Social Class and Self-esteem among Adolescents in Hong Kong

Research Proposal

Research Objectives

Self-esteem is one of our most basic psychological needs. Researches on this subject suggest that self-esteem impacts the major aspects of our lives, like our thinking process, emotions, desires, value, choices, and goals. Self-esteem holds a considerable significance in both the individual and social context. Most importantly, it deals with adolescents’ concern of personal growth. Self-esteem affects how an adolescent search for a clear and stable self-definition (Cheung, T. S., 1984). So, this is why I decided to generate a research on adolescents’ self-esteem.

It is commonly believed that the level of self-esteem varies positively with one’s social class. People tend to think that with higher social class, one may exercise more resources, power, and control, that is social capital, over their lives, and vice versa. Hence their sense of self-worth would be higher or lower. However some researches from the western countries suggest that the relationship between social class and self-esteem among adolescents is only moderate.

The objective of this research is to find out whether a relationship exists between social class and self-esteem among adolescents in Hong Kong, what type of relationship it is, the level or extent of the relationship and whether there are any extraneous factors affecting the relationship. This research will be conducted in a way more related to Hong Kong’s situation.
There are a number of reasons that justify the need to conduct such a research. First, a research on such a topic will help broaden people’s understanding about the concept of self-esteem. It also offers people a more accurate understanding on the impacts of social class on self-esteem. It might, if possible, also fill a void in the existing literature. Second, many past researches on this topic were conducted in western countries. We are not certain if the generalization there also applies to adolescents in Hong Kong. Conducting such a research in Hong Kong would enable us to have a more comparative perspective in viewing this issue. Third, as self-esteem holds such an apparent significance on adolescents’ personal development, finding out its determinants will help us to improve the methods of raising self-esteem. If the level of self-esteem was largely affected by one’s social class, or if the level of self-esteem was only moderately affected by one’s social class and in fact more by other factors, how would parents and schools adjust their routes of educating their kids and students? This research would help serve as a reference for any further studies or for any educational reforms.

Literature Review

For this part, I would like to respectively give a general impression on each work I have read about this topic. I have chosen ten major works.

*Rosenberg, Morris (1978). Social Class among Children and Adults. American Sociological Review, 84, 53-77.* This journal introduces to us that the relation between social class and self-esteem among children, young adolescents and late adolescents is respectively none, modest and moderate. It does not support the idea that self-esteem
varies positively with social class. The findings are impressive and reliable in the USA, but whether it is applied to Hong Kong’s situation is debatable.

Wiltfang, Gregory (1990). *Social Class and Adolescents’ Self-esteem: Another Look*. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 53, 174-183*. This journal uses a non-traditional measurement of social class to explore the relations between social class and self-esteem. It includes some questions about parental welfare status, and neighborhood financial status, etc. Results are supportive. When including that new form of measurement, adolescents’ self-esteem and social class do have a more apparent relation. I would include those questions in my questionnaire.


This book includes theoretical considerations like definitions, types and important issues of self-esteem, and methodological considerations like measurement, experimental use and instrument validations. A practical work.


Cheung, T. S. (1984). An Analysis of the Self-esteem of Adolescents in Hong Kong: configurations and Determinations. Occasional Papers No. 5. Centre for Hong Kong Studies. This work shows us a general picture about Hong Kong’s adolescents’ self-esteem and the factors affecting it like familial tide, gender, SES, academic grades, etc. It does not particularly point out which the most influencing factor is, but just traces all the possible elements. It rejects Rosenberg’s theory by arguing children in Hong Kong are more earlier to have class conscious due to more contacts with peers of different SES.
A Report on the Study of Self-esteem of Secondary School Students. Hong Kong Polytechnic and Family Service, Caritus – Hong Kong. 1993. This work uses a 0-34 points score scale to measurement the self-esteem of randomly selected Hong Kong secondary school students. The modal score is 24. The report concludes that parental and teachers’ care and school academic grades as important factors affecting secondary school students’ self-esteem. Glancing at the questionnaire of the survey, no questions are asked on students’ socio-economic status. Is this an ignorance? So I would like to conduct it once again with more considerations.

Szymanski, Albert (1983). Class Structure: A Critical Perspective. Praeger. The author traces the origins and development of class, and some important issues like race and class, etc. It helps me define social class theoretically and operationally.

In conclusion, the literature listed above gives a valuable reference in conceptualizing my variables. It also brings me multi-angled views in judging and setting my hypothesis. With incorporating different elements of these literature into my research project plus my new perception about this issue, I expect a breakthrough over the past.
Research Hypothesis

The degree of self-esteem among adolescents in Hong Kong is positively related to their social class standing. My theory is that 1) Adolescents whose parents have higher social class may exercise more resources, power and control over their lives, and vice versa. Therefore, the self-esteem of those adolescents will be higher, and vice versa. 2) People in Hong Kong currently have negative feeling about welfare money since many think that only beggars need welfare money. Adolescents whose parents are currently living on welfare may feel ashamed and inferior to those whose families are free from governmental assistance. 3) Hong Kong is crowded city with dense population. Hong Kong children and adolescents tend to have more contacts with their peers from different class backgrounds. They happen to have class conscious at an early age.

The degree of social class affecting self-esteem among late adolescents is greater than among early adolescents. Human being tends to have more exposure to society when they grow older each year. They experience class difference. They see inequality. They may start to evaluate their worth by their social class standing. As for early adolescents, the “centrality” theory in psychology claims that when something is central to self-evaluation, it has a stronger effect on self-esteem. Statistics show that
the main concern of most early adolescents is their academic skills. They are likely to evaluate their self-worth by the grades they obtain in school. As for late adolescents, academic results may not be their priority. Instead, physical appearance, and popularity among peers do. These two traits can be improved with enough financial support and cultural capital. Therefore, social class becomes central to late adolescents’ self-evaluation.

Definitions of Variables

The dependent variable in this research project is self-esteem. It refers to the perception the individual possesses of his or her own worth. A personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitude the individual holds toward himself. It is a subjective experience. Sense of personal efficacy. Sum of self-confidence and self-respect. A conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living. Here I refer to general self-esteem. Operationally, I will use sets of questions which can evaluate self-esteem to measure it.

The independent variable is “social class”. Theoretically, social class can be defined by Marx’s idea. It is defined by its relationship to the means of production and produced by the logic of the mode of production. A class for itself is class conscious
(aware of its interests and the social forces acting on it, thinks of itself as a group, acts
upon this common feeling in pursuit of its collective interests). A class in itself is not
class conscious. There must be the existence of at least 2 classes since class itself can
only be seen when there is comparison.

Operationally, social class will mean a group of people who enjoy a same particular
amount of power, status, resources, income, educational attainment, wealth, etc. There
is lower class, middle class and upper class. Social class here will be measured by
SES index and some non-traditional social class measurement like whether parents
are currently receiving welfare, the financial conditions of neighborhood, the
employment stability of father, etc.

Operationalization

Levels of Measurement

In this research, the level of measurement for social class is an ordinal one. Variables
with attributes we can logically rank-order are ordinal measure (Babbie, 2001). The
different attributes of ordinal variables represent relatively more or less of the variable.
As I mentioned before, my concept of social class in this research includes lower class,
middle class and high class. Each class respectively represents a group of people who
are enjoying the same level of social resources. But we cannot actually tell the 
numerical difference between each class. We can only rank each’s seriousness. So, 
social class is an ordinal measure.

The variable self-esteem is also an ordinal measure. The level of self-esteem can only 
be explained as high, intermediate and low. Although each choice in each question of 
the questionnaire includes a score, those scores only represent a ranking of 
self-esteem and they cannot be put into calculating mathematical sums. We are just 
impossible to say that the self-esteem of a person with 24 scores is two times higher 
than that of a person with 12 scores.

**Indicators**

For measuring social class, the parental occupations, monthly income, wealth 
possessions, educational attainment, and housing type are important and effective 
indicators. Whether the occupation is white or blue collar would affect occupational 
prestige. Monthly income would be arranged as several intervals like $0-5000, 
$5001-10000, etc. Wealth possessions include flats, cars, ships, shares, etc. Parental 
educational attainment would be divided by intervals like primary 1-6, secondary 1-3, 
secondary 4-5, and secondary 6 and above. Housing type would focus on private 
housing and public housing, water housing, and squatters. The ranking of private
housing would be determined by their prices. In addition, some non-traditional indicators would also be used like whether currently respondents’ parents are receiving welfare money, and how long have respondents’ fathers been out of work during past 3 years. Also, neighborhood’s conditions of living as luxurious, comfortable, average, below average, rundown and slum would be included.

As for measuring self-esteem, I would focus on several aspects that can effectively reveal one’s self-esteem. These include general self-esteem, which is about whether a person can identify and accept his or her feelings, merits and weakness, social self-esteem, which is about one’s interaction pattern, academic self-esteem, which is about one’s confidence and initiative in school life, and “lie items”, which is about one’s attitudes of defensiveness.

Mode of Observation

This research will be best conducted by mainly a survey. Surveys are excellent means for studies that have individual people as the units of analysis. One of the important characteristics of survey research is the use of probability sampling. With such a sampling and carefully constructed standardized questionnaires, data about adolescents’ social class standing and self-esteem can be collected so as to reflect
those of the larger population. Practically, I think it is not necessary to conduct an experiment to test the relationship between social class and self-esteem. A few case studies like in-depth interviews with students from different class backgrounds would be a good supplement.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is individual. This refers to Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong who 1) are aged 12-14 and 15-20, 2) are still receiving formal education, 3) have been living here for at least 7 years.

Time Dimension of This Study

As for the time dimension of this study, a cross-sectional research would make good sense. It involves observations of a sample that are made at one point in time (Babbie, 2001). The goal of this study is to have an understanding about the association between social class and self-esteem among adolescents in Hong Kong. Observing the latest generation in Hong Kong should be the first thing to do. A longitudinal study would be too huge and complex to manage and control.
Sampling

The last step of this research proposal is to deal with the problem of population, sample, and data collection.

Population and Sampling Units

First of all, the population of this study is the adolescents in Hong Kong. To make it clear, I would say the Chinese adolescents today in Hong Kong who are aged 12 to 22 and still receiving formal education. The sampling frame is that the data of this research will be obtained from a random sample of adolescents in primary and schools (both include international schools), technical schools and universities in Hong Kong.

A sampling unit is that element considered for selection in a stage of sampling. The sampling unit of this research will be any 12 to 22 year-old Chinese adolescent in Hong Kong who are still schooling.

Sampling Methods and Sample Size

As for sampling method, I decided to use mainly probability sampling because the sample drawn from this method is more representative. Moreover, survey research
allows the use of probability sampling.

My study population is the adolescents who are still schooling. So they will best locate I schools in Hong Kong. I can address their locations by using cluster sampling. This sampling method involves a multi-stage approach. Following this format, I will first obtain a list of all primary, secondary, technical schools and universities in Hong Kong. This complete list can be collected in the webpage of the Education Department. Knowing the exact number of schools, I will then randomly sample a number of schools, which contain the same proportion with respect to primary, secondary, technical, and university type. Next I will randomly obtain lists of members from each of the selected schools with the same proportion of people in each school. The primary sampling units here are schools, then adolescents. Finishing the sampling process, I can distribute my questionnaires out. Cluster sampling is useful when it is impractical to compile an exhaustive list of the elements composing the target population (Babbie, 2000). As for the selection of participants in several in-depth interviews, probability sampling can also be used. Three class standings can be resulted from the information provided by participants of self-administered questionnaires. I then will randomly select some students who belong to that class standing for in-depth interviews.
As for sample size, I decided to enlarge it in order to reduce the error in predicting the relationship between social class and self-esteem among adolescents in Hong Kong. A larger sample size would also bring a more normal distribution about participants’ social class standing. I estimate the sample size of this study will be 2000 adolescents (for further information please refer to appendix II).

Data Collection Methods

My data collection method will be the use of questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

Questionnaire Design

In this study, a questionnaire, which contains 72 questions on measuring adolescents’ social class standing and their self-esteem, will be distributed to each of the student selected from probability sampling. This questionnaire is composed of three parts. The first part includes questions on some personal information like age, sex, school type, education level and religious faith. The second part contains 60 questions on measuring self-esteem. These 60 questions are chosen from the book “Cultural-Free Self-esteem Inventories” by James Battle 1992. Questions are in statement-form with “yes” and “no” as choices. The third part contains questions on students’ social class standing. Both traditional and non-traditional social class measurements will be used.
Last but not least, this will be a self-administered questionnaire with supervisors in the primary, secondary, technical and international schools selected. As for university students, questionnaires with reply envelopes will be mailed to their houses and we suppose the university students selected will mail the questionnaires back to us.

Negosiations with university departments are needed in order to obtain students’ addresses. Appendix I includes a copy of my questionnaire in this research.

An Outline of In-depth Interviews

Below are some important points that should be included in every interview:

1. An introduction to the participants by the interviewer (me).

2. Well-built relationship with mutual trust in us.

3. Whether the participants can identify their own likes and dislikes.

4. How they view about their physical and self images.

5. How they feel about the views people around have for them.

6. Their self satisfaction level.

7. How they feel about the resources, like money, stuff animals, mobile phones, accessories, etc, they are currently enjoying, if they have.

8. How they feel about their families’ financial situation.

9. Any meaningful open ended questions afterward.
* Be aware that the items above are just the outline of my in-depth interviews. They are information I would like to know at least. Content of actual conversations may be more than the above items.
Appendix I

Adolescents’ Life Survey Questionnaire

Introduction

Dear participants,
Hello! The Department of Sociology of the Chinese University of Hong Kong is conducting a study on the lives of adolescents in Hong Kong. We hope you participants can help us out. All you have to do is just taking several minutes to fill our questionnaire! All information you have provided will keep confidential.

Please read each of the questions carefully. All the questions in Part B do not have an absolute answer. Just choose the one that is true to your feelings. Then tick the suitable box. If you have any questions, please ask the supervisor for help. Thank you for your help!

Part A
1) Your age: __________
2) Gender : 1. Male 2. Female
   2. Vocational school
   3. Technical school
   II) 1. Boy school
   2. Girl school
   3. Co-educational school
   b. Level: 1. P.5-6
   2. F.1
   3. F.2
   4. F.3
   5. F.4
   6. F.5
   7. F.6
   8. F.7
   9. Year 1
   10. Year 2
   11. Year 3
Part B

Following are sentences about your feelings. If the statement truly reveals your feelings, please tick the “Yes” box. If not, then tick the “No” box. If your feeling about that statement lies somehow between “Yes” and “No”, then please think for a while and then tick the most suitable one.

YES   NO

1. I spend a lot of time daydreaming
2. Boys and girls like to play with me
3. I like to spend most of my time alone
4. I am satisfied with my school work
5. I have lots of fun with my mother
6. My parents never get angry at me
7. I wish I were younger
8. I have only a few friends
9. I usually quit when my school work is too hard.
10. I have lots of fun with my father.
11. I am happy most of the time.
12. I am never shy.
13. I have very little trust in myself.
14. Most boys and girls play games better than I do.
15. I like being a boy / I like being a girl
16. I am doing as well in school as I would like to
17. I have lots of fun with both of my parents.
18. I usually fail when I try to do important things
19. I have never taken anything that did not belong to me
20. I often feel ashamed of myself
21. Boys and girls usually choose me to be the leader
22. I usually can take care of myself.
23. I am a failure at school
24. I find it hard to make up my mind and stick to it
25. My parents make me feel that I am not good enough
26. I never get angry
27. I often feel that I am no good at all.
28. I have many friends about my own age
29. Most boys and girls are smarter than I am
30. Most boys and girls are better than I am
31. My parents dislike me because I am not good enough
32. I like everyone I know
33. Children pick on me very often
34. I like to play with children younger than I am
35. I like to be called on by my teacher to answer questions
36. I would change many things about myself if I could
37. There are many times when I would like to run away from home
38. I am as happy as most boys and girls
39. I can do things as well as other boys and girls
40. I often feel like quitting school
41. I worry a lot
42. My parents understand how I feel
43. When I have something to say, I usually say it
44. I never worry about anything
45. I am as nice looking as most boys and girls
46. Other boys and girls are mean to me
47. I know myself very well
48. I am doing the best school work that I can
49. People can depend on me to keep my promises
50. My parents think I am a failure
51. I always tell the truth
52. I need more friends
53. I always know what to say to people
54. My teacher feels that I am not good enough
55. My parents love me
56. I never do anything wrong
57. Most boys and girls are stronger than I am
58. I am proud of my school work
59. I often get upset at home
60. I am never unhappy

PTO
Part C

1. Which job comes closest to describing the job you father usually does?
   a. Manual work
   b. White collar

2. How many dollars do your parents earn per month?
   a. $0-5000
   b. $5001-10000
   c. $10001-15000
   d. $15001-20000
   e. 20001-25000
   f. $25001-30000
   g. above $30000

3. How much education does your father have?
   a. Secondary 3 or less
   b. Secondary 4 to 5
   c. Secondary 6 to 7
   d. University
   e. University grad
   z. Technical school grad
   y. Others __________

4. Have your family any property?
   a. Yes: i) flat(s) ii) car(s) iii) ship(s) iv) shares
   b. No

5. What is the type of housing you are currently living at?
   a. Squatters
   b. Water housing
   c. Public housing
   d. Private housing (Bought or Renting? __________)

6. How would you describe your neighborhood's condition of living?
   a. Luxurious
   b. comfortable
   c. Average
   d. Below average
   e. Run down
   f. A slum

7. How much time during the past 3 years has your father been out of work?
   a. Not at all
   b. Less than 1 month to 2 years or more (collapsed)
8. Have your parents received welfare payments?

a. No
b. Yes

Thank you for your help!

* In Part B, the shaded choice is where the participants can score a point. Totally we have 60 points

Appendix II

Important statistics on primary, secondary, technical schools by the Education Department:

1999/2000

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of primary schools</td>
<td>819</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of primary students</td>
<td>491851</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of repeaters</td>
<td>5034</td>
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Here I divide the number of primary students by 6 so as to estimate the number of primary 6 students:

\[
\text{491851} / 6 = 81975 \text{ (Including primary six repeaters)}
\]

1999/2000

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<tr>
<td>Number of secondary and technical students</td>
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<td>Number of repeaters</td>
<td>21951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of secondary and technical students – No. of repeaters</td>
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Important statistics tertiary students by UGC

1999/2000

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of undergraduates</td>
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Total number of my study population is about 558,139 adolescents.