

# Dominant cultural values influence self-esteem in young people

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The respondents based their self-esteem on various aspects of their identity. The more closely these aspects corresponded to the value priorities of their cultural context, the more important they were for the individuals' self-esteem. Copyright : Jacqui Bealing.

Regardless of our personal values, we base most of our self-esteem on the fulfilment of the dominant values of our culture, reveals a global

survey supervised by Maja Becker, a social psychologist at the CLLE (Laboratoire Cognition, Langue, Langages, Ergonomie, CNRS / Université de Toulouse II-Le Mirail). The results of the study, involving more than 5,000 teenagers and young adults in 19 countries, were recently published online in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

We can all think of situations that give us a positive image of ourselves, such as success at school or at work, satisfying relationships with friends and family, living up to our moral standards in our interactions with others or having desirable possessions. We can also think of other things we are less proud of and that do not make us feel so good about ourselves. But why are they important? What are the factors that influence our self-esteem?

For the past hundred years, psychology has mostly assumed that individuals base their self-esteem on the fulfilment of the values they personally perceive as being most important. However, a worldwide survey of more than 5,000 teenagers and young adults, launched in 2008 and covering 19 countries in Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East, South America, Africa and Asia, casts an element of doubt on this widely-accepted hypothesis. The results show that the young respondents base their self-esteem not on their own personal values - which seem to have little or no influence on their self-regard - but on the fulfillment of the value priorities of other individuals in their cultural environments. The survey covered about 200 secondary school pupils in each country, most of them between 16 and 17 years of age. The researchers noted that their respondents' self-esteem was based, in all cultures, on four key factors: controlling one's life, doing one's duty, benefiting others and achieving social status. Nonetheless, the relative importance of each of these items for individual self-esteem varies between cultures. For example, participants in the survey who live in cultural contexts that prize values such as individual freedom and leading a stimulating life (in Western Europe and certain regions of South America) are more likely

to derive their self-esteem from the impression of controlling their lives. On the other hand, for those living in cultures that value conformity, tradition and security (certain parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia) are comparatively more likely to base their self-esteem on the feeling of doing their duty.

Seen in this light, self-esteem seems to be a mainly collaborative, as opposed to individual, undertaking. These findings suggest that the system for building self-esteem is an important channel through which individuals internalize their culture's values at an implicit level, even if they claim not to subscribe to these values when explicitly asked. These subtle processes can encourage people to act according to the expectations of the society they live in, thus helping maintain social solidarity.

**More information:** "Cultural bases for Self-Evaluation: Seeing Oneself Positively in Different Cultural Contexts," lead author Dr. Maja Becker, published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, [DOI: 10.1177/0146167214522836](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167214522836)  
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