychology and self-help books often seem to imply that people can build self-esteem on their own. These findings should remind us that no-one is an island. Building self-esteem is mostly a collaborative enterprise.

"Our research suggests that the self-esteem system is an important way in which individuals internalise the values of their culture on an implicit level, even if they do not profess to believe in these values when they are asked explicitly. These subtle processes may encourage people to act in ways that are desirable in their society, and thus help to maintain social solidarity."

**More information:** "Cultural bases for Self-Evaluation: Seeing Oneself Positively in Different Cultural Contexts", lead authors Dr Maja Becker and Dr Vivian Vignoles, is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.  
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