

## Helpdesk Research Report: Self-esteem, shame and poverty

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**Query:** Provide an overview of key literature on the effects of shame and low self-esteem on poverty. What do we know about interventions that can be used to bolster self esteem?

**Purpose:** To inform scoping work for future poverty research.

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### 1. Overview

Shame and self-esteem have long been considered inherent components of poverty. Adam Smith first emphasised the relative character of poverty, arguing that poverty was better captured by indicators such as 'ability to go about without shame' than absolute material measures. More recently, this relational understanding of poverty has been championed by Amartya Sen who has argued that 'the ability to go about without shame' should be considered a basic capacity that should be incorporated into general conceptions of poverty (Sen 1993 cited in Zavaleta Reyes 2007). While material poverty is relative, Sen argues that poverty experienced as shame is absolute and universal (Sen 1983). The emergence of the term 'social exclusion' has similarly stemmed from a need to generate an understanding of poverty that is multi-causal, relational and incorporates less tangible aspects of poverty such as the loss of status and self-esteem (Levitas et al 2007).

The view that poverty is intimately linked to shame and low self-esteem is 'consistent with the prioritisation given by people with direct experience of poverty' (Walker et al 2007, p.2; Lister 2004) and has been highlighted by the World Bank's 'Voices of the Poor' project (Oduro 1999). A number of multidimensional approaches have emerged in recent years to capture aspects of poverty such as shame and self-esteem that are difficult to quantify (Alkire & Sarwar 2009). Despite the long history of shame and low self-esteem in conceptualising poverty, and their prominence in poor peoples' accounts of their own poverty, these concepts rarely play a role in intergovernmental policy debates (expert comments).

Poverty itself can create or contribute to problems of low self-esteem, although this link is by no means universal (Batty and Flint 2009). Tomlinson and Walker (2009, p.22) cite two studies that demonstrate a clear link between poverty and deteriorating mental health. It has been claimed that having low self-esteem, particularly in childhood, can increase future susceptibility to poverty by influencing 'the degree to which individuals assert agency, respond to risks and cope with covariant and idiosyncratic shocks' (Bird 2007, p.34). This in turn can create 'downward spirals of insecurity', damaging capabilities such as good mental health, social capital, civic engagement and political engagement that may help to extricate poor people from poverty (Walker et al 2007, p.6, Lister 2004, p.149). Since it is widely agreed that poverty is multi-causal, and that the various factors underpinning poverty tend to interact, it is difficult to argue that low self-esteem or shame have universal or predictable effects on poverty. Low self-esteem and shame are likely to be closely bound up with a range of associated factors such as ill health, poor educational outcomes, neighbourhood and parental income.

Attempts to draw links between poverty, shame and self-esteem have been hampered by a number of conceptual, measurement and theoretical problems. First, there is a lack of consensus in the academic and policy literatures about what self-esteem is (Emler 2001). 'The most significant division is between the view that self-esteem is a generalised feeling about the self, and the view that it is the sum of a set of judgements about one's value, worthiness, and competence in various domains' (Emler 2001, p.1). Walker has argued that 'very little is known about the way people in different countries experience and regard poverty'. An ESRC/DFID-funded research programme led by scholars from Oxford University, which began in 2010, will examine Sen's claim that the shame and stigma associated with poverty are universal. This project will also examine the effects of shame and low self-esteem on poverty (expert comments).<sup>1</sup>

Second, shame and self-esteem are difficult to measure. There have been some attempts to integrate qualitative indicators of shame and self-esteem into multi-dimensional poverty indexes (see, for example, Zavaleta Reyes 2007), but these methods are relatively new. Third, the links between poverty and self-esteem/shame have been theorised in conflicting ways. While some argue that poverty promotes low self-esteem while wealth promotes high self-esteem, others stress that individuals have a broad repertoire of self-protecting strategies that shield their self image 'in relation to external feedback linked to socio-economic level'. Poor people may be more likely to blame external factors for their economic situation and maintain their self-esteem despite low incomes (Palomar Lever 2005). Neither of these broad positions, however, has consistent evidential support (Palomar Lever 2005). Fourth, individual self-

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the project see the DFID research website:  
<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/SearchResearchDatabase.asp?ProjectID=60725>

esteem (or individually-constructed shame) should be considered distinct from group self-esteem (or socially-constructed shame). These two characteristics may conflict with each other – a person with low group self-esteem may have high levels of individual self-esteem (expert comments).

The next section will examine the mixed evidence for a direct causal link between shame/low self-esteem and poverty. Section three presents findings from studies that directly challenge the low self-esteem/poverty link, and section four examines programmes that have sought to bolster self-esteem.

## 2. Evidence That Low Self-Esteem/ Shame Causes or Compounds Poverty

The evidence on whether self-esteem or shame cause or contribute to poverty is mixed. Although a number of studies point to links between low self-esteem in childhood and adult poverty (Yaquib 2002, Dooley & Prause 1997, Waddell 2006), findings usually indicate that these relationships are complex, multi-causal and vary according to group and context. This argument is directly challenged by another group of studies, which challenge the role played by self-esteem in creating or perpetuating poverty traps (see section three).

As Yaquib (2002) has argued, **childhood** is a sensitive period for developing cognition and personality. He states that: 'Children with high self-esteem have been found to associate their success in a particular situation with their ability and their failure with a lack of effort or a factor that they had no control over. This contrasts with the "learned helplessness" of children with low self-esteem' (Yaquib 2002, p.1085). He argues that it becomes progressively harder to retrain to correct for 'learned helplessness' (Yaquib 2002, 1085). Bird (2007, p.34) cites Yaquib's (2002) claim and adds '[i]n later life this ["learned helplessness"] can influence the degree to which individuals assert agency, respond to risks and cope with covariant and idiosyncratic shocks'. As Yaquib (2002, p.1088) is quick to point out, however, only *some* damage done to self-esteem and other functionings in childhood may be permanent.

The phenomenon of the '**satisfied poor**', where poor people become accustomed to low standards of living and therefore less motivated to escape poverty has been widely noted in the literature (see Neff 2009). Neff (2009) identifies a number of mechanisms for this process of adaptation. One of these mechanisms is the low levels of self-esteem associated with poverty, although he notes that there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate this mechanism. Hunt's (2004) study of beliefs about poverty amongst minority groups in the US finds that these groups vary considerably in the extent to which they draw on structuralist or individualist theories to explain their experience of poverty.

The link between self-esteem and poverty has been most widely assessed by looking at **educational outcomes**, but the evidence from this literature is mixed. A number of studies have shown that students with low self-esteem were likely to perform less well in school (Bankston & Zhou 2002), and were less likely to be employed than students with high self-esteem (Dooley & Prause 1997, Waddell 2006). Bankston & Zhou (2002) note, however, that in many ethnic minority groups, the link between good school performance and self-esteem contradicts these findings. The children of Asian immigrants tended to have the lowest levels of self-esteem but performed best at school, while black adolescents showed the highest levels of self-esteem, but had relatively low levels of achievement (Bankston & Zhou 2002). Tomlinson and Walker (2010) argue that while education leads to improved self-esteem, high self-esteem does not necessarily lead to better educational outcomes.

### 3. Questioning the causal link between Self-esteem/Shame and Poverty

Furedi has questioned the assumption that low self-esteem is a source of poverty and other social problems. In a lecture given in 2003, he argues that evidence from the US shows that in fact **high self-esteem can be destructive** as it 'makes people respond aggressively when their inflated self-image is threatened by criticism or perceived insult' (Furedi 2003, no page number). A similar point is made by Emler (2001), in his broad-ranging study of the costs of low self-esteem in the UK. He argues that high self-esteem is associated with a range of risky behaviours.

The role of low self-esteem in perpetuating 'poverty traps' has been challenged at a number of levels. Several studies have shown that a range of factors, including socio-economic background, academic achievement, neighbourhood and gender are only modestly related to self-esteem (Emler 2001, Batty and Flint 2009). Other studies have challenged the link between improvements in self-esteem and employment. Jeffrey et al's (2004) study of Dalits in India, for example, shows that improvements in self-esteem that arose from better education were not sufficient to lead to better employment.

Porter and Washington (1993) have emphasised the importance of distinguishing between group and personal dimensions of self-esteem. While it may seem that belonging to an ethnic minority community, particularly one that has experienced persecution and discrimination, would lead to low individual self-esteem, research has shown that minority communities (particularly black Americans) often enjoy higher self-esteem than their white counterparts (Emler 2001). This demonstrates that the links between race/ethnicity and self-esteem are complex and highly context-specific.

### 4. Anti-poverty interventions that seek to bolster self-esteem

A number of development programmes have either sought to tackle poverty by addressing self-esteem, or seen improvements in self-esteem as a useful side-effect of a broader anti-poverty or women's empowerment strategy. These programmes often see improving self-esteem as an end in itself rather than as a means to reducing poverty. It has been widely claimed that cash transfers and youth employment programmes have improved self-esteem, although these claims are found in programme reviews and are not rigorously tested.

Although the extent to which efforts to improve self-esteem can, on their own, reduce poverty is open to question, addressing self-esteem issues as part of a comprehensive intervention may be beneficial. Yaqub (2002, p.1089) has argued that the timing of anti-poverty programmes that seek to address functionings (such as self-esteem) may be critical. He argues that '[a]ntipoverty interventions should be prioritized to when the worst damage from poverty can be avoided, when the most gains in functionings can be obtained, and when the fastest poverty-reversals occur' (ibid.).

Emler (2001), focusing on the UK, has argued that while planned interventions can raise self-esteem, there is little knowledge about why particular interventions work or whether they have an impact beyond the short term. Poverty is caused by a variety of individual and contextual attributes and factors. As Tomlinson and Walker (2010, p.1178) have argued in relation to child poverty, 'it is no simple matter to determine which of these factors is more or less important for the child not least because they tend to

work in concert'. They argue that 'any policy programme to address these issues would be more successful if it employed a comprehensive package that includes poverty alleviation, alongside educational assistance, improving parental relations in terms of communication, and financial support in order to assuage the impact of disadvantage on future life chances in children. Not only is it likely to be necessary to tackle multiple impediments but the effectiveness of one intervention may be lessened if another is not in place' (ibid.). Furedi (2003, no page number) is critical of social policy interventions that have sought to improve low self-esteem: 'All they really do is force people into subservience, reliant on the State for direction and well-being'.

A range of development interventions seek to boost the self-esteem of individuals or communities. **Cash transfers** are often cited as having a positive impact on the self-esteem of recipients. Recent studies by Concern Worldwide and Oxfam (2011), Devereux and Vincent (2010) and Espey et al (2010) have found that cash transfers can increase self-esteem among women and girls. Rather than perceiving themselves as a drain on scarce resources, cash transfers can help people to see themselves as financially self-reliant and independent persons, with a capacity to contribute to the household. Molyneux's (2008) review of the use of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) in empowering women shows that while these programmes do consistently boost the self-esteem of women, they may also reinforce existing gender roles.

Other areas of interventions that have mentioned building self-esteem as a benefit include programmes to address **youth unemployment** (see, for example, SPW and DFID 2010) and **education** (CPRC 2007). The CPRC (2009) has claimed that 'education can increase self-esteem and confidence – the well-educated are better able to negotiate for higher wages, manage rural–urban transitions, and extract themselves from exploitative relationships'. Interventions to improve the employment prospects and well-being of people with **disabilities** often emphasise self-esteem (see WHO 2011, Right to Play 2010). As mentioned above, few of these claims are supported with rigorous evidence, and no systematic analysis of the capacity of these kinds of projects to reduce poverty by improving self-esteem has been conducted.

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### 3. Additional Information

**Key websites:** Child Poverty Action Group, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative

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