

The Low Self-Esteem Indian Stereotype: Positive Self-Regard among Indigenous Peoples of the United States¹

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Abstract

This research compares the cultural meanings that shape the construction and experience of self-regard in Indigenous Peoples of the United States with the conceptualization of self-esteem prevailing in the mainstream psychological science and cultural context. The Indigenous self seems to become meaningful mainly in reference to relationships with one's people and to one's involvement within the goals of their communities. This contrasts with the emphasis on independent self striving for self-enhancement typically reported within the mainstream cultural settings. The conception that emerges from this study treats self-regard as general feelings of self-worthiness, which are an epiphenomenon of being a valuable member of one's community and of living a good balanced life according to one's cultural ways. In the process of one's self-regard formation, the individual reflects the evaluations that their community expresses about their deeds. Indigenous people who identify with their respective cultures thus do not need to worry about their low self-esteem as measured and defined by the mainstream society, but rely rather on their respective traditions.

A relatively vast amount of literature has concluded that minority group members have lower self-esteem because (1) they are looked down upon by

others; (2) they look down on themselves by internalizing the negative attitudes of society towards their group; or (3) they compare unfavorably in important evaluated respects with the prestigious majority.² Assuming that persons who meet the above conditions have low self-esteem is very reasonable, but this study does not assume that these conditions automatically apply to every ethnic minority member. Certain conditions must be present for the above-mentioned principles to apply. These are as follows: a person (1) must be fully aware of what the broader society thinks of their group; (2) must agree with this judgment; (3) must believe that this judgment is personally relevant to themselves; (4) must highly value the opinions of others who think negatively of them, and (5) must compare themselves with the majority group.³ Moreover, membership in a stigmatized group can protect the self-esteem of those who attribute negative feedback given to them due to prejudice against their group. This includes those who selectively devalue those dimensions on which their group fares poorly and value those dimensions on which their group excels.⁴

While the literature deals with ethnic minorities in general, this study is examining self-esteem in Indigenous Peoples of the United States in particular. A widespread notion that Indigenous people have low self-esteem exists in the United States and educators, scientists, as well as lay people generally accept this notion.⁵ This issue seems to be more complicated, however. Due to the ethnocentrism of contemporary psychology, differences in self-esteem tend to be interpreted according to an assumed norm that originated in Western society and that took up a strong meaning in the United States.⁶ This norm stems from an image of self as independent, autonomous, and separated from others and from social context.⁷ The view of independent self motivates individuals to identify positively valued internal attributes of their self, express them in public, and confirm them in private. Those persons tend to develop social psychological mechanisms enabling them to maintain and increase their own self-esteem, which became gradually integrated into the mainstream culture.⁸

Since Indigenous cultures, as opposed to the mainstream one, traditionally emphasize different aspects of self, such as collectivism rather than individualism. If programs designed to help Indigenous children with their low self-esteem are not culturally responsive, they can even damage the children's self-esteem. Indigenous students are, for example, often reluctant to be singled out for attention or may lack a competitive drive that can be easily interpreted as signs of low self-esteem. These same behavior patterns can be actually contributing to Indigenous self-regard, however, and be a reflection of their traditional upbringing.

On the other hand, it is important to understand that since views of self are shaped by culture, especially by immediate individual reality in which a person lives, through gradual socialization and acculturation, most Indigenous persons live by the meanings and practices of multiple sets of cultural contexts. The reality of Indigenous groups in the United States is influenced by the mainstream society in many ways, from media to institutions such as schools. As a result, most members of contemporary Indigenous communities have been to a certain

degree assimilated into the mainstream culture. Indigenous persons who were raised in the traditional ways of their people and those who would like to promote and follow the ways of their ancestors, need to be assured, however, that their way is equally valuable as any other way (and it may be better for them in particular). The mainstream psychology then needs to free itself from ethnocentrism in order to arrive at understanding of the human experience (not only experience of a certain group of people) and in order not to take part in oppressing people of other cultures. Pertinent programs in education and elsewhere would then reflect this emphasis on cultural responsiveness.

A literature review reveals that if one critically analyzes the psychological research to date, they could not conclude that Indigenous students have problems with self-esteem. There are various problems with psychological studies of Indigenous self-esteem, such as using culturally inappropriate testing procedures with problematic content. Some of their items are even contrary to traditional Indigenous values and behavior such as those asking for competitive comparison of an individual with others instead of a comparison with one's previous achievements and emphasizing cooperation within a group.⁹ Several other studies document that the results concerning Indigenous self-esteem are inconsistent and ambiguous.¹⁰ Fourteen years ago, a couple of scholars suggested that Indigenous children referred more frequently to kinship roles, traditional customs, beliefs, and moral worth in their open self-descriptions than White children did and that Indigenous children also showed greater external orientation.¹¹ These results suggest that aspects different from those proposed by the mainstream theories are important for Indigenous self-regard.

In order to explore the possibility that the concept of self-esteem itself, as defined by contemporary mainstream psychological theories, may not be relevant enough to the experiences of Indigenous people, this study explores how self-regard is constructed and experienced among them. In spite of the vast diversity of the 562 Indigenous nations, which are living in the area that is now United States, on theoretical level, using a common term for those nations concerning their conceptualization of self-regard is conceivable.¹² There are more similarities among them than between Indigenous Peoples and the mainstream population in general or in comparison to the mainstream theories of self-esteem.

Within the mainstream settings, self-esteem is commonly understood as a judgmental process in which individuals examine their performance, capacities, and attributes, according to their personal standards and values, and arrive at a decision of their own worthiness.¹³ The present study uses the term self-regard instead of self-esteem when referring to the experiences of Indigenous people because—as will be explained further in detail—the process leading to feelings of self worth as understood by Indigenous traditions is quite different from self-esteeming as understood within the dominant society. The conceptualization emerging from this study treats self-regard as general feelings of self-worthiness

as opposed to the concept of self-esteem that needs to be high and thus self-enhanced.

Exploration of the Specifics of Indigenous Self-regard

In order to arrive at a better understanding of the Indigenous conceptualization of self-regard, two qualitative studies were conducted to explore the most important sources of Indigenous self-regard and how it is constructed and experienced. Since the studies involved almost identical methods, their results will be discussed together. The participants were 129 Indigenous students of Haskell Indian Nations University¹⁴ (121 respondents) and the University of Kansas in Lawrence, (8 respondents) (the first study involved 12 students and the second 117 students).¹⁵ They were asked to think of several situations, events, or circumstances that happened within the last year and made them feel good about themselves (that is feel pride, or self-respect). Then they would explain specifically what about the situations made them feel that way. The further described results are representative of these respondents only, but some common emerging themes can be offered as hypotheses for further studies of Indigenous self-regard as arising from traditional worldviews of Indigenous Peoples. The students are of 39 nations, but since the Navajo and Lakota constituted the largest groups within the research sample, special attention will be devoted to these nations within the following discussion of the results.

When processing the 333 answers given within the second study, 21 categories condensing the content of the responses concerning aspects important for one's self-regard were created together with the category—Other. Each answer could fall into as many categories as applicable. Please, see the following list of more detailed descriptions of each category and frequencies with which the answers related to these categories. (Since this kind of analysis was not conducted within the first study—because of small number of respondents involved there—all numbers referring to the frequency of individual categories within the discussion relate to the second study only, unless specified otherwise.)

- PEOPLE - Other people mentioned within the responses (as opposed to only the individual involved with the response). 154
- ACADEMICS - Acceptance to a college, grades, graduations, awards 123
- RELATIONS - Being embedded in relationships (with family, friends, community...), including being unconditionally accepted by others. 104
- OVERCOMING - Overcoming difficulties, doing something they could not do so far, proving to be more capable than they/others thought. 79
- CULTURE - Preserving cultural identity - being proud of their culture, practicing it, being with other Indigenous people, representing

their tribes, fighting “Indian” stereotypes.	49
· HONORED - Their efforts being recognized by others, being honored, being chosen to accept a responsibility.	43
· HELPING - Doing something for the those outside one’s family.	36
· TRAITS - Having special talents, abilities, and positive traits.	35
· GOALS - Reaching goals and fulfilling personal desires.	30
· SPORTS - Being good at sports, being a part of a successful team.	28
· WORK - Having a job, working hard.	23
· ROLES - Fulfilling their family and culture roles and duties.	22
· SELF-RELIANT - Being independent, not relying on their family financially any more.	20
· IDENTIFICATION - Seeing others doing well, succeeding, etc.	1
· FIRST - Doing something that was not possible for their families/ communities so far.	1
· POSSESSIONS - Possessing stuff.	10
· BELIEFS - Spirituality, religious beliefs and practices.	8
· PRIDE - Making others proud of them.	8
· PHYSICAL - Losing weight, living in a healthier way.	4
· SEPARATE - Being separate from others, free to do whatever.	3
· BETTER - Being better than the others.	2
· OTHER (answers that fell into this category only).	5

While the mainstream theories conceptualize self-esteem as based mostly on an individual’s, personal traits, abilities, and accomplishments, evaluated by the individual themselves, the Indigenous concept of self-regard has much broader scope of sources stemming from the holistic Indigenous worldviews emphasizing relationships. The category “People” was represented overwhelmingly most frequently when 154 responses fell into this category. The next most represented category was “Academics” (in 123 cases), but when the respondents went on explaining why an academic achievement was important for their self-regard, they very frequently referred to their family and people again. The third most frequent category was “relations” indicating that in 104 cases, the respondents felt good about themselves because of being embedded in various kinds of relationships. Only 35 responses related to having special talents, abilities, and positive traits, while 30 responses related to reaching one’s goals and fulfilling their own personal desires.

Mainstream self-esteem scales items do refer to other people, but in doing so, they reflect the notion that others serve as a standard according to which an individual assesses its worth. The individuals either compare themselves with the others to see if they are better or worse than them, or the individuals worry about being viewed as inferior by others. While competitive comparison of oneself with the others is not generally a part of traditional Indigenous worldviews,

worries about social acceptance of this shallow kind are not the most important source of Indigenous self-regard either. Detailed analysis of the importance of others for the Indigenous conceptualization of self-regard follows.

Within the results of both the present studies, a strong expression of the importance of one's family can be seen (the first parts of the following responses illustrating this point give the situations in which the persons felt good about themselves and the second parts give the pertinent explanations):

“Being with my children and grandchildren...I feel good about myself because I was a single mom many of the years of raising my children. I had very little money but lots of love and lots of loving friends around. My children grew up to be good people who love me and who are still close. My grandchildren are their children and they love me too, and enjoy spending time with me. That makes me feel very good because, in spite of all the times I screwed up, I must have done a few things right.”

“Being complimented about my son...this was the best [of all the situations when I felt good about myself]!! It made me happy to know that someone noticed my son's actions/behaviors (sharing, good behavior, intelligence) and complimented me about him. I felt many things when this person mentioned my son; pride, love, happiness, etc. because I work hard to be a good mother and this person acknowledged this.”

In these responses, it can be seen that the person's self-regard reflects their conviction that they succeeded in fulfilling their parental roles. While the first cited person recognizes it from her children and grandchildren's behavior herself, somebody else acknowledges the other as a good parent. The importance of acknowledgements expressed by others for the Indigenous conceptualization of self-regard will be discussed in detail later, but it should be noted here that while both the cited answers were given by women, men also expressed their pride in being a good parent or uncle. Overall, there were 22 cases emphasizing fulfilling their roles and duties, including other roles than parental.

Giving birth to a child is perceived as a contribution to the well-being of the whole family, as expressed in the following situation and explanation: “I had a baby-girl in November of 2001. It made me feel good because it changed everybody's lives because she is all of my family's light.” When talking about their self-regard, some persons identified themselves with their families so strongly that they did not really make a distinction between their person and their family. For example, one person said, “People hold my family in high respect and honor. We are respected because of our traditional ways and our curing.” While the above-mentioned answers indicate the importance of one's family roles and relationships implicitly, others express the importance of being imbedded

in relationships explicitly. Another person replied, "I got to stay with my little brother [for two weeks]. I missed him a lot and it was nice to see him again."

From the above examples, as well as from many other explanations, it can be seen that family is not perceived only as the nuclear family, not even only as extended family, but much more broadly. The following person perceives her accomplishments as belonging to more than her and promoting more than her immediate family: "In 2001, I was selected as Haskell's Student of the Year and asked to serve as the graduation commencement speaker. This made me feel good because I felt like I was representing my family, my tribe, Haskell athletics, as well as Haskell. This was an honor."

A similar response was: "I was proud of being accepted into the Indigenous Nations Studies [program] at the University of Kansas. I feel [that] I am furthering my education for my tribe, as well as all Native American people" provides further background also for comprehending another kind of quite frequent explanation for being proud of one's achievements. These persons (12 cases) felt good because of being first of their family, generation, or community, to achieve such an academic recognition: "I am going to Haskell. I was the first kid in my generation to attend any college in my family." Answers of this kind do not contain any further explanation, and this actuality may result from assuming that the answer is self-explanatory. Given the regrettable well-known high college or even high-school drop-out rates among Indigenous students, it can be safely assumed that finishing or even beginning college studies is a great accomplishment for a majority of Indigenous people. Some could propose that by saying that somebody was first of their family to go to college, those who gave the answers implied being better than other members of their families. The illustrative responses given within the previous paragraph suggest, however, that the respondents rather imply that they got to represent their family or community in their accomplishments.

Representing their families or communities outside of them is important for Indigenous students also because this way, the outside world gets to see that Indigenous people are capable. Even more importantly, other Indigenous people can learn from these examples that academic or other accomplishments are available to them too. The following answer illustrates these points: "Received things that not very many Native Americans receive at my school...it felt other Indians know that we aren't as bad as we all thought. That we can get recognized for our accomplishments." The widespread lack of recognition of Indigenous people's accomplishments or contributions within the United States society contributes also to generating answers. One example is, "I felt good about myself when I was introduced to reading materials that demonstrated Indian contributions in America because my knowledge was very limited in this area." Many answers given within the survey indicated that Indigenous students did have doubts about their capabilities at first. One person said, "Completing school...I found I was smarter than I thought I was." While some of these answers are related to

the fact that the students had to struggle hard to accomplish at school for whatever reasons. One person said, "Graduating from high school...I had to struggle to graduate and when I finally did it, it made me believe I can do anything," others were rather under the influence of somebody who let them know that they did not believe in them: "Graduated early...none of the faculty thought I could do it." This kind of answer emphasizing that Indigenous students felt good about themselves after they found out that they were more capable than they thought was one of the main explanations given for pride in academic accomplishments voiced throughout both the studies. The category "overcoming" with its meaning: overcoming difficulties, doing something they could not do so far, proving to be more capable than they/others thought, was the fourth most frequently used one with 79 responses of the second study falling into it. Concerning the first study, finding that they were smarter than they had thought was the most frequently given reason for feeling good about one's academic achievement, when three of the 12 respondents gave it.

The contrast of negative perceptions of oneself with the surprise of performing well is similar to the also quite common explanation that someone felt good about themselves when people treated them with respect after a series of bad experiences. For instance, "I met this man ... he is the first man to treat me kindly." After describing her experiences with her three previous husbands, alcoholics who beat her, this respondent continued, "My current boyfriend is a gentleman. He makes me laugh with his jokes and he is good to me. He can even cook! He thinks that he wants to marry me, but only time will tell, as we have only known each other for a little over four months." This example is very personal, and it also illustrates the importance of being desired as a life partner for one's self-regard. Within the studies, the importance and stupendousness of being treated nice and with respect was related also to various other situations, however. This finding can be related to the past and its impact on contemporary Indigenous communities (such as high level of social pathology), but also to the still ongoing prevalence of negative stereotypes and discrimination of Indigenous people especially within the mainstream education. It seems that the experience of academic inferiority combined with the discrimination against traditional Indigenous ways of thinking and behavior observed in mainstream schools continues to be important factor in construction of Indigenous self-regard.¹⁶

Since stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples negatively influence their self-esteem,¹⁷ as well as the expectations of others they have towards Indigenous people, the stereotypes in particular can be one of the underlying preconditions of the above-mentioned observations. Therefore, it is no wonder that actively fighting negative "Indian" stereotypes also contributes to positive Indigenous self-regard, as we can see in the following answer. "A white woman was making negative remarks about Indians. I educated her a little bit about my culture. She may not have cared but that is still one more person that knows something about us." As illustrated in the following response, expressions of racism are not limited

only to members of the dominant society. However one person said, "Ignoring racist remarks from other Haskell students,... I come from a Native family so I overlook them calling me a stupid white girl." All these answers are related to the fact that Indigenous people do not generally feel accepted by the dominant society. In addition, "Getting accepted to Haskell...make many, many new friends, different setting, now all Indians, few whites, before it was all whites, few Indians, I felt looked down on." From this answer it can be furthermore inferred that Indigenous students do not necessarily ascribe much weight to being accepted by the dominant society, and their self-regard may be rather nourished through their involvement within their own groups.

Many answers speaking about Indigenous Peoples in a collective way reveal the fact that in recent decades, the common experience and engaging in the struggle related to, for example, various federal Indian law and policy issues or Indian stereotypes, formed a common Indigenous identity among people of many tribal groups. On the other hand, community, which is mostly perceived as a certain tribal group or even a more specific group within a tribe to which an individual belongs, was mentioned even much more frequently within both the studies. Community improves one's self-regard through the support it provides. In one instance, "People in my community tell me to go farther," but also through contributions one can make to the well being of their community. One person said, "I worked with Native youth all year. I think in some small way, I made a difference in my community." Thirty-six responses indicated the importance of doing something for the others. These findings correspond with those of other scholars finding that young Indigenous women draw a strong relationship between their self-worth and their contributions to their family, friends, and their tribal society¹⁸ and that even Indigenous children who were found to have low self-esteem in relation to the public domain, usually had a very good self concept within their home and community.¹⁹

In many cases, the situations and reasons for feeling good about themselves did not directly involve the persons who gave them at all. This kind of answer was not given only by parents referring to their children, however (as could have been expected). Some examples of both the situations and explanations follow: "Seeing my younger sisters trying their best to be a better person." "My mom being happy, because after the divorce she had a rough time, it makes me feel good that she feels good." "I felt really thankful and proud when my parents were together again after they were close to divorce. They stayed together for life." "[My] little brothers both won at pow-wows. I was proud of both of them." This feeling good about somebody else's well-being or accomplishment was mentioned in 15 cases. Taking pride in somebody else's accomplishment is very deeply rooted within many traditional Indigenous communities.²⁰ It is even institutionalized in various ways there. For example, when somebody is recognized by an honor dance being dedicated to them, their family participates in the dance as an expression of their pride of him. A respondent described similar experience

of being honored. One person said, "My cousin got up and danced for me at a pow-wow." Overall, 43 cases related to one's efforts being recognized by others, being honored, and being chosen to accept a responsibility, which is perceived as an honor, too.

Indigenous practices honoring certain persons play very powerful role in the construction of self-regard, as described by Chief Luther Standing Bear, who watched Lakota Victory ceremonies as a boy. He said, "At these ceremonies, praises were sung for all our braves and it was there that the boys determined to be braves themselves some day."²¹ Standing Bear further described the Lakota Confirmation ceremony as being the most important one in the life of a Lakota child. In exchange for consecrating one's life to service and welfare of other members of his community, the one who takes the ceremony is placed in the highest social position. For him, it is a great honor to be asked for help. "The saying, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive,' is literally and practically observed."²² From this account, we can see that traditionally, the most respected people were those who worked for the well-being of their people. Being able to contribute to the well-being of somebody else, for example by tutoring, was the second most frequently mentioned source of positive self-regard. He said, "I worked all summer with youngsters. I felt that I made the younger teenagers feel good about themselves so it made me feel better about myself for doing that." The practice of young people taking care of those who were younger than them was mentioned also by Standing Bear describing the Lakota ways of his childhood. He noted, "The older boys took time to look after us [younger boys] and, in fact, all seemed proud to share in this responsibility."²³ This practice was thus a source of positive self-regard for the older boys and more will be said later about the fact that pride comes together with responsibility. While family involvement was okay most frequently mentioned as a source of self-regard throughout the studies, doing something for others was even more frequently declared to be the most important one. He added, "I feel happiest and proudest inside as a person helping others in any way I can."

While the situations in which people felt good about themselves most frequently fell into broadly defined social sphere directly, some of the situations related to the student's academic achievements, such as graduation or being admitted to Haskell, were explained in relation to others too. In eight cases, the respondents specifically pointed out that their accomplishment made somebody else proud. One person stated, "I came to college. My aunts were crying when they left because they were proud. I graduated high school. My mother wanted me to graduate and she passed away before I did but I still made her proud." This kind of answer is similar to the previously described ones where some respondents felt good about themselves because of what others felt or did. Unlike in the previous cases where the respondents were identifying with the others, in these cases, they are fulfilling their roles and making others happy by their accomplishments. These explanations are thus illuminating examples of how

Indigenous people comprehend their education as not only an individual issue, but rather as something by which they can contribute to the well-being and positive future of their communities. One person said, "Putting an application for college...that I could further my education to help my tribes."

While these answers clearly indicate one's interconnectedness with their community, this relationship does not relate only to people who are living at present. The tendency to relate one's own personal worth to the personality, virtues, strength, and stamina of their ancestors seems to be important Indigenous trait. Many people use a phrase like "I come from a strong people" when talking about their positive characteristics.²⁴ When using this formulation, the persons point out not only the fact that they could have inherited these desirable characteristics, but also that their personal worth is based on belonging to a long line of not only direct ancestors, but much broader group of, for example, people of prayer or leadership. Pointing out their ancestors collectively, Indigenous persons do not elevate themselves individually, but emphasize all their People. They are strong because their People are. Again, this would be a sign of the proposed interconnectedness of Indigenous individuals with their family, immediate and broader community, as well as their deceased ancestors. As far as the results of the presented explorative study are concerned, the interconnectedness with one's immediate ancestors is demonstrated for example in the formerly mentioned answer concerning making a respondent's deceased mother still proud by his graduation, and it can be seen also in the story of a person who draws on the strength of her deceased mother:

This was a sad time, but on the other hand, I know that it happened for the best. My mother had cancer in the spine for nine years... She went from a cane, to a walker, to a wheelchair, to finally being bedridden... Even though my mom was on pain pills and lots of other medication, including morphine patches, it would or never could get rid of all of the pain.... When she finally died, I knew that she had finally found some peace... I know that she is no longer in pain, and that makes me feel good. She always wondered why she went through all of this pain and suffering, but I know that when I ever feel down and depressed, that I can draw on all of her strength, just knowing what she went through. Mom died two days before I came to Haskell.

Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn explains the meaning of one's interconnectedness with ancestors. She says that what a modern Indian woman is doing is very likely dependent upon what her female ancestors and relatives did. She said, "She walks the road smoothed for her by the women who preceded her."²⁵

The community identity arising from all these answers is formed by socialization process developing a strong sense of responsibility to the group.

The individuals then come to feel that at all times they are representatives of the group. Indigenous people would often say, "I am the People"²⁶ as a result of this kind of identity. They would also feel many duties to fulfill within their communities and the more of these duties, the better one can feel about themselves, as opposed to the mainstream Western ideal of individual self-determination. Standing Bear explained this community identity in his own terms; "...in serving my tribe I was serving myself. If I failed in duty, I simply failed to meet a test of manhood, and a man living in his tribe without respect was a living nonentity."²⁷ The crucial importance of one's community is proved by the fact that for many Indigenous nations, such as the Cheyenne, the very worst punishment an individual could face was being banished from their community.²⁸

Concerning the Indigenous definition of community, although the dominant United States society members may define their community rather residentially, for Indigenous Peoples it means their People, no matter if they live close to them at present or not. The Indigenous community does not encompass only people (living and deceased), but also other living beings and their environment. This fact has important implications for the definition of Indigenous interconnectedness, which seems to be the most important characteristic of Indigenous worldviews. Understanding one's relationships is paramount to living a life in the beauty of balance and harmony.²⁹ Since relationships are keys to understanding the world, placing oneself within a system of relationships is crucial for achieving well-being and balance within oneself and within one's community that extends beyond human relationships.

Placing oneself within a system of relationships is crucial especially for persons who found themselves away from their original communities, such as students who began studying at a college far away from their homeland. Navaho surgeon Lori Arviso Alvord narrated that she overcame her feelings of inferiority and lostness in the strange world of Dartmouth College by finding her place in the coalescing community of the few Indigenous students there. This experience led her to honoring and cherishing her tribal membership and ultimately understanding that such membership is central to mental, spiritual, and physical health.³⁰ Cherokee leader Wilma Mankiller reports a similar experience of gaining the necessary self-esteem as a result of her frequent visits at an Indian center where she could share her life with teenagers from similar background and where she was later meeting with other American Indian activists.³¹ Haskell University freshmen also gave answers pointing out the importance of new relationships for their self-regard: "Making friends at Haskell...I thought it was gonna [to] be hard because of my light complexion."

How Indigenous self-regard is built on a sense of place where one belongs is expressed for example in the following answer: "I felt good as soon as I walked into the door of my home in Alberta, Canada. I think it was the feeling of belonging and being accepted even when I'm grumpy in the morning...(laughs.)" Within this answer, two important meanings can be seen. One of them is a sense of a

homeland as a source of one's identity, which is even more strongly demonstrated in the following answer: "I feel good when I go home to Coppermine. It is my homeland, who I am." Muscogee historian Donald Fixico explains, "The place of homeland is germane to the confidence and abilities of anyone, especially to those Indian professionals being challenged by linear skeptics ... place provides the physical quality to life, and provides security to mind and body."³²

The other meaning of home is a place where one is accepted unconditionally (which is humorously expressed as "being accepted even when I'm grumpy in the morning" within the above answer. While this acceptance is characteristically found within families, it does not necessarily have to relate only to one's home or family. As one respondent explained in detail, together with the acceptance comes a genuine interest in one as a person and in their well-being:

[I felt good about myself when] I could feel and see in the expression in the other person's eyes, face, and body language, tone of voice, and mannerisms that they genuinely cared about me as a person. It mattered to them how I felt, my opinions, what I thought and they took time for me. They were very patient and compassionately considerate. They really wanted me to overcome any obstacles that might be in my life. They were also very kind and not competing with me, nor did they wish me to compete with others. I did not have to be "good enough." I simply was accepted as I am. They were very supportive and willing to help. In helping me, they did not gain superiority over me. They saw me as equal...rather than looking for my weaknesses to make me seem inadequate so they could control or dominate me. They treated me with respect and love in its truest form.

This person went on to explain, "This is all about relations with other people, because that is the very most important for me. Other things such as accomplishments in school or sports are about doing, but relationships are about being. What you are is the most important for me concerning feeling good about myself."

Loving one another not only within one's family, but also with friends, getting their support and trust, as well as being able to do something for them, was emphasized quite strongly for example is the following answer: "Being asked to be my friend's maid of honor ... That really surprised me. I know she has a lot of other friends but it made me feel special and appreciated." This girl later explained all the responsibilities and hard work that comes with such a recognition and accepting a responsibility was indeed reflected as an inseparable part of being honored in many other answers. The fact that others believe that somebody is able to take on a responsibility was given as a source of self-regard for example in the following answer: "Being chosen as the varsity cheerleading coach...The fact that the school board trusted me and believed in me. (I was 18 for the first

time, and 19 the second.)” This answer is also illustrating the tendency that when somebody has a respected position, they do not explain its attainment in terms of their superiority, not even necessarily of their hard work towards the position, but in terms of others choosing them. “I was a captain and assistant coach of my softball team. The girls picked me.”

Indigenous students emphasize their traditional customs and beliefs indeed and when they find themselves outside of their communities and within the mainstream, they find preserving their cultural identity an effective buffer against loss of self-regard.³³ Emphasis on traditional culture as well as being embedded in one’s community (including homeland) was mentioned quite pervasively within the results of both the present studies (49 cases fell into the category of preserving cultural identity). Unlike people who live within their widespread mainstream culture, thus do not face many situations making them recognize their culture and its importance for their identity, Indigenous People are reminded of their distinct cultural heritage and the threats it faces quite often and in many ways. The conducted research revealed that Indigenous self-regard is also rooted in spiritual beliefs and practices. A person said, “I SunDanced for two days. I SunDanced for two days in July, and it was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. But I finished and in the end I was so proud of myself. I will never forget what that felt like.” Traditional Indigenous spirituality incorporates even specific ceremonies that, among other blessings, give one confidence, such as the Navaho *Kinaaldá* ceremony for young women.³⁴ Other answers given by Haskell students concerning spirituality indicated that today, spirituality of many Indigenous people incorporates Christianity.

While the above explanations emphasize the importance of interconnectedness for the Indigenous conceptualization of self-regard, they certainly do not try to suggest that traditional Indigenous people do not feel pride in their own accomplishments or in their personality. In fact, traditional Indigenous upbringing and education concentrates on one’s personal strengths very much, while marginalizing areas in which the child does not have much talent and competence.³⁵ “Native education was not a class education but one that strengthened and encouraged the individual to grow.”³⁶ The Indigenous way of positive reinforcement, however, is different from self-enhancement as understood within the mainstream American psychology and pedagogy. A person is praised for something good they have done. The right to hold a certain position of honor and responsibility must be well deserved. One person said, “Men in council were there because of merit. A man might be poor in goods, ... but he would sit with the council.”³⁷ The most admired merit for which one would become a council member is contributing to the good of one’s community, such as generosity. By accepting praise or honor, one is supposed to accept also responsibility for carrying the good example on. One’s generosity then should be ideally expressed in a way that is not even noticed by other people. One is supposed to give away in a manner that does not make the bestowed feel inferior

because of needing help. It is the choice of the bestowed to let others know about what had been done for them. Also, when giving, one is supposed to give the best and most they have.³⁸ This kind of helping the others out is quite different from the mainstream concept of “voluntary service” of some professionals, who are obliged to do some kind of voluntary service, which makes the volunteering mandatory, thus creating a clear contradiction.

Although individual qualities and rights were recognized in traditional Indigenous communities, children were not encouraged to feel better than the others were or strive for recognition of their superiority. Alvord explained, “We [the Navajo] were taught to be humble and not to draw attention to ourselves, to favor cooperation over competition (so as not to make ourselves “look better” at another’s expense or hurt someone’s feelings).”³⁹ Standing Bear stated, “In the course of learning, the strength of one small mind was never pitted against the strength of another in foolish examinations.”⁴⁰ This principle sharply contrasts with the false uniqueness effect typically reported within the mainstream United States society.⁴¹ Within a comparative psychological study, American students assumed that only 30 percent of people would be better than themselves on various traits and abilities as opposed to Japanese students, who made a realistic claim that about 50 percent would be better than themselves.⁴² Moreover, mainstream self-esteem scales, such as the Rosenberg-Heatherton and Polivy,⁴³ base some of their questions on comparison of the respondent’s brightness or worthiness with others. While Indigenous students mentioned numerous accomplishments and even excelling in competitive sports within the present studies, only one of them explained that he felt good about himself when he played sports because it made him feel superior (and only two cases referred to being better within both the studies altogether). Some could argue that the fact that students did not give feeling better than others as a reason for their positive self-regard can be caused by the fact that it is not desirable to express these feelings within their group. Even if it were so, however, this would support the claim that an Indigenous person does not feel appropriate when sticking to their superiority because traditionally, one would compare oneself with their previous achievements instead of comparing themselves to the others. In contrast, within the mainstream American society, one can feel free to be proud of winning something because of being best in a certain area. The actuality that the students did not want to reveal their feeling superior to others is quite unlikely, however, given the design of the study, which was strictly anonymous. Many Haskell students indeed resist being singled out as better than the others even though they receive worse grades than they deserve in result.⁴⁴

Looking at the issue of interconnectedness from a summarizing quantitative point of view, in the first study, 11 students out of 12 all mentioned their worthiness in relation to their relationships and family directly when listing the situations that made them think and feel good about themselves. The only remaining one was a person who listed five academic or athletic achievements, but when this

person went on explaining why it was important for her, all the explanations were related to her family, tribe, community, and all Native American people. Within the second study, only 21 out of the 117 respondents gave no answer that reflected them as being in relationships. The majority of these people gave only two answers.

In order to explain the delicate balance of independence and interdependence within Indigenous communities, it should be noted that on one hand, "Although Native Americans are individuals, the cultural emphasis is on the group over the individual so that collectivism is more influential; hence collectivism in such communalism is preferred over individualism," On the other hand, "Whereas group collectiveness is preferred for social acceptance and validated by kinship and symbolic kinship relationships, the tribal society acknowledges all members of the community."⁴⁵ The importance of the unique personality of each individual is reflected for example in the fact that Indigenous People could acquire names based on their predominating traits, abilities, or other personal characteristics. They would also acquire respect and status based on their generosity or bravery, while people displaying opposite characteristics would be despised. According to Lame Deer, a Lakota holy man, "...a man is what nature, or his dreams, make him. We accept him for what he wants to be."⁴⁶ Personalities of Indigenous individuals were thus acknowledged, but emphasis on collectivism was of greater importance than what an individual could achieve by themselves. Moreover, even those who achieved the greatest deeds or possessed the most positive personal traits were always considered in the contexts of their families, communities, or clans. The first principle of Powhatan education is bring about the development of persons who "knows his 'true self-identity,' that is, who understands his relationships to his or her clan, tribe and nation, and also to the earth, to animals, to plants, and to the Great Creative Power."⁴⁷ This definition shows that the Indigenous self is made meaningful in relationships with others in specific contexts, which strongly contrasts with the mainstream self-identity, which is attribute-based and thus relatively stable. The definition also puts the response of a Haskell student who said he felt good for who he was in a new perspective that proposes the possibility of individuality without individualism.

This concept further elucidates the fact that when surveying people during their late adolescence, many of which recently left home, an important issue for them was becoming independent. Answers documenting this actuality are: "Having a job...I didn't have to depend on my father to get money, instead I worked for it" or "I moved out of my parent's house. It felt good to be on my own. I liked knowing that I now had big responsibility to take care of myself." While most of the answers given within both the studies proved a widespread tendency towards interdependence among Indigenous people, do these answers prove the importance of independence in the sense of maintaining self-other boundaries? Not really because self-other maintenance is defined as distinctiveness in the sense of being separate from others and making decisions without respect to

others. These answers, however, could be more appropriately characterized as self-reliance, which is appropriate for young adults. Within the studies, 20 responses pointed out being self-reliant to be important. Only three responses referred to being separate from others, with freedom to do whatever the respondents wanted.

In one of these three cases, a respondent said that he felt good about himself when he could do what he wanted, not what others told him to do. When interpreting such a statement with regard to the unique circumstances in which many Indigenous people still live, however, a special meaning that was not originally obvious can be revealed. Seminole Chairman James Billie explained, "Members of the tribe, especially the younger ones, for far too long have had a defeatist attitude. They've been knocked down so often that many don't want to get up. ... I want to make sure they get the opportunity to do what they want ... and not what somebody else wants."⁴⁸ To put this struggle for independence in a historical perspective, it can be elucidating to hear Standing Bear describing his struggle for receiving title to his own land and American citizenship after being judged competent to manage his own affairs that "the day [I] received [my] papers and thus [my] freedom "from the iron hand" of the Indian agent was one of the greatest days in [my] life."⁴⁹ Considering this background proves beneficial also when interpreting the following answer of a Haskell student who said, "I felt good about myself when I finally realized that I can do anything with my life because there are no limitations in life. I read a quote somewhere that went like this...there are no limitations in life, it is we who create them for ourselves. It made me think and I felt more in control of my life." Especially for Indigenous people, feeling good about themselves when being in control of their own life can thus be a sign of becoming an adult or overcoming the influence of negative stereotypes and negative experience, not necessarily only of independent orientation. Concerning the person whose statement about feeling in control of her life is given above in particular, her four remaining answers all related to relationships with her friends, potential boyfriend, community, and homeland.

According to the mainstream self-esteem theories, which are reflected in pertinent assessment procedures,⁵⁰ physical appearance is almost as important as the factors of social involvement and performance for one's self-esteem. None of the respondents of the first study, however, mentioned any importance of physical appearance for their positive self-regard. Within the second study, three people declared feeling good about themselves as a result of losing weight and one as a result of living in a healthier life style. While two of the persons who mentioned losing weight gave no further explanation, the last one wrote that "Getting in shape...I felt good in losing weight, because I started to get self-motivated more and had a lot more energy." It is thus arguable that in those cases the most important meaning behind losing weight is concern about physical appearance.

Concerning the potential gender difference in the construction of Indigenous People's self-regard, such a difference was not found within the present studies. There was a certain difference concerning the sphere of academic achievement in the first study when four women but only one man mentioned this sphere. Within the second study, however, no gender difference concerning emphasizing academic sphere was found. This kind of gender difference could be real, because in today's society, women still have to struggle harder for their equal position in higher education than men do. Also, gender roles are not perceived as a dichotomy within Indigenous world-views. There could be larger gender differences as far as the dominant American culture is concerned, because of its tradition of superiority of men over women.⁵¹ Possible quantitative gender differences in self-regard would then be imposed on Indigenous people as a result of their assimilation into the mainstream society.

Concerning the overall relatively great importance of education for the self-regard of Indigenous persons in the sample, it can be ascribed to the fact that all the respondents were college students. These results thus do not contradict observations that many Indigenous people still do not find the mainstream kind of education very important and rewarding.⁵² Moreover, even people who are highly educated are considered to be fecund not for their professional expertise alone, but because of their personal examples.⁵³ Had this study been conducted within socio-cultural settings different from the higher education one, its results could have reflected the previously mentioned principles.

The fact that others recognize the talents of Indigenous persons that they may not themselves even think of seems to be an important factor in the construction of Indigenous self-regard. Alvord described that when her supervisor asked her if she ever thought about going to medical school, she immediately thought that she did not have what it took. Further more she admitted; "Yet, as soon as he spoke the words, I began to take the idea seriously. In traditional Navajo belief, speaking a thought into the air gives it more power."⁵⁴ Mohawk lawyer and scholar Patricia Monture-Angus described similar experience when she for a long time believed her high school counselor who told her that she was not smart enough to go to a university. Later, however, her self-regard changed, and she, a child of the streets, decided to work towards her higher education as a result of getting a good grade at her first examination in an introductory course she took at a university. Even more important than the mark itself, however, was the encouragement provided by her professor who made a comment expressing the professor's belief that she could do better. Monture-Angus began thinking that "Maybe I was more than a 'stupid Indian'! Every good grade I earned challenged the 'inferiority complex' I had been dragging around with me."⁵⁵ A student at The University of Kansas expressed the importance of other people's evaluation for her self-regard within the present studies stating that, "Receiving an award at KU...I do not feel like I deserve any big rewards. I feel very ordinary. Receiving the Nontraditional Woman Student

Award made me feel good about myself. The letters that were written in my behalf touched me deeply." Another person said that he felt good when he was considered a role model because it was a sign that the initial perceptions of him, which others used to have, have changed. He thus felt good about himself due his reputation.

This community encouragement of proper behavior contrasts with the above-mentioned mainstream concept of self-esteem. The Indigenous self-regard based on interconnectedness with one's community does not propose that the individual would do their evaluation according to their own standards. It is rather the community that evaluates one's deeds according to the community's standards and expresses a conclusion about one's personal worthiness (while the individual is also likely to internalize these standards). In the process of one's self-regard formation, the individual reflects their community's evaluations instead of using techniques for self-esteem enhancement or experiencing praise regardless of how well they do. The community standards of moral worth are also reflected in various ways of formal respect expression.

Although this study does not try to make arguments concerning the negativity or positivity of self-regard in Indigenous Peoples, at least one remark concerning the high or low level of self-regard needs to be done. Literature emphasizing the role of self-esteem defines it mostly as the total of positive evaluations of the self, implying that "good" self-esteem means "positive" self-esteem. Research conducted with mainstream Americans shows that vast majority of them really does not have low or "neutral" self-esteem, but much higher than where the theoretical midpoint of self-esteem scales is.⁵⁶ On the other hand, however, this emphasis on not adequate, but high self-esteem, can do more harm than good. Students participating in the introduced brief study said that they considered that kind of behavior, which usually results from high self-esteem, to be merely arrogance. People even use the apology that their antisocial behavior results from their low self-esteem, which makes them not oppressors, but victims of their self-esteem wound. The biggest danger involved in the pursuit of self-esteem, however, is that it will not do the good it promises to do for our health, happiness, and better society.⁵⁷ While there unfortunately still are many Indigenous children whose self-regard has been negatively influenced by social pathology existing within their communities or by prejudice and stereotypes, the mainstream standard of positive self-esteem may not be the desirable state either. Indigenous people thus do not need to worry even if it was true that they have lower self-esteem than members of the dominant society because it can actually mean that overall, they are the ones who have the adequate level of self-esteem, therefore they may be considered the healthy ones.

Moreover, for Indigenous people, low self-esteem is not really a problem, but rather an issue. One does not necessarily have to be worried about having low self-esteem as a child because they are not facing this issue alone. They have their family, community, and usually also a mentor to guide them through

their life as they are constantly growing in becoming good persons.⁵⁸ Low personal self-esteem in children can be thus seen as a developmental phase during which identifying with their parents or other family members can make the children more proud than their own self. Since they do not think of themselves as only their person, but also their family, community, and environment, their community self-esteem (when one feels good about themselves because their community or a narrower group is doing well) may also play an important role in balancing their lack of individual self-esteem.

Summary

The present research shows that ideas about the importance of high self-esteem emphasized within the mainstream United States society differ from the conceptualization of self-regard based on Indigenous traditions. While within the mainstream, the self is viewed as independent, attribute-based, and striving for self-enhancement, for Indigenous college students, the concept of self is made meaningful mainly in reference to relationships with others. Associated with this difference in conception of self are differences in construction of self-regard. The Indigenous self-regard seems to be predominantly based on the students' interconnectedness with their family and community, which is understood in a very broad sense, including deceased ancestors and entities that are not considered alive within the mainstream. The importance of preserving one's cultural identity and importance of learning who Indigenous People really are in contrast to "Indian" stereotypes or other means of Indigenous groups or individuals' misrepresentation are examples of other emerging specifics of Indigenous self-regard, as well as fulfilling one's responsibilities and roles and promoting others' goals. This interconnectedness with one's family and community, which is focused on maintaining harmony with one's environment, makes the Indigenous concepts of self-regard flexible and variable, depending on the context.

An important characteristic of Indigenous interconnectedness seems to be the fact that it is not the individual who is supposed to do their own self-evaluation, and it is not their own standards the evaluation is compared to, as asserted by some of the most influential self-esteem theories. It is rather the community that evaluates one's deeds according to the community's standards and explicitly or implicitly expresses conclusions about one's personal worthiness. In the process of one's self-regard formation, the individual reflects these evaluations instead of using techniques for self-esteem enhancement or experiencing praise regardless of how well they do. This study proposes Indigenous concepts of adequate self-regard as general feelings of self-worthiness as opposed to the concept of self-esteem that needs to be high and thus self-enhanced. Adequate self-regard is not a goal in itself; it is rather an

epiphenomenon of being a good member of one's community, living a good balanced life according to one's cultural ways.

Indigenous People who identify with their respective cultures thus do not need to worry about their low self-esteem as defined and measured by the mainstream society, but rely rather on their respective traditions. In order to avoid imposing foreign concepts, which can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy and therefore negatively affect Indigenous peoples self-regard, it is important for the mainstream psychological science to become culturally responsive and pay attention to the culturally specific Indigenous conceptualization of self-regard.

Notes

1. A substantial portion of the data used within this study was a part of a larger project led by Stephanie Fryberg and Glenn Adams, focusing on Indigenous identities in relation to perceptions of racism, reservation experience, self-esteem, and achievement orientation. I wish to extend my gratitude to the Indigenous students who participated in this research. Special thanks belong also to Professors Donald Fixico, Glenn Adams, Cornel Pewewardy, and Daniel Wildcat for their advice and support during my research, to Janice Downs for their consultations, and to Barbara Cunningham and Theresa Milk for their help with data collection.

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