An Analysis of the Self-esteem of Adolescents in Hong Kong: Configurations and Determinants

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Centre for Hong Kong Studies

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE SELF-ESTEEM OF ADOLESCENTS IN HONG KONG:
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The self is an important concept in understanding the behavior of adolescents because their paramount concern at this stage of personal growth is the search for a clear and stable self-definition. Literature abounds to show that adolescence is a turbulent stage of personality development. Bodily changes in primary and secondary sex characteristics trigger the abrupt transition from early childhood into the adolescent period. In a matter of months, an adolescent may grow several inches or gain some twenty pounds. Actually, besides height and weight, all parts of the body are undergoing fundamental transformations, achieving adult size and form in a rather short time (Conger, 1973). These changes are so profound that Erikson (1959) calls them the physiological revolution.

Physical maturity puts an adolescent on a par with his parents. But because of economic dependence, role expectations and long time submission, it may be difficult for him to ask for equality from them. He seeks it elsewhere. Emancipation from home begins early in childhood, but the process of emancipation is greatly accelerated during adolescence. This gives him not only an opportunity for independence but also an enlarged horizon of life experience.

Together with a sense of prowess brought about by independence, he experiences a state of anxiety. Moving gradually away from his parents'...
protective umbrella, an independent adolescent has to solve many questions by his own effort. Gone are the carefree days when he could leave all the troubles to his parents.

The same glandular secretion that produces changes in external physical structure also creates internal emotional disturbances. New desires and interests surge through him. But cultural taboos and personal clumsiness usually obstruct the channelling of these interests and desires.

Bodily growth spurt, discontinuity of status, upsurges of new desires and interests, sudden enlargement of life horizon—after all these rapid transformations the adolescents find themselves in the midst of nowhere and, correspondingly, there is an ambiguity of self-definition (Rosenberg et al. 1973).

Man is not only a tool-maker. He is also a pattern-seeker (Radhakrishnan, 1967:58). He will not tolerate a continuous state of ambiguity and the resulting anxiety. In fact, many of the typical behaviors of the adolescents, such as sensitivity to others' opinions, eagerness to attract attention, the persistent effort to prove one's competence, and the search for an identity, can be seen as manifestations of the psychological propensity to confirm and enhance their self-esteem.

Despite its importance, research in this area has seldom been conducted in Hong Kong. There are a few scattered studies, such as those by Cheung (1977, 1981), Lau and Lu (1980), Lung (1982), Bond and Cheung (1983) and Cheung and Lau (1983). However, these are all confined to very limited samples. They may have heuristic value, but the findings generated by them can hardly be inferred to the entire population of adolescents in Hong Kong. Mitchell's (1969) study on pupil, parent, and school in the mid-60s' has two chapters on students' self-esteem. His sample is a probability one, but the population is confined to Form 5 students only.

As indicated in the method section of this monograph, the present study covers the entire student population of secondary schools in Hong Kong.

Besides, following the tradition in western societies, most of the studies mentioned above have been conducted to identify the determinants of self-esteem. This can be easily understood because one of the major objectives of scientific research is to look for the causes of various phenomena. However, it should be noted that delineation of pattern or description of structure is also an integral part of science and is by no means a less significant endeavor. Previous studies conducted in Hong Kong have succeeded in identifying several major variables associated with the adolescents' self-esteem. So far nothing have been done to delineate its internal structure. This constitutes the first objective of the present study. We attempt to find out the pattern of clustering among items of the self and the elements responsible for a positive or a negative self-esteem. The second objective is to follow Mitchell and others' footsteps in identifying the major determinants of self-esteem. In addition to updating their findings, we will extend the scope of analysis by considering more variables, particularly those that are related to the subjects' schooling environment. We will also introduce the sex of the subjects as a control factor, so as to see if the determinants of self-esteem vary across the gender boundary.
Sample and Data Collection

Data for this study came from an extensive questionnaire survey of a probability sample of secondary school students in Hong Kong. In early November 1982, 40 schools were chosen randomly from a total of 430 secondary schools recorded in a list provided by the Department of Education. With the help of the Department, 38 schools were willing to participate in the study. Subsequent contacts were made with individual schools to work out a time convenient for them so that we could make the field visits. At the same time, information on each form in every school was also gathered. By means of random sampling, two classes of students were selected from each school to be included in the final sample of students, thus giving a total of 76 classes that ranged from the lowest to the highest grades in the schools.

As several researchers with different interest were involved in the study on adolescent mentality, the large number of question items thus devised for practical purposes had to be grouped into two separate questionnaires. The main criterion employed in the partition process was affinity in content. The two questionnaires, however, share a common set of items that serve to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. As such, each questionnaire is a self-contained instrument for research.

Field work started in mid-December, 1982 and lasted until late January, 1983. During each school visit, two field workers were assigned to distribute the two questionnaires—Questionnaire A and Questionnaire B—randomly to all the students in each class. The students were told to fill in the questionnaires by themselves. The field workers were on hand to help in case of doubts about specific questions. Each student, however, was asked to answer only one of the two questionnaires. At the end of the exercise, 1,466 of Questionnaire A and 1,407 copies of Questionnaire B were collected, out of which two copies of Questionnaire A and four copies of Questionnaire B had to be discarded owing to incompleteness. In all, the final sample of respondents for Questionnaire A is 1,464 and that for Questionnaire B is 1,403. The findings reported in this article are based on data collected through Questionnaire A.

Configurations of Self-Esteem

The subject’s global self-esteem is measured by nine items, formulated in a way similar to Rosenberg’s scale (1979:291). In order to tap the self-esteem from different angles, four of these items are phrased in a positive way, three carrying a negative overtone, while the remaining two are more neutral. All of them are arranged in a seven-point Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The two items with relatively neutral meaning were later discarded because of their poor statistical association with the pool of self-perceived attributes selected to represent the subject’s self-concept.

A factor analysis was run to examine the structure of the remaining seven items that were used to measure global self-esteem. As can be seen from Table 1, these items clearly cluster into two sets, except for Item 4, which is more ambivalent. Factor 1 consists of three negatively phrased items, whereas Factor 2 is made up with three positively phrased items. We decided to include Item 4 into Factor 2, partly because it is also positively phrased and partly because its factor loading on Factor 2 is 0.29, just a little bit lower than the acceptable value of 0.3.
Table 1. Rotated Factor Loadings on Global Self-Esteem Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Factor I</th>
<th>Factor II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Everybody has merits as well as shortcomings. All in all, I have more shortcomings than merits.</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am no good at all.</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. All in all, I feel that I am a failure.</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I feel that I am not worse than others.</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. If I could be reborn once again, I do not want any change at all. I would rather remain as exactly the same as I am now.</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I have great expectation on my future.</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In view of the clear clustering in Table 1, we suppose that the global self-esteem of our subjects is by no means a homogeneous one. We also suspect that the aspects of the self elicited by the positively phrased questions are different from those elicited by the negatively phrased ones.

In order to verify this conception, we correlated the two dimensions of the global self-esteem with a pool of self-perceived attributes intended to represent the subject's self-concept, respectively. These attributes are taken as the components of the global self-esteem. The question arises as to how these components can be identified. An individual's self-concept is composed of numerous attributes. Since the boundary of its entire population cannot be clearly delineated, the selection based on the sampling method is out of the question here. If a probability sample cannot be found, the second best alternative would be choosing the attributes which are more salient to the individual. This is theoretically sound because by definition the less salient traits can be disregarded without significant impact on the global self-esteem.

Selection of the more salient attributes relies on a previous study conducted by the senior author of this paper. Carried out in 1977, that study asked a group of secondary students, ranging from Form 1 to Form 5, to fill in twenty responses to the question of "Who Am I?". From these responses, we tabulated those that Kuhn and McPartland (1954) classified as "psychological attributes" and selected twenty-four that were most frequently mentioned. They were filial piety, intelligence, sociability, code of brotherhood, optimism, consistency, readiness to help others, being bad-tempered, selfishness, susceptibility to others' influences, laziness, naivety, cowardice, being restrained, being receptive to others' opinion, fondness of novelty,
playfulness, indulgence in fantasy, seeking for excitement, being taciturn, being emotional, willingness to make friends, introvertedness, and rebelliousness. Since these are all spontaneous responses, their frequency of appearance can be assumed to represent their saliency. Each of the questions measuring these attributes was provided with seven alternative responses, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The alpha coefficient of the scale made up these attributes is 0.72 and the correlation coefficient between this scale and the global self-esteem is 0.51.

Table 2 lists the Pearson correlation coefficients between these psychological attributes and (1) the global self-esteem, (2) the negative dimension of global self-esteem, and (3) the positive dimension of global self-esteem, respectively. We found that these components can be grouped into six categories. The first category includes fondness of novelty, playfulness, seeking for excitement, code of brotherhood and readiness to help, all of which are significantly related to the positive dimension but not to the negative dimension of the global self-esteem. The second category includes being restrained, being taciturn, being emotional, introvertedness, indulgence in fantasy, rebelliousness, and susceptibility to influences, all of which are significantly related to the negative dimension but not to the positive dimension of the global self-esteem. The third category consists of those items which are significantly related to both dimensions of the global self-esteem but the strength of their relationship is stronger with the negative dimension than with the positive dimension. These include being bad tempered, selfishness, laziness, naivety, and cowardice. The fourth category, including filial piety, consistency, willingness to make friends, also maintains a significant relationship with both dimensions of the global self-esteem but its relationship with the positive dimension is stronger than with the negative dimension. The fifth category is composed of those items which are significantly related to both the positive and the negative dimensions and there is no considerable difference in the strength of relationship. These include intelligence, sociability, and optimism. The sixth category has only one component, i.e., valuing others' opinion, which is not significantly related to any dimension of the global self-esteem.

This pattern of distribution confirms our contention that the attributes associated with the positive statements are apparently different from those associated with the negative statements. For example, when our subjects were responding to the positive statements, what came to their mind were those attributes belonging to the first and the fourth categories. Correspondingly, when they answered the negative questions, they were more preoccupied with attributes classified as categories 2 and 3. This does not mean that in responding to the positive questions, our subjects only thought of attributes in categories 1 and 4, and nothing else. But the systematic difference in the weight of correlation between the negative and the positive dimension of the global self-esteem among different components clearly lend support to the argument that certain attributes contribute more to the positive and others to the negative dimension of the global self-esteem.

The figures in the third column of Table 2 are correlation coefficients between each of the components and the composite score of the seven items measuring global self-esteem, in which the direction of scoring for the negative items has been adjusted. They indicate what attributes have positive/negative effects on our subjects' global self-esteem. Those contribute to a positive self-esteem include playfulness, seeking for excitement,
filial piety, intelligence, sociability, code of brotherhood, optimism, consistency, readiness to help, and willingness to make friends, whereas the attributes responsible for a negative self-image include being restrained, being taciturn, introvertedness, being bad-tempered, selfishness, laziness, being emotional, rebelliousness, naivety, cowardice, susceptibility to influences, and indulgence in fantasy. The effect of intelligence on global self-esteem is the strongest, while cowardice, sociability, consistency, and optimism come next, in that order. What should be noted is the attribute of selfishness. Several surveys carried out recently indicated that the adolescents in Hong Kong, because of the pervasive influences of the commercial-materialistic culture, have developed an egoistic mentality (HKFS, 1982; HKUSU, 1982). Our data show that selfishness is still conceived as negative, although its intensity is somewhat moderate.

The configurations of global self-esteem presented above were examined separately in male and female subjects. No significant difference was found.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of Self</th>
<th>Global Self-Esteem</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative Dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fondness of Novelty</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playfulness</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking for excitement</td>
<td>-0.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code of brotherhood</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness to help</td>
<td>-0.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being restrained</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being taciturn</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being emotional</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introvertedness</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indulgence in fantasy</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebelliousness</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susceptibility to influences</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being bad-tempered</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfishness</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laziness</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naivety</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowardice</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filial piety</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to make friends</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociability</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing others' opinions</td>
<td>-0.01*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All except those with an asterisk sign are statistically significant at 0.01 level.
Determinants of Self-Esteem

Many variables have been found to have significant effects on self-esteem. Most of these variables, however, can be classified into two categories. The first is the warmth and supportiveness of the social environment in which the individual spends a significant part of his life. These include unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959), parental interest (Rosenberg, 1963), acceptance by mothers (Coopersmith, 1967), etc. The second is the relative standing in those areas to which the individual feels important. This category, in turn, has two dimensions, namely, the relative standing achieved by the individual himself, such as academic achievement (Skaalvik, 1983), occupational experience (Mortimer and Lorence, 1979), and task performance (Tesser and Campbell, 1980), etc. The second dimension refers to the aspirational nature of an individual's relative standing, notably sex (Koffman and Lips, 1980), race (Hines and Berg-Cross, 1981), and birth order (Kidwell, 1982). Certainly, there are border-line cases, of which social class (Rosenberg and Pearl, 1979) is the most conspicuous example. For the adults, it is an achieved status. For the adolescents or younger children, it is determined primarily by characteristics of their parents.

Since our subjects are school students, the family and school constitute the major social environment in which they spend a significant part of their life. The variable of relationship with family is measured by four questions: (1) I feel that my family is more harmonious than others; (2) my home is the best place in the world; (3) I have thoughts of leaving my family; (4) If I could be reborn, I would like to be born in the same family. Each of these questions is followed by seven alternatives, arranged in a Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The reliability of this scale has an alpha value of 0.62. The variable of relationship with school is also measured by four questions: (1) I like to participate in activities organised by school; (2) I always hope that the classes be ended soon; (3) I feel that what has been taught in the class is useful; (4) if possible, I would like to change to another school. These questions are also followed by seven alternatives, arranged in a Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The alpha coefficient of this scale is 0.35 which, taken at its face value, is low. However, although the four items are all indicants of relationship with school, they are by no means homogeneous in empirical referents. For instance, 77% of respondents indicated that what has been taught in class is useful and 51% answered that they like to participate in activities organised by school. On the other hand, however, 52% expressed the wish to change to another school and 63% responded that they always hope that the class be ended soon. As Zeller and Carmines (1980:60) stated, "alpha does not provide an optimal estimate or reliability when the items that make up the composite are heterogeneous in their relation to one another ... Thus, the more the item interitem correlations diverge from one another, the more the value given by alpha understates the true reliability." Of course we could delete some of the items to increase the alpha value. But by doing so we will narrow the empirical referents which the conceptual boundary of the variable is supposed to encompass. In sum, the alpha value of 0.35 represents the lower limit of reliability of the variable of relationship with school. This should be kept in mind when interpreting the related findings.

We grouped our subjects into the categories of good, moderate and
bad, in terms of their relationships with family and with school. The relationship was defined as bad when the subject gave an average of negative responses to the questions constituting the respective scale; the relationship was considered as moderate when the subject indicated either an ambivalent stance or a little bit towards the positive side; the remaining cases (missing cases not included) were classified as maintaining a good relationship with their family/school.

As for the category of relative standing, we correlate self-esteem with sex, socio-economic status, birth order, academic achievement, and a set of variables which make up our subjects' schooling environment. Socio-economic status is measured by father's education and occupation. Family income is abandoned as an indicator of this variable because of the exceptionally large number of missing cases. A score of 4 is assigned to those whose father belongs to the occupational ranking of higher-grade professionals and their equivalents; 3 to lower-grade professionals and their equivalents; 2 to small proprietors, lower-grade technicians and their equivalents; 1 to routine non-manual employees, skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled wage workers. For father's education, a score of 4 is given to graduate training; 3 to either university or post-secondary education; 2 to secondary education and 1 to primary school or below. The reliability score of this scale has an alpha value of 0.46. The socio-economic status of our subjects is classified as high if their composite score on this scale is or above 5; as medium if their composite score is 3 or 4; as low if their composite score is 2. Academic achievement is indicated by the subject's standing in his/her own class in the semester prior to the time of data collection. Since in many schools students are only ranked into the first tenth, the second tenth, and so forth, we can only have a crude measurement of this variable.

Table 3 shows the effects of a set of independent variables on global self-esteem. Some variables in the table, such as relationship with family, relationship with school, socio-economic status, and academic achievement have either an interval or an ordinal score. However, for the sake of comparison with other nominal variables, all data are analysed by analysis of variance.

First of all, it should be noted from the data in Table 3 that, except for two categories, the mean scores of self-esteem among our subjects, no matter how classified, are all above the theoretical average point of 28, which means that their self-image is generally tilted towards the positive side. This finding is particularly revealing in view of the fact that some scholars, such as Mahler (1976) and others, have maintained that the Orientals usually have a lower score on self-esteem because of their traditional de-emphasis on selfhood and individualism. Bond and Cheung's study (1983), which is based on a limited sample, found neutral responding in spontaneous expressions of self-esteem among Hong Kong Chinese.

The figures in the table also show that our subjects' self-esteem is significantly affected by their relationship with the family and school. The magnitude of influence remains largely the same even after sex has been introduced as a control variable. Judging from the F values, the family seems to have greater effect on self-esteem than school. This is consistent with existing theory and research findings in this area and particularly with Cheung and Lau's study (1983) which, carried out with a limited sample in Hong Kong, indicated that the family and school correlate significantly with self-esteem and that the family environment is more significantly related to
self-esteem than that of the classroom environment.

As for the variables indicating the individual's relative standing, their effects on self-esteem are not that clear and require some elaboration. First of all, the self-esteem of male subjects is higher than their female counterparts. The mean scores are 32.49 and 30.63, respectively. The difference is significant at .01 level. Sex differences in self-esteem are not generally detected by studies conducted in western societies. However, some recent evidence (Koffman and Lips, 1980; Skaalvik, 1983) has shown that such a difference does exist. Moreover, past research in Hong Kong (Mitchell, 1969; Cheung, 1977) consistently shows that males have a higher score on self-esteem than females, although among college students such a difference could not be found (Bond and Cheung, 1983).

The unfavorable self-perception of our female subjects reflects the favorable treatment they receive from society. Despite the rapid pace of modernization, the traditional pattern of discrimination against women, albeit in a subtle way, still persists in Hong Kong. Boys are still considered as responsible for perpetuation of ancestral lineage. If a family cannot afford to send all the children to school, it is always the boy who has the priority (Tang, 1981). Under this prevalent atmosphere of discrimination against girls, in the absence of a women liberation movement, it is conceivable that female subjects generally see themselves lower than their male counterparts.

Besides sex, birth order and socio-economic status are other major variables of ascriptive nature that indicate an individual's relative standing. For our subjects, there is no significant relationship between birth order and self-esteem. The firstborns have a mean score of 32.15, as compared to 31.25 of the middleborns and 31.93 of the lastborns. We also fail to find any significant difference in self-esteem between the only child and others. The mean scores of these two categories are 32.67 and 31.59, respectively. Because of space limitation, all these figures about the relationship between birth order and self-esteem have not been entered into Table 3.

Research findings about such a relationship has been quite conflicting. Based on a much limited sample a few years ago, the senior author of this paper found that the firstborns have the highest score on self-esteem, the lastborns come next, and the middleborns the lowest (Cheung, 1977). Kidwell (1982) was also able to establish that middleborns have significantly lower self-esteem than firstborns and lastborns, although she failed to detect any significant difference between the latter two categories. Rosenberg (1965), on the other hand, found little association between birth order and self-esteem. However, he discovered that whether one has any siblings does make a difference. The equivocal relationship between birth order and self-esteem, both in Hong Kong and abroad, is subject to interpretation. It may be that birth order is not a major determinant of self-esteem, or that the relationship has been suppressed by other variables. In either cases, more empirical research and, perhaps, more sensitive instruments are needed before there could be any more definitive conclusion.

The effect of socio-economic status on self-esteem is significant and is in general consistent with Mitchell's (1969) finding generated about fifteen years ago. The mean scores of its high, medium and low categories are 34.19, 32.28 and 30.69, respectively. After the control variable of sex has been introduced, the relationship persists but has diminished somewhat among female subjects (significant only at .05 level).
The effect of socio-economic status on self-esteem has for a long time been quite ambivalent but Rosenberg and Pearlin (1979) have come out to arbitrate the differences. They introduced age as a control variable and found that the association between social class and self-esteem is stronger among adults than among children and stronger among older children than among younger ones. To explain these findings, they suggested that "for the adult, social class is achieved (at least in principle), whereas for the child it is unequivocally ascribed." (p.129) It seems as first sight that this statement carries the implication that achieved status has greater effect on self-esteem than ascribed status, but what they really emphasized is that

"If we hope to appreciate the meaning of social class ... for the child, it is essential to see social class from his viewpoint, to adopt the child's view of stratification, to understand how it enters his experience and is internally processed. To the sociologist, social class means differential prestige, respect, possessions, and power, with obvious self-esteem implications. But from the child, as he looks around him in the actual world of school and neighborhood in which he lives, finds that most of the children he meets are socio-economically much like himself ... His effective interpersonal environment, which provides the primary social experiences which enter his phenomenal field, is largely a classless society, a world in which status plays little or not role." (p.147)

We quote Rosenberg's explanation at length in order to show that what he has portrayed as existing in the United States may not be true in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is one of the most crowded cities in the world. Over five and a half million residents live within a territory of some 400 square miles, most of whom concentrated in the much smaller metropolitan area. In such a densely populated city, people of different class background inevitably have frequent contacts with each other. Under this circumstance, the sense of superiority/inferiority conferred by one's class status cannot easily be delegated to peripheral importance.

Following Rosenberg and Pearlin, we examine the relationship between socio-economic status and self-esteem by introducing age as a control variable. We divide our subjects into three groups, namely, those whose age is from 10 to 13; from 14 to 17; and from 18 to 22. The Pearson correlation coefficients between socio-economic status and self-esteem of these three groups are 0.22 (P < 0.01), 0.21 (P < 0.01), and -0.02 (P > 0.10), respectively. This finding points to the opposite direction as suggested by Rosenberg and Pearlin. This means that the older our subjects, the lesser effect of socio-economic status on self-esteem.

Since our subjects are all students, academic achievement is expected to be a major source of their sense of competence. We would therefore hypothesize that the subjects whose academic performance is better would have a higher self-esteem. Generally speaking, these two variables do have a positive relationship. However, after sex has been introduced as a control variable, such a relationship persists in males but becomes more complicated in females. It is true that the female subjects whose academic standing is lowest also have the poorest self-esteem, but those who score highest in self-esteem are ranked just next to the bottom in terms of academic achievement. In other words, academic achievement is a less significant factor in maintaining a positive self-esteem for the female subjects. This pattern of influence is also reflected by other variables indicating an individual's relative standing in achievement, such as the standard of streaming and the financial status of school. The academic quality of the private school in general is considerably lower than those that
are run, subsidized, or aided by the government. Table 3 shows that the
financial status of the school has a significant impact on self-esteem only
among males but not among females. The same is true for the standard of
streaming.

The type of school and class our subjects attend may also have
relevance to their sense of competence. The academic quality of the Chinese
middle school, once commendable, has been declining very rapidly in the
last decade or so. We therefore hypothesize that students attending this
type of school would suffer from a lower self-esteem than their counterparts
in the Anglo-Chinese school, where English is the major instructional medium.
Contrary to our expectation, however, the data in Table 3 indicate that there
is no difference in mean scores on self-esteem between these two types of
school, both among males and females. To explain this result, we can only
think of two possible reasons. Firstly, there is great variation in terms of
academic quality among the Anglo-Chinese secondary schools. Although the
best schools usually use English as the major instructional medium, there is
still a large number of schools in this category whose academic quality is
even worst than that in the Chinese middle school. Secondly, we suspect
that the use of a language other than the mother tongue may have an adverse
effect on self-esteem, especially among those students who can hardly master
English. This counteracts the effect on self-esteem brought about by enrolling
in that type of school where the academic standing is supposed to be
better.

Finally, in Hong Kong, there is a tendency for brighter students to
be enrolled in science classes. So we expect students in this category to
have a higher self-esteem than their counterparts in arts class. In fact,
Lau and Lu (1980) study, which is based on a limited sample in Hong Kong,
did establish such a relationship. The data in Table 3 indicate that this
relationship also exists in our sample. The mean score for arts students is
30.83, as compared to 32.27 of the science students. However, the difference
is significant only at 0.05 level. Moreover, after controlling for sex, the
relationship vanishes both among males and females. This means that the
original relationship is a spurious one. Science students have a higher
self-esteem only because most of them are male students.

In sum, among the variables which indicate an individual's relative
standing, sex and socio-economic status, both of ascriptive nature, are
significantly related to our subjects' self-esteem. As for those variables
which represent personal achievement, academic performance, standard of
streaming and financial status of school are significantly related to self-esteem
only among males. This means that the self-esteem of our female subjects is
less sensitive to the effect of their relative standing in academically-related
achievement. This result lends support to a recent finding by Skaalvik (1983)
who discovered that, in Norway, low achieving boys tend to lower thier self-
estem, while low achieving girls do not. The pattern of this result, he
suggested, seems to crystallize around the 4th grade. The explanation he
gave is a sound one and is applicable to Hong Kong. In brief, he attributed
this differential susceptibility to the influence of academic achievement on
self-esteem between the two sexes to the psychological tendency of self-
enhancement. Because of the existence of this motive, self-protective
mechanisms will be activated when self-esteem is threatened. One possible
way of protecting self-esteem against the systematic experience of academic
failure is the devaluation of school work. However, there are limitations for
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables of Self-Esteem</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>All Subjects</th>
<th>Male Subjects</th>
<th>Female Subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Scores</td>
<td>F values</td>
<td>Mean Scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(N=376)</td>
<td>(N=190)</td>
<td>(N=185)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with Family</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>34.28</td>
<td>70.23</td>
<td>34.82</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>28.44</td>
<td></td>
<td>29.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with School</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>35.10</td>
<td>44.59</td>
<td>35.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>32.08</td>
<td></td>
<td>33.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>29.87</td>
<td></td>
<td>30.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32.49</td>
<td>21.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30.63</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic status</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>34.19</td>
<td>9.68</td>
<td>35.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>32.28</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>30.69</td>
<td></td>
<td>31.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic attainment</td>
<td>1st to 10th in class</td>
<td>32.57</td>
<td></td>
<td>34.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11th to 20th in class</td>
<td>32.01</td>
<td></td>
<td>33.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** All F values without any asterisk sign are significant at 0.01 level; those with one asterisk sign are significant at 0.05 level; those with two asterisk signs are not significant.
the exercise of self-protective mechanisms, one of which is the cultural pressure towards academic achievement. Skaalvik also pointed out that the cultural pressure varies with the sex of the subjects. Traditionally, there is greater expectation to do better in school for boys than for girls. Such a cultural environment leaves more room for the female subjects to exercise their self-protective mechanism by devaluation of academic achievement.

Summary and Conclusion

As its title indicates, the objective of this article is twofold, namely, to delineate the configurations and to identify the major determinants of the global self-esteem of adolescents in Hong Kong. A factor analysis shows that the global self-esteem of our subjects is by no means unitary. Generally, it consists of a positive dimension and a negative dimension. There are indications that these are not just the two sides of the same coin, because the aspects of the self related to the positively phrased questions are different from those elicited by the negatively phrased ones. For example, some components of the self, such as being bad-tempered, selfish, lazy, naive, and coward have quite strong relationship with the negative dimension of global self-esteem, but their relationships with the positive dimension, though still significant, have been considerably reduced. This means that possessing these personality attributes could lower the subject's self-esteem, while not possessing them would not enhance the self-esteem with corresponding magnitudes. Similarly, filial piety and self-consistency have much stronger relationship with the positive dimension than with the negative dimension. Furthermore, some components of the self, such as fondness of novelty, playfulness, and seeking for excitement have moderate significant relationships only with the positive dimension, while introvertedness, indulgence in fantasy and being emotional have moderate relationships only with the negative dimension of the global self-esteem. Of the 24 salient components of the self, only intelligence, sociability, and optimism have relatively equal effects on both the positive and the negative dimension of the global self-esteem.

Intelligence stands out among other items in having the strongest effect on the global self-esteem, while cowardice, sociability, consistency, laziness, and optimism come next, in that order. Generally, all these attributes are in some way related to the sense of competence, maturity, courage, and self confidence, the most sensitive areas of individual self-perception during adolescence.

The above-mentioned configurations of global self-esteem remain essentially the same among the male as well as among the female subjects.

In general, all our subjects' self-esteem is tilted slightly towards the positive side and the male subjects have a higher self-esteem than their female counterparts. Having classified the determinants of self-esteem into two broad categories, namely, warmth and supportiveness of social environment and relative standing, we found the former has a greater effect on our subjects' self-esteem than the latter. Comparing the effects of the family and school, the former clearly is more powerful in shaping individual self-esteem. These findings hold true both among males and females.

The effect on self-esteem of the variables indicating an individual's relative standing is different between males and females. For males, socio-economic status, academic achievement, financial status of school and standard of streaming are significantly related to self-esteem, at the 0.01 level.
However, for females, only socio-economic status still maintains a significant relationship, and yet, its degree of significance has been reduced to 0.05.

All these findings suggest that female subjects have suffered from a lower self-esteem as a result of their relatively lower standing in sex role as compared to males. However, further disadvantages in relative standing do not result in a further deterioration of their self-esteem. This does not mean that their self-esteem is not sensitive to the influence of one's level of competence. On the contrary, we have shown that perception of intelligence is the most salient component in our subjects' global self-esteem, both for males and for females. Since intelligence is a generalized ability which extends beyond the purview of academic achievement, we suspect that the female's self-esteem may be shaped by other variables of relative standing which have not been considered in the present study. This points to a direction for further research in this area.

Reference


香港青少年的自尊：形態與決定因素

（中文摘要）

顧名思義，本文主要探討香港青少年的自尊之形態及其決定因素。資料源自香港青少年心理研究。於八二年十二月至八三年三月間以自填問卷方式蒐集。該研究由香港大學香港研究中心主持，研究對象為香港六名青少年隨機抽樣選出。研究結果顯示香港青少年的自尊可分為正負兩方面。本文再檢視一系列足以影響自我形象的個人特質與這兩方面的關係，發現這些特質可以歸納為六個類別：第一類與正面的自尊有關，包括樂觀、愛玩、喜歡找尋刺激、有勇氣、喜歡幫助人；第二類與負面的自尊有關，包括貪婪、沉默寡言、情緒化、內向、愛幻想、反叛，易受他人影響；第三類與自尊的正負兩方面都有關。而與負面的關係遠較正面的關係為強，包括壞脾氣、自私、懶惰、幼稚、懦弱；第四類也與自尊的正負兩方面有關，但與正面的關係遠較負面為強，包括孝順、前後一致、喜歡交朋友；第五類與自尊的正負兩方面有關，而且程度相去不遠，包括聰明，擅於社交；樂觀；第六類只有兩項，即尊重別人意見，與自尊的正負兩方面無顯著關係。

本文的第二部分是選出影響個人自尊的外在因素。根據現存理論及研究成果，此等因素大別可以分為兩類：第一類是個人社會生活環境的和諧性和鼓舞性，以家庭和學校為主；第二類是在重要領域裏面所處位置的高低，包括性別、社會地位、出生次序、學業狀況等。經統計之後，本文得到下列結論：

一、自尊與家庭關係及學校關係都有很顯著的相相關，而家庭的作用比較校校為強。

二、自尊與性別有關，一般男性比女性為高。

三、自尊與職業地位成正比。

四、自尊與出生次序無顯著關係。

本文從五方面來檢視學生自尊的關係，包括班內名次、分數後所屬班次、學校財政來源（官津或私立）、學校教學語言（中中或英中）、學生所


修科目（理組或文組）。結果顯示，在女生當中，此五個因素均與自尊均無顯著關係；在男生當中，學校教學語言及學生所修科目均與自尊無顯著關係。在其他三個因素當中，班內名次及分數後所屬班次均與自尊成正比，至於學校財政來源方面，則官津學生的自尊較私立學校為高。總的來看，男生的自尊受學業成就所影響，女生則否。