

Group memberships boost self-esteem more than friends alone

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Belonging to multiple groups that are important to you boosts self-esteem much more than having friends alone, new research has found.

CIFAR fellows Nyla Branscombe (University of Kansas), Alexander Haslam and Catherine Haslam (both University of Queensland) recently collaborated with lead author Jolanda Jetten on experiments to explore the importance of group memberships for self-esteem. Working with groups of [school children](#), the elderly, and former [homeless people](#) in the United Kingdom, China and Australia, their studies showed consistently that people who belong to many groups, whatever their nature, had higher self-esteem. However, this relationship was only apparent when people considered the group in question to contribute to their sense of who they were—that is, when they were a basis for social identity.

"This is in our view promising and suggests that boosting group memberships is quite a powerful way to make people feel better about themselves," Jetten says.

The researchers compared group memberships to the number of friends people had, and found that having a large network of friends did not predict self-esteem, but belonging to multiple groups did. The authors argue that groups provide benefits that interpersonal ties alone do not; namely, meaning, connection, support and a sense of control over our lives.

"Groups often have rich value and belief systems, and when we identify

with groups, these can provide a lens through which we see the world," says Jetten. For example, religious groups or organisations striving toward a goal such as reducing poverty can provide a greater sense of purpose.

The new study could signal a shift away from thinking about self-esteem as something that comes solely from inside of us. "Rather than fetishizing self-esteem, a much better and probably healthier and more effective strategy is to encourage people to have rich social lives and multiple sources of social engagement. If you do that, one important by-product will be improved [self-esteem](#), but there will be lots of other benefits too," Haslam says.

Research on groups represents a major theme in CIFAR's [Social Interactions, Identity & Well-Being](#) program. Previous research in this area by members of the group and their collaborators has shown that those who belong to groups tend to be healthier, happier and live longer. For example, a recent study by CIFAR Global Scholar Alumna Katharine Greenaway found that belonging to groups increased people's sense of personal control, and in turn their health.

The research was published in *PLOS One*.

More information: *PLOS One*, journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0124609

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