

Cross-cultural similarities in early adolescence

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Acquiring self-esteem is an important part of a teenager's development. The way in which adolescents regard themselves can be instrumental in determining their achievement and social functioning. New research from Concordia University shows that the way in which adolescents think about themselves varies across cultural context.

To compare how [teenagers](#) assess their self-worth, William M. Bukowski, a [psychology professor](#) and director of the Centre for Research in Human Development, examined responses from children in Montreal and in Barranquilla—a city on the Caribbean coast of northern Colombia. The study revealed significant commonalities, and some differences in the factors that these children considered to be most important when they evaluated themselves. Bukowski is the second author on the study, which was recently published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

The researchers examined how particular facets of the children's context—their location, their socio-economic status, and significant cultural characteristics—might impact the parts of their lives they consider to be most important when determining self-worth. They studied the responses of 864 early [adolescents](#) (aged 9 to 11), 317 from Montreal and 547 from Barranquilla. The numbers of boys and girls, and the socio-economic classes they represented—upper-middle and lower-middle—were roughly equal.

One of the most significant observations was that the girls' scores on

measures of self-worth tended to be higher. "Previous studies had found the opposite result, and this change may have to do with improvements in the status of women in recent years," says Bukowski.

Overall, the researchers found no differences between the participants from the two cities, which was somewhat of a surprise. There were, however, differences in each location between the children from upper- and lower-middle-class families.

"Children from upper-middle-class families were likely to consider social skills as the most important factor when evaluating themselves," says Bukowski. "If they felt they were popular or likeable, they were more likely to have high self-esteem. While they did consider their athletic and intellectual abilities, they seem to have understood that social skills are crucial for success among individuals of their class."

On the other hand, children from lower-middle-class families focused on evidence of their cognitive competence when assessing themselves to determine their self-worth. If they believed they were smart and successful at school, they were more likely to have healthy self-esteem. The study associates this trend with the emphasis on education as the key to self-improvement among members of this class.

This research provides valuable information for parents and teachers because it sheds light on the process by which children develop [self-esteem](#). They look at aspects of their lives, determine how well they're doing, and allow this to determine their self-worth. They also pick up on signals from their environments about which aspects of their lives should be most important in this evaluation.

Therefore, adults can help [children](#) to conduct more accurate self-assessments by reminding them of things they do well, and by helping them to focus on evidence of their achievements.

Provided by Concordia University

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