

---

Title	Psychological well-being and self-esteem of secondary school students in Singapore
Author(s)	Liu Hah Wah Elena and Cheng Yuanshan
Source	<i>ERA Conference, Singapore, 23-25 November 1998</i>
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

---

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

## **Psychological Well-being and Self-esteem of Secondary School Students in Singapore**

Lui Hah Wah Elena & Cheng Yuanshan  
National Institute of Education  
Nanyang Technological University

### **1. Background**

The current emphasis in Singapore's national policies is '*Heartware*'. While Singapore is becoming an 'Intelligent Island', a 'knowledge economy' and the 'best home', Singaporeans are getting smarter and enjoying better quality of life. But are they able to cope with all the demands in the highly competitive world? The Singapore 21 Committee's chaired by RAdm (NS) Teo Chee Hean (Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence), recommends that "*Every Singaporean Matters - giving my very best*". In the draft for S21 Conference on 21 November 1998, ideas such as 'self-care', 'self-mastery', 'self discovery', 'strong families', 'supportive employers', 'Before and After School Care Programme', etc were mentioned. As for the young Singaporeans, the Ministry of Education is currently advocating ability-driven education, performance assessment, national education and total development of students. Research studies on Singapore adolescents' psychological well being and self-esteem could make timely contributions to the planning and implementation of affective education and life skills programmes in schools and other organisations in the community.

### **2. Focus of Study**

In May 1995, the National Institute Education commenced a longitudinal study on the cognitive, psychological development and school adjustment of secondary school students in Singapore. This research (RP 14/94 EST) is funded by the Academic Research Fund, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The Principal Investigator is A/P Esther Tan and the team members are: Dr Tan Wee Kiat, Dr Tan Ai Girl, Dr Seng Seok Hoon, Dr Peter Khor, Dr Cheng Yuanshan, Ms Sum Chee Wah, Mr James Ong and Dr Lui Hah Wah Elena.

This paper reports on the second part of the longitudinal study focusing on the psychological well being and self-esteem of 344 secondary school students in the sample. While presenting a general profile of the psychosocial development of these students over a period of three years, from 1995 to 1997, comparison between the age groups and gender groups will be discussed.

### **3. Methodology**

Two instruments were administered together during the annual survey in the four secondary schools taking part in this study. The Self-esteem Checklist (SEC), a locally validated instrument of 4 scales 25 items, was used to measure of these students' self-esteem. The SEC has concurrent validity with the widely used Self-esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967). The Well-being Checklist (WBC), a new instrument of 30 items, was used to measure these students' anxiety and coping strategies. The preliminary findings presented in this paper are based on the data analyses of the responses of these 344 students, male 158 and female 186. The distribution of samples by course, level and gender is in Table 1.

#### 4. Preliminary Findings

- (1) Concurrent validity of SEC & WBC was established. Significantly positive correlations (at 0.01 level) were found between these two instruments over the 3 years: 0.39 in Secondary 1 ('95), 0.40 in Secondary 2 ('96) and 0.39 in Secondary 3 ('97).
- (2) All the inter-subscale correlations, except Home Self-esteem and Peer Self-esteem, were positive and significant at 0.01 level. The weak correlation between the Home and Peer Sub-scales was also found in the earlier study by Lui in 1987. The four subscales of SEC cover four aspects of self esteem: home, peer, school and general self. The total SEC score is the sum of all the sub-scales scores. The hierarchical structure of self concept was postulated by Shavelson, R.J. and associates in the '70s.
- (3) The SEC Total Self-esteem mean scores of all the students was 61.12 in Secondary 1, 59.68 in Secondary 2, and decreased to 58.72 in Secondary 3. The differences were significant,  $F = 3.27$ ,  $p = 0.05$ . The findings of this study were consistent with those in the earlier studies using SEC to measure Singapore adolescents' self-esteem. The SEC mean scores of this sample were very close to the mean scores found in the studies of Lui ('87) and Kok ('90), ranging from 57.31 to 62.96
- (4) Male students had higher SEC mean scores than female students by 2.7 points in Sec 3, 5.2 in Sec 2 and 4.0 in Sec 1. The differences were significant at 0.05,  $F = 7.13$ . The significant gender differences in SEC mean scores, in favour of male students, were also found in Lui's 1987 study.
- (5) The Well-being Checklist (WBC) mean scores of these students was 65.67 in Sec 1, 64.22 in Sec 2 and 64.30 in Sec 3. The  $F$  value of these differences was 14.04, significant at 0.05. The average score of WBC is 60, and the possible scores range from 30 to 90. These findings indicated these students were having average mean scores on the well being scale.
- (6) Male students had slightly higher WBC mean scores than the female by 1.7 to 2.5 points in 3 years,  $F = 14.46$ ,  $p = 0.05$ . This may mean that the male students had less anxiety and could cope better with stress. The findings in D'Rozario and Goh's research: "Adolescent ways of coping: a study with a sample of Singaporean Students" (1998), also showed male students tended to use positive coping strategies more than female students.
- (7) The differences of mean scores of both checklists among the three courses, Express, Normal Academic and Normal Technical, were not statistically significant in this study.

#### 5. Remarks

In general, the above findings indicated that the 344 students who participated in this part of the longitudinal study over the 3 years, 1995-1997, had the average mean scores of 65 on the Well-being scale and 59 on the Self-esteem scale. The male students had consistently higher scores than the female students. And on both scales, the mean scores decreased from Secondary 1 to Secondary 3. Though the differences among levels were significant, there were no statistically significant difference among the three courses: Express, Normal Academic and Normal Technical. A more comprehensive and in depth report is pending the data analyses to be performed on the Secondary 4 responses from the total sample.

## References

- Coopersmith, S. (1967). The antecedents of self-esteem. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- \_\_\_\_ (1998). Every Singaporean matters - giving my very best, draft report for S21 Conference, November 21, Singapore 21 Committee, Singapore.
- D'Rozario, V. and Goh, M. (1998). Adolescent ways of coping: a study with a sample of Singaporean students. A paper presented at the Malaysian Educational Research Association Inaugural Conference, April 28-30, Penang, Malaysia.
- Kok, S.K. (1990). Self-concept as related to academic achievement and expectations: a comparison of PSLE high-achievers in Secondary One. Unpublished master's thesis, National University of Singapore.
- Lui, H.W. (1985). A measure of self-esteem in Singapore secondary schools. Singapore Journal of Education, 7(1), 22-26.
- Lui, H.W. (1986). A measure of self-esteem in Singapore secondary schools. Paper presented at the Fourth Asian Workshop on Child and Adolescent Development, Singapore.
- Lui, H.W. (1987). The development of the self-esteem checklist as a new measurement of the self-esteem of pupils in Singapore lower secondary schools. Doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University. (Published on microfilm).
- Lui, H.W. (1998). What Singapore adolescents think of themselves. Growing up in Singapore, edited by Chang, A., Ho, W.K. & Gopinathan, S., Singapore: Prentice Hall. (in print).
- Shavelson, R.J., Hubner, J.J. & Stanton, G.C. (1976). Self-concept: Validation of construct interpretations. Review of Educational Research, 46, 407-441.