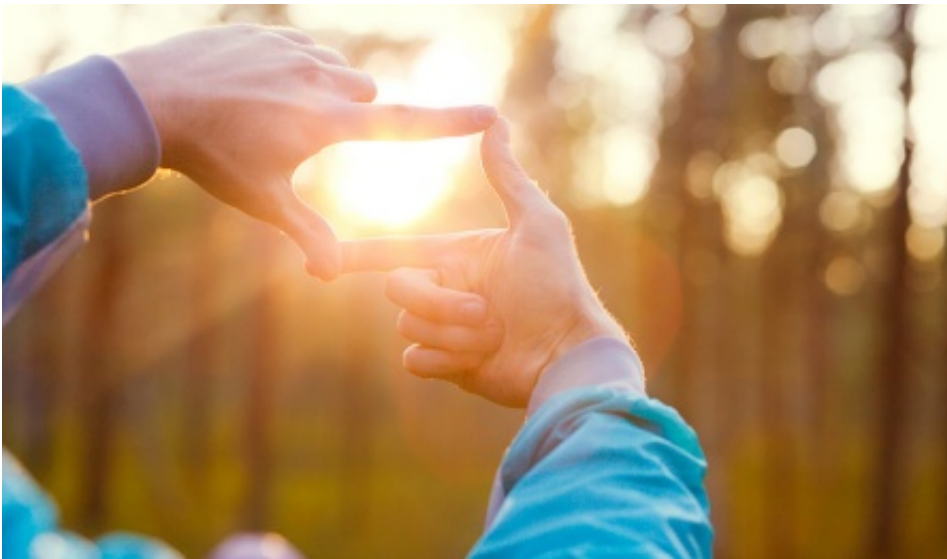


# The match between early family experiences and self-esteem contributes to how people view themselves

March 3 2015, by Bert Gambini

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Although some children emerge from cold and neglectful family environments as adults with high self-esteem, a new study by a University at Buffalo research team suggests those people may still be at a relative disadvantage, with a foggier sense of who they are.

However, adults with [low self-esteem](#) who grew up in the same type of negative environment actually had relatively high self-clarity, according to the study's findings.

Self-esteem and self-clarity are each unique components of the self. Self-esteem refers to a person's overall feelings of self-worth; self-clarity reflects the extent to which self-views are clearly and confidently defined. Greater self-clarity is associated with better psychological adjustment, lower neuroticism, better academic performance and a lower likelihood of anger and aggression in response to failure.

Previous research has shown that higher self-esteem is associated with higher self-clarity, so people who feel good about themselves tend to have a clearer sense of who they are.

"But we thought there might be more to the story," said Lindsey Streamer, a UB graduate student in the Department of Psychology and co-author of the study "Who am I? The interactive effect of early family experiences and self-esteem in predicting self-clarity," published this month in *Personality and Individual Differences*.

"Drawing on previous research, we know that getting feedback that's inconsistent with self-esteem leads to reduced clarity," she said. "So people with high self-esteem who get messages contrary to their overall self-evaluation tend to have conflicting interpretations of the self, or low self-clarity."

That research, however, focused on feedback that was isolated, like a recent comment or something else that was "very much in the moment," said Mark Seery, a UB psychologist and co-author of the current study.

"We wanted to look more at ongoing, chronic social feedback, such as early family experiences," Streamer said.

A questionnaire determined the degree to which subjects were raised in a warm and loving environment as opposed to one filled with chaos and conflict. Subjects also completed assessments that measured self-esteem

and self-clarity.

Similar to previous research conclusions, the results suggest that inconsistency between how you think about yourself and what you're hearing from others predicts relatively low self-clarity, but the authors say this study is the first to examine the ways in which early family experiences may influence aspects of self-clarity.

"This work shows that even those people who manage to get out of that relatively negative time and view themselves as good, worthwhile and capable people are still not sure of the entire picture of themselves," said Seery. "So they're held back a little bit in that sense because those early family experiences can really be lasting."

But curiously, the results also suggest that those with low self-esteem who grew up in a caring environment are particularly likely to have low self-clarity.

"One of the things this work highlights is how important consistency is for people," said Seery. "We have a strong motive to expect consistency and to find consistency. It includes us and how we fit in the world, and that can lead to some counterintuitive findings like we have here."

That motivation for consistency is present regardless of whether people view themselves positively or negatively.

"If I think I'm a good person and have positive expectations, I think good things are going to happen to me. So it makes sense when they do," said Seery. "But if I have low [self-esteem](#), things like getting a 'A' on an exam or having a secret crush ask me out may feel good, but they don't entirely make sense to me, because I don't expect to be treated as though I'm a person of worth."

It's the inconsistency that contributes to this lack of clarity about the self, the researchers say.

"Our work is another striking demonstration of that basic idea, but extending it into early family experiences," said Seery.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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