

# People with a "bonding identity" cope better with structural disadvantage

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In a paper published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, NCCR LIVES PhD candidate at the University of Lausanne, Mouna Bakouri, demonstrates how individuals from socially disadvantaged populations who define themselves as connected to a group are better prepared to deal with barriers encountered in their life-course. Their self-esteem is indeed less harmed as a result of stronger sense of efficacy. Her findings

call for renewed integration policies.

Social psychology has already shown the strength of group identification to reduce the feeling of social devaluation. In her paper published online on 12 February 2015 Mouna Bakouri goes further and argues for the "empowering role of bonding identities" when facing barriers to one's life projects. She suggests that these bonds stem not only from collective identities bound to ethnic origin or occupational status, but also from relational identities based on family and friends. Comparing individuals who consider these kinds of identities as most important in their self-definition with individuals who chose a more personal self-definition (like a [personality trait](#) or activity), Mouna Bakouri observed that connectedness has a buffering effect on efficacy beliefs and against life-course stressors.

Transition periods often highlight structural constraints. This is particularly the case between adolescence and adulthood and during integration into the labour market. Mouna Bakouri's study focused on 365 individuals in Switzerland aged 15 to 30. This sample was composed of young employees, apprentices, and pre-apprentices who were still looking for an apprenticeship at the end of their compulsory schooling. A majority of pre-apprentices had an immigrant background versus only 11% of the employees, reflecting the structural hardship faced by non-nationals in the transition to work.

The participants were invited to complete a questionnaire which addressed their financial worries, level of [self-esteem](#), perceived coping efficacy, perceived barriers and project appraisals. Using an adapted version of the "Who Am I" questionnaire, the survey also collected data on the participants' most meaningful definition of their identity, which was then coded in order to distinguish between individuals with a bonded self and those with an un-bonded self.

The first hypothesis was that participants from socially disadvantaged groups perceive higher barriers. This was especially true for people with financial worries, pre-apprentices and foreigners; age and gender showed no effect. The second hypothesis was that perceived barriers negatively impact self-esteem. This model was significant, regardless of professional status, nationality or level of financial worries. The third hypothesis is at the core of Mouna Bakouri's paper: when perceived barriers are high, people with a bonded self proved to maintain a significantly better self-esteem than individuals who defined themselves at a personal level. This may be explained by the fourth and last hypothesis, whose model was also successfully tested: the positive role of bonding identities in protecting self-esteem is linked to an enhanced belief in coping efficacy.

"The existence of social bonds, independent of the source of those bonds, seems to be a key resilience factor when one's capacity of action is structurally constrained", Mouna Bakouri concludes. She adds that the results of this study "have a crucial implication for interventions with youth aimed at strengthening their sense of agency and efficacy to negotiate critical life-course transitions." This contradicts the "liberal credo" of individualism, suggesting that interventions "should work with group identities and not against them."

**More information:** Mouna Bakouri, Christian Staerklé (2015). "Coping with Structural Disadvantage: Overcoming Negative Effects of Perceived Barriers through Bonding Identities." *British Journal of Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12102

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