

Who are you? People yearn for positive perception about themselves

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(Medical Xpress) -- People care about how others view them and will go to great lengths to repair negative perceptions, a new University of Michigan study found.

For [social acceptance](#), honesty and kindness—which researchers describe as communion traits—are more important for relationships than intelligence and ambition, both considered agency traits, says Oscar Ybarra, professor of psychology. Agency traits help people attain skills, talent and status.

"Social life pressures people to view themselves as possessing high levels of communion traits and to ensure that others have this perception as well," he said.

Researchers reviewed responses from 270 college students in the United States and Korea for two studies: one tested self-judgment and the other assessed people's displeasure and motivation to repair their reputations after accusations of not being honest or not being intelligent.

In the self-judgment study, respondents rated their traits for age 16, their current age and what could happen at age 30 for various tasks. Participants rated themselves higher in honesty and kindness than intelligence and ambition, and they also rated themselves higher on these communion traits than they rated other students at their universities, the study showed.

The second study looked at responses for two scenarios in which participants imagined themselves as the target of someone else's suspicions and accusations. The concerns involved others believing that one had cheated on an exam (communion) or that one had failed an exam (agency).

Students answered questions in response to the scenarios, including concerns with social acceptance and their reputation. Both Americans and Koreans were concerned with how others viewed their failures, but especially failures that involved their communion reputations.

The study also demonstrated that participants judged themselves as consistently maintaining their kindness and [honesty](#) traits across time, whereas they were more willing to judge their agency characteristics as varying more across time and situations.

The agency dimension deals with behaviors and characteristics that people develop over time and are associated with limited opportunities in which they can be expressed. Thus, there should be less pressure on people to judge themselves positively compared to the communion dimension, Ybarra says.

However, due to the importance people place on having social connections with others, judging the self as low on communion is risky, as is failing to address reputation concerns in this domain, he says. The social and moral aspects of one's reputation appear to trump how intelligent, skilled and ambitious one reports being or wishes to be.

More information: The findings appear in *European Journal of Social Psychology*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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