Unlike Americans, Australian self-esteem has stayed the same since the 1970s

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Australians in the 1970s and 1980s were no more or less fond of themselves than Australians of the same age in the 2000s and 2010s.

Consider three propositions about how Australians see themselves.

1. Young people today, with their preening selfies and their sense of

entitlement, have a higher opinion of themselves than previous generations.
2. Young people today, with their precarious futures and increasing levels of anxiety and depression, have more self-doubts than previous generations.
3. Young people today, living in a more and more Americanised culture, are developing an increasingly brash and inflated sense of self-worth.

It is hard to see how all of these propositions could be true, and a recently published study indicates that they are all, in fact, false.

Takeshi Hamamura and Berlian Septarini conducted a quantitative review of 141 studies that assessed self-esteem in Australian samples. Together these studies included 66,776 high school and university students or members of the general community. All completed a widely used self-esteem scale between 1978 and 2014.

The researchers explored whether average scores on this scale changed systematically over the 36-year period, from the Fraser years to the Abbott era. Rising or falling scores would reveal increases or decreases in Australians' average self-esteem. A curved trajectory would suggest something more complex: perhaps a nation buoyant with pride, or deflated, during the Howard years.

The historical trajectory of self-esteem that the researchers found was as flat as the Nullarbor. After controlling statistically for factors such as the gender and age composition of the samples, there was no relationship whatsoever between self-esteem scores and the year in which they were obtained.

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Students grooving to the Bee Gees or convulsing to the Sex Pistols in 1978 reported the same mean self-esteem as their One Direction- and Beyoncé-loving coevals in 2014.

Propositions one and two bite the Nullarbor dust.

This research follows up studies conducted elsewhere that have come to different conclusions. In particular, psychologist Jean Twenge carried out several influential investigations of self-esteem in the USA. Her findings documented significant increases in average levels of self-esteem among American undergraduates and school children, beginning in the 1960s and 1980s, respectively.

Those provocative findings had several consequences, not all of them beneficial. They encouraged researchers to examine historical change in other characteristics such as narcissism (rising) and empathy (falling). They led to a recognition that culture influences personality, and that personality is malleable at a population level. But they also generated some generational caricatures.

Twenge, for instance, wrote critically of "Generation Me" and its supposedly inflated, entitled and social atomised sense of self. She argued that a culture of unearned self-worth - in which, as the Dodo bird said in *Alice in Wonderland*, "everybody has won and all must have prizes" – was responsible.

Some researchers argued that Twenge overestimated the magnitude of any generational differences in self-esteem. However few have asked the basic question whether such historical changes occur outside the American context.

Hamamura and Septarini's research is important for this reason. It shows convincingly that any rising tide of self-esteem which may have occurred

in the USA – whether small or large – is not replicated in Australia. Whatever cultural trends have driven rises in American self-esteem have not gained traction Down Under.

One implication of increasing average self-esteem levels in the USA and stable levels in Australia is that these levels have diverged over recent decades. Average self-esteem scores of American and Australian undergraduates were similar in the 1970s. However in the past decade the American average easily outstrips the Australian.

Where self-regard is concerned, Australians have not become more American but less. Proposition three is incorrect.

Hamamura and Septarini interpret the divergent historical trajectories of American and Australian self-esteem as a consequence of cultural differences. Australian culture, they argue, embodies "horizontal individualism", in which concerns for equality and independence coexist. The Scandinavian countries best exemplify this cultural tradition.

By contrast, the USA embodies a more "vertical" form of individualism. Cultures of this sort value the development of a unique sense of self relative to others, and are accepting of inequality.

Australian culture is no doubt susceptible to all manner of influences from across the Pacific. Rising self-esteem, and the apparent inter-generational differences in the sense of self that it brings, does not seem to be one of them. Where self-esteem is concerned, generational stereotypes appear to be even less true in Australia than elsewhere.

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