

# SOCIO-ECONOMIC PRECARIOUSNESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY comparison between the French and the Portuguese people about self-esteem

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Researchers in Psychology are in agreement about the relevance of self-esteem, and emphasize its influence on the individual's psycho-social adjustment.

In fact, several essays point to the existence of connections between self-esteem, motivation, and the level of vocational maturity. They suggest that people having higher self-esteem and more confidence in their own opinions and decisions are more likely to successfully pursue their personal objectives. Positive self-esteem is a motivational factor that fosters personal fulfilment and social integration, thus enhancing personal identity and promoting adjustment to society. On the contrary, negative self-esteem causes people to doubt their potential, minimize their aspirations and narrow their scope of action. Consequently, they will find it more difficult to adapt to social reality and feel socially integrated.

In this context, the study of self-esteem appears to be of key importance as a means of understanding the processes and mechanisms involved in the individual's social (un)adjustment in the face of adversity. Positive self-esteem will be a protective factor, whenever the individual is faced with situations or events that may increase his or her vulnerability.

## METHOD

### Participants

► N = 449

	Portugal (Coimbra)	France (Toulouse)	Total
Male	68	156	225
Female	81	144	224
Precarious situation	42	150	192
Not precarious situation	107	150	257

### Materials

► The Self-Esteem Scale used was the result of Tap and Vasconcelos' adaptation (2004) of the Toulouse Self-Esteem Scale (Oubrayrie *et al.*, 1994) from which ten items, out of a total of sixty, were selected. Five of them allow a direct positive evaluation whereas the other five, carrying a negative meaning, involve an inversion of the answers' score. The answers' format is carried out by means of *Likert*-type scale (from 1= I totally disagree to 5= I totally agree). The global self-esteem score may range from a minimum of 10 points to a maximum of 50 points.

### Procedure

► The compilation of data was carried out in Public Health Care Centres in the central region of Portugal and in Toulouse, in France, with the co-operation of GPs, social workers, and psychologists. The users were requested to fill in the questionnaire in full. In case the participants showed difficulties seeing, reading and/or understanding, they would be assisted by the researcher, who would read the questions and/or explain their meaning to them. Participation was voluntary.

## RESULTS

► This scale shows a good degree of internal consistency which was evaluated by means of *Cronbach's* alpha ( $\alpha=.82$ ): total sample  $\alpha=.77$ ; Portuguese population  $\alpha=.82$ ; French population  $\alpha=.79$  (Tap & Vasconcelos, 2004).

Concerning its factorial structure, the analysis of main components followed by rotation of the *varimax* type resulted in 2 factors considered to be the two dimensions of self esteem.

On determining the coefficients of *Cronbach's* alpha, the value obtained for factor 1 was  $\alpha=.76$ , which indicates good internal consistency. This factor explains 35,5% of the variance and is connected to *self-affirmation (by denial)*; it includes the five negative items, whose score in the answers was reversed.

Factor 2 is called *self-confidence* and is determined by four of the five items that enhance the individual. It also shows internal consistency (global population  $\alpha=.84$ ) and explains 13,96 % of the variance.

The results are shown based on three dimensions: global self-esteem, self-affirmation, and self-confidence

### Global self-esteem

✓ The distribution curve of the mean global self-esteem scores by age groups (Graph 1) shows that self-esteem tends to increase until 39 to 43 years of age. In older individuals, the reverse may be seen, since there is a marked decrease after 53 to 58 years of age.

✓ The difference found between the level of self-esteem of the French (M=37,2) and that of the Portuguese (M=29,7) is statistically significant (F=81,64;  $p<.001$ ). This difference is more marked after thirty, and especially noticeable after forty-five, the age at which the self-esteem of the Portuguese decreases sharply.

The individuals who live in a non-precarious situation (M=35,4) show a higher level of self-esteem than those who do not (M=31,4), and the difference is statistically significant (F=22,5;  $p<.001$ ). This trend may be seen among both the Portuguese population ("non-precarious": M=32; "precarious": M=27,3) and the French one ("non-precarious": M=38,8; "precarious": M=35,6).

The difference between the men's group (M=34) and the women's (M=32,8) is not statistically significant (F=2,1; NS). The reverse trend may be observed among the Portuguese who live in a precarious situation (women: M=28,7; men: M=26). However, men show to have higher self-esteem than women up to the age of 43, at which time this difference becomes gradually smaller.

### Self-affirmation (by denial)

✓ The analyses of the data concerning the first factor (called *self-affirmation by denial*) indicate the same trends as the results of global self-esteem.

The differences seen between the French (M=18,9) and the Portuguese (M=13,6) are statistically significant (F=93,97;  $p<.001$ ). On comparing these two groups in terms of age, we observe that the French have a higher level of "self-affirmation" in all age groups (Graph 2). These differences are statistically significant in most age groups.

✓ People who do not live in a situation of precariousness (M=17) show a higher level of self-affirmation than those in the opposite situation (M=15,4). This is a significant difference (F=8,52;  $p<.004$ ).

In both France and Portugal, men proved to be more affirmative than women in the group of individuals living in a non-precarious situation. Conversely, differences depending on country and gender were observed in the "precarious" group.

Portuguese women experiencing precariousness (M=14,7) show a higher level of self-affirmation than Portuguese men in the same situation (M=11,7), and this is a significant difference (F=5,29;  $p<.02$ ). Conversely, among the French population, men (M=19,2) have higher values in this variable than women (M=16,2) when experiencing precariousness.

### Self-confidence

✓ In the "self-confidence" factor, the variations observed in the previous factor were also seen here.

The French are more confident (M=18,23) than the Portuguese (M=16,1) (F=21,98;  $p<.001$ ). However, on comparing self-affirmation (Graph 2) means with self-confidence ones (Graph 3) in terms of age, we see that, in the latter, the differences between the Portuguese and the French are not so obvious, and they are significant only in the first and second age groups.

✓ People who do not live in a situation of precariousness (M=18,3) are more self-confident than those who do (M=16), in both the French and the Portuguese samples.

Portuguese men in a precarious situation are more self-confident than their female counterparts. Nevertheless, this is not a significant difference.

## DISCUSSION

The factorial analysis revealed two self-esteem factors. In this article, we have kept to the classical method of reversing the score of the answers to the negative items. In addition to analysing the differences between the two factors obtained, we have analysed the global score of self-esteem as well (Factor 1 + Factor 2).

The global score of self-esteem increases with age, reaching its maximum value between the ages of 37 and 47, and it progressively decreases after 48. Thus, it seems appropriate to regard self-esteem as an indicator of maturity and adjustment to the various situations and duties of adult life. Specific studies on affirmation and self-confidence yield similar results.

People who do not live in a precarious situation have higher self-esteem than those who do. However, the difference between these two groups tends to decrease between 35 and 55 years of age, particularly concerning self-confidence.

No differences were found at the level of self-esteem between men and women, apart from people under 40, where the men's group showed to have higher self-esteem. This difference is more marked in relation to self-affirmation than it is in relation to self-confidence.

The French have higher self-esteem in both global and specific terms – self-affirmation and self-confidence – than the Portuguese, most markedly after 30. This difference is more significant in relation to self-affirmation than it is in relation to self-confidence.

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