

## CITE AS:

Konrath, S. (2012, in press) *Self-esteem, culturally defined*. In *Cultural Sociology of Mental Illness: An A-to-Z Guide*, Sage Reference.

## Self-Esteem, Culturally Defined

### Overview

Self-esteem (also known as self-regard) is defined as people's evaluations about their own worth, competence, and desirability. Self-esteem is a personality trait that has been widely studied by psychologists and other social scientists. There are different kinds of self-esteem. *Explicit measures* ask respondents to self-report to what extent they agree that they are a person of worth, that they have good qualities, and that they have positive attitudes toward themselves. *Implicit measures* of self-esteem assess beliefs about the self that operate below respondents' conscious awareness. Explicit and implicit measures of self-esteem are not correlated with each other. This means that people can believe that they have high self-esteem but have low self-esteem "deep down." Similarly, people might think that they have low self-esteem, but they may secretly love themselves.

### Culture and self-esteem

There are ongoing debates about whether the desire to hold positive self-views is a human universal that is valued in most cultures, or whether it is much more valued within individualistic nations. Individualistic nations promote a sense of uniqueness and independence from others, while collectivistic nations promote interpersonal connections and a sense of interdependence with group members. People from individualistic nations (e.g. United States, Canada) typically score higher on explicit self-report measures of self-esteem compared to people from collectivistic nations (e.g. Japan, China). They also tend to be more likely to self-enhance (e.g. exaggerate their abilities) when given the opportunity. People from more collectivistic nations place a high value on self-criticism and self-improvement, rather than self-esteem.

One attempt at resolving the debate has been to say that there is a difference between personal self-esteem and collective self-esteem. *Personal self-esteem* is how people typically define self-esteem – as applying to their individual characteristics and abilities. *Collective self-esteem* is a feeling of self-worth that is based on group memberships (e.g. family, occupation, gender). Even though people from collectivistic cultures have lower personal self-esteem, they do tend to have high collective self-esteem, and they also selectively self-enhance on collectively-relevant attributes. Thus, some researchers argue that what appear to be cultural differences in self-esteem are actually measurement artifacts, and that all people need to feel good about themselves, whether they define their self as a separate individual, or more broadly to include relationship partners and group members. These scholars point out that the evolutionary function of self-esteem is to allow people to know to what extent they belong in their social environment, so it has to exist universally across cultures. Interestingly, when implicit measures of self-esteem are compared across such cultures, no differences are found.

### Acculturating self-esteem

Several studies have found that immigrants who have lived in Western individualistic nations for longer have higher self-esteem levels. Longitudinal studies that track individual immigrants over time find that their self-esteem levels rise after living in Western individualistic nations for as little as 1 year, and that this rise is associated with levels of acculturation. In other words, the more people internalize their new culture's norms and values, the more their self-esteem grows. In addition, immigrants to Western individualistic nations who primarily speak the language of their new homeland have higher self-esteem than immigrants who primarily speak in their original language. Taken together, such studies suggest that it is possible for self-esteem to rapidly change within certain cultural contexts.

### **Debates about the value of self-esteem**

Self-esteem is typically seen as a sign of robust mental health, but there are debates about its value, even with individualistic cultures. Even though the term "self-esteem" is relatively new, philosophers have long debated the relative merits of loving oneself. For example, Aristotle weighed in on whether self-love and selfishness were synonymous, and concluded that self-love could be a virtue or a vice. The New Testament writers seemed aware of the human tendency to prioritize the self, and commanded people to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:31).

The modern *self-esteem movement* began in earnest 1969 when psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden published, "The Psychology of Self-Esteem." Boosting self-esteem was viewed as a panacea for all personal and social ill: "I cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molestation—that is not traceable to the problem of low self-esteem" (Branden, 1984, p.12). Branden's ideas caught on quickly, and soon became implemented in the American educational system.

There are indeed a number of documented benefits associated with high self-esteem. People with high self-esteem have better psychological health; they have lower depression and anxiety, and also report higher life satisfaction. However, there are also negative connotations of high self-esteem (e.g. vanity, egotism, arrogance, narcissism), which is precisely why more collectivistic cultures discourage it. High self-esteem has been linked with defensiveness, prejudice, aggression, and over-optimistic task persistence. In addition, in some cases unrealistically positive views of the self (i.e. grandiosity, delusions) can signal mental illness. Some researchers see high self-control and high other-regard as more prototypical of mentally healthy people, regardless of cultural background.

Whether one values self-esteem or not, it is interesting to note that there have been increases in explicit measures of self-esteem in American culture from the 1960s to the present. Research that examines such changes in collectivistic cultures is needed.

### **Sara Konrath**

*University of Michigan*

*University of Rochester Medical Center*

### **See Also:**

Acculturation

Grandiosity

Self Help

### **Further Readings**

- Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological science in the public interest*, 4(1), 1-44.
- Branden, N. (1994). *The six pillars of self-esteem*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Heine, S. J., & Lehman, D. R. (2004). Move the body, change the self: Acculturative effects on the self-concept. *Psychological foundations of culture*, 305-331.
- Heine, S. J., Lehman, D. R., Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1999). Is there a universal need for positive self-regard? *Psychological Review*, 106(4), 766.
- Jordan, C. H., Logel, C., Spencer, S. J., & Zanna, M. P. (2006). Nonconscious Self-Esteem: Is There Something You're Not Telling Yourself? In M. P. Zanna, S. J. Spencer & M. H. Kernis (Eds.), *Self-esteem issues and answers: A sourcebook of current perspectives*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Sedikides, C., Gaertner, L., & Toguchi, Y. (2003). Pancultural self-enhancement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(1), 60.