

Assessing the Self-Esteem of New Zealand Adolescents*

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Data from a survey of the life areas important to 163 New Zealand school children were compared to the dimensions included in well-known self-esteem instruments. The focus of these measures on areas such as the family, friends, and sport was appropriate for the majority of those sampled. However, the academic area and physical attractiveness were not so salient for these middle-class adolescents. There was also evidence of gender and age differences in salience of life areas. A random sample of adolescents may well reveal differences along cultural and class lines. Implications of such differences for the measurement of self-esteem are discussed.

An individual's self-esteem has long been recognized as significant both as an indicator of psychological health and as a factor influencing academic achievement (James, 1890). Consequently, much effort has been devoted to the measurement of self-esteem. However, this research area has been plagued by problems of inadequate theoretical conceptualization and insufficient attention to establishing the reliability and validity of the instruments concerned (Wylie, 1974). Fortunately, the situation has improved recently with the proposal of a multifaceted, hierarchical model of the self by Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976). This model has served as a basis for several questionnaires validated with the aid of the latest techniques of causal modeling (Fleming, 1986; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Song & Hattie, 1984).

These instruments, however, like most other measures of self-esteem, assume that different individuals share the same components of self-esteem — typically covering areas like school, family, friends, and personal appearance (see Table 1). The problem with pre-set questions is that they may focus on aspects of life which are not salient for an individual subject. Alternatively, some aspect salient for that subject may be omitted. Self-esteem questionnaires fail to allow for developmental

and cultural, let alone individual, differences in value systems (Juhasz, 1985; Watkins, 1978). Even if the areas of life covered are salient for an individual, it does not follow that they are of equal salience as these questionnaires assume. This assumption is contrary to the view held by numerous theorists from William James to the present day that an individual's self-esteem should weight each component of the self according to its subjective importance to that subject (James, 1890; Marsh, 1986; Wylie, 1974).

Clay and Oates (1984) pointed out that New Zealand society was more culturally different from North American and the United Kingdom than is often recognised. Consequently they concluded that much of the overseas research into adolescent values was not relevant for New Zealand.

Therefore it seems pertinent to ask whether the life areas covered by typical published measures of self-esteem are appropriate for New Zealand adolescents. It may well be that there are other life areas that a great majority of a particular subgroup of New Zealand adolescents consider important. If this contention was to be confirmed then it may be possible to develop culturally appropriate self-esteem questionnaires separately for New Zealand male and female adolescents, for example, if required. Alternatively, it may well be that little agreement about the salience of life areas even for sub-groups of New Zealand

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Table 1: *Subscales of Five Well-Known Self-Esteem Measuring Instruments*

Self Description Questionnaire (SQD) (Marsh et al., 1984)	Self-Relating Scale (SRS) (Fleming, 1986)	Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS) (Fitts, 1965)	Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) (Coopersmith 1967)	Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers, 1969)
Physical Abilities/Sport	Social	Physical	Peers	Intellectual & School Status
Physical Appearance	Physical Abilities	Moral/Ethical	Family	Physical Appearance and Attributes
Relations with Peers	Physical Appearance	Personal	School	Anxiety
Relations with Parents	Academic	Family		Popularity
Academic	Self-Regard	Social		Happiness & Satisfaction

adolescents can be found. It may then be necessary to develop instruments to measure self-esteem which allow individual New Zealand subjects to choose their own salient life areas. This particularly would be the case if the instruments were to be used for other than research purposes where the emphasis was on group rather than individual trends.

Thence the purpose of this research was to answer the following questions:

What life areas are important to the majority of New Zealand adolescents?

Are these areas covered by typical self-esteem questionnaires?

Are these areas equally salient for these adolescents (both as a group and individually)?

Are there significant gender and age differences in the above.

Method

The subjects were 163 primarily Pakeha students (89 male, 74 female) who were enrolled either at an intermediate or a secondary school in an urban, middle class area. The students were virtually evenly distributed across Form 1, III, and V classes in which the ages averaged 11, 13 and 15 years, respectively. Top, average, and below average streams were included in the sample at all levels.

The subjects were asked to answer anonymously a modified version of the "How I See Myself" questionnaire (Juhasz, 1985) under the directions of their normal English teacher. Their responses to the following questions were context analyzed by the authors:

"What are the most important areas of your life?"

"Which of these usually make you feel good?"

"Which of these usually make you feel bad?"

Results

An average of four life areas was listed per subject. The majority of these responses were classifiable into one of eleven categories. These life areas together with the percentage of subjects reporting that area by form and gender are listed in Table 2.

It can be seen that the only life areas reported as important by the majority of each form x gender subgroup were 'family' and 'friends'. 'Sport' and 'school' were the next most commonly reported. However, it appears that the only female subgroup a majority of which reported the former as significant were those in Form V. 'School' was acknowledged as important by less than 30% of the Form III students regardless of sex. However, the great majority of Form V students recognised the importance of school.

The rankings of the importance of the life areas indicate fairly similar responses by form (age) and gender (coefficient of concordance, corrected for ties, $W = .70$). Inspection of Table 2, though, provides further evidence of age and gender differences. For example, money and career were often reported as important by the older boys and older girls, respectively. The older girls were also the most likely to consider

Table 2: Percentages of Subjects Reporting Life Areas by Form and Gender

Life Areas	Form I		Form III		Form V	
	M (N=27)	F (N=28)	M (N=38)	F (N=16)	M (N=24)	F (N=30)
Family	85.2	85.7	65.8	75.0	75.0	70.3
Friends	74.1	75.0	50.0	68.8	75.0	66.7
Sport	55.6	28.6	92.1	37.5	54.2	70.0
School	55.6	42.9	26.3	18.8	87.5	70.7
Relationships	29.6	25.0	15.8	6.3	12.5	40.0
Health	14.8	17.9	7.9	12.5	29.2	23.3
Money	3.7	0.0	18.4	12.5	45.8	20.0
Career	0.0	0.0	13.2	6.3	25.0	46.7
Personal Traits	0.0	3.6	5.3	12.5	16.7	53.3
Pets	11.1	35.7	2.6	37.5	4.2	3.3
Social Life	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.5	16.7	33.3

relationships with others, personal traits (e.g. kindness, helpfulness, trustworthiness), and their social life as significant aspects of their life. The younger girls were more likely to consider their pets as salient.

Further analysis showed that the subjects reported about 60% and 20% of the life areas important to themselves made them feel 'good' and 'bad', respectively. It appears that their family, friends, and sports usually made them feel 'good'. However, the Form V students, in particular, reported that school and career prospects often made them feel 'bad'.

Discussion

This exploratory study indicates that the focus of self-esteem instruments on life areas such as the family, friends, and (to a lesser extent) sport, may be appropriate for the majority of middle-class New Zealand adolescents such as those sampled here. However, there were a considerable number of the subjects for whom at least one of these life areas is apparently not very important.

This study also showed indications of gender and age differences in salience of life areas. These were generally ones that would be expected given our knowledge of current sex roles and maturational changes. However, this study was confined to students from a middle-class urban area. It is likely that a random sample of New Zealand adolescents would reveal further differences along cultural and class lines. For example, Ranby (1979) and Chapman (1984) have

questioned the appropriateness of Western self-esteem measures for Maori subjects.

Therefore, it may well be worth considering placing more concentration on the development of self-esteem measuring instruments which allow individual subjects to choose self-dimensions relevant to their lives and to weight them according to their own feelings. Watkins (1978) has demonstrated that this is possible to achieve.

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