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Generalized self-efficacy of youth in the New Territories:

A community survey conducted by a Hong Kong NGO

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## Abstract

Youth are both key participants in debate and a central theme in the discourse on social issues in Hong Kong. Youth are often problematized in the contemporary media and political discussion as lacking in the work ethic, confidence and social skills necessary to be successful. Hong Kong youth are framed as pathologically shy, anti-social, lazy and entitled and these characteristics are used to present an image of Hong Kong youth as having individual characteristics that lead to their challenges in the job market and their characteristics as political rogues. This study approaches the characterization of Hong Kong youth with an intention of gaining a clearer picture of individual characteristics related the problematized image of Hong Kong youth, namely Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE), a notion connected to a variety of traits. The study is based on community surveys of youth (N=2036) using the GSE instrument conducted in the New Territories communities of Tin Shui Wai and Yuen Long, communities known for high rates of poverty, and public housing. GSE characteristics are analyzed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency, factor analysis to verify the dimensional nature of the scale. The relationships between GSE and age and gender were analyzed using multiple linear regression model. Findings indicated that despite a slightly higher, yet statistically significant GSE scores for females, and little impact of age on GSE, Hong Kong youth have normal levels of GSE. This finding offers a counter to the pathologizing of youth's individual characteristics, and implies the need for a shift in discourse toward more targeted examination of the structural issues that act as barriers to social mobility of today's young people in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Hong Kong, youth, self-efficacy, urban youth, social mobility

## Generalized self-efficacy of youth in the New Territories:

### A community survey conducted by a Hong Kong NGO

Youth issues in Hong Kong have risen to the forefront of social discourse in Hong Kong in recent years. Youth protests known as the Umbrella Movement and Occupy Central gave youth issues more attention in the mainstream media in Hong Kong and worldwide. Youth protest events have continued for several years, beginning in late 2014 in response to general social anxiety about the loss of sovereignty since the handover to China in 1997 by the British colonial powers. Anxieties were further spurred by political moves of the Chinese central government to control Hong Kong election processes (Cheng, 2014). Broad pessimism among the younger generations in Hong Kong has grown and youth hold a generally negative view of the future of Hong Kong and economic opportunities in the long term (Pau, 2014). Even Hong Kong's governing body, the Legislative Council Secretariat (2015), has acknowledged the limited social mobility in contemporary Hong Kong society for young Hong Kongers.

Youth in Hong Kong face many tribulations which have been well documented in the media (Abraham, 2017; Yan, 2014). Income inequality has grown in recent years and social mobility has been limited (Ho & Huang, 2013). Hong Kong youth face some of the highest housing prices in the world (Forrest & Yip, 2015), an issue that many young professionals lament as they struggle to make a living in what many consider a post-*golden age* Hong Kong (Chew, 2014). Hong Kong youth also perceive wide generational divides (Sin, 2012). Hong Kong has seen economic shrinkage recently since the expansion of mainland China's economy, further limiting the jobs even for university graduates.

Within the contemporary Hong Kong economic and social context, the current study sought to elaborate upon issues impacting youth in the New Territories. The New Territories is the region of Hong Kong closest to the border of mainland China, and furthest from the central business and shopping districts of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Through collaboration with Hong Kong-based charity, Project Share, who works with disadvantaged youth in the New Territories, one of the researchers and the organization's staff designed a community survey to be implemented in the summer months of 2015 and 2016 to gather data on a variety of social issues impacting youth in this area. Included in this survey were selected items from the general self-efficacy (GSE) scale developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) in order to garner a clearer understanding of youth self-efficacy. The organization then shared survey data with the researchers. This study endeavors to contribute to the body of literature on youth issues in Hong Kong, the relationship between GSE and other related issues within the Hong Kong context, and to provide a more informed position to both the collaborating charity, as well as any other charities, social agencies and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) working with youth in Hong Kong.

Youth self-efficacy was of particular interest to the researchers and the organization due to issues of low self-confidence among youth participating in organizational programming and prior research

exploring self-confidence and related issues (Du, King & Chu, 2016; Wong, 2012). In particular, the organization provides workshops and internships in English-based settings for youth in order to provide opportunities to improve English skills in real-world situations. The researchers were interested in further exploring the construct of self-efficacy, often associated with self-confidence (Scholz, Dona, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002), as it pertains to these youth to situate New Territories youth in the broader social field of self-efficacy research. The following literature review will examine research on self-efficacy, particularly the generalized self-efficacy construct, as well as situate the study within contemporary research on Hong Kong youth issues.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Generalized Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a social-psychological construct that emerged from the work of Bandura (1989; 1999; 2002) and based on Bandura's social-cognitive theory. Bandura (1998) claimed that people's beliefs in their abilities to produce effects through their actions impact their aspirations, choices, resilience, perseverance, health, academic achievement, social integration and susceptibility to stress and depression. Although this perceived self-efficacy is a personal central self-regulatory mechanism impacting the individual's agency, these beliefs are also impacted by socio-structural influences.

Self-efficacy as a social science construct has been operationalized in a variety of fields and generally organized into two categories: domain-specific and general (Scholz, Dona, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002). Domain-specific self-efficacy refers to a sense of self-efficacy toward specific tasks and abilities, for instance, academic subject achievement (Kaya, & Bozdog, 2016) or career decision-making (Flores, Ojeda, Huang, Gee, & Lee, 2006; Gushue, Scanlan, Pantzer, & Clarke, 2006). General self-efficacy (GSE) "refers to global confidence in one's coping ability across a wide range of demanding or novel situations" (Scholz, Dona, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002, p. 243). Schwartz (1992) outlined GSE as a sense of competence to cope with stressful situations effectively. Thus, a GSE scale was developed by Schwartz and Jerusalem (1995) to measure this construct and since, the scale has been translated into 32 languages. The authors have tested the instrument in a variety of countries, vetting the scale for reliability and validity (Luszczynska, Scholz, & Schwarzer, 2005; Schwarzer, Bäßler, Kwiatek, Schröder, & Zhang, 1997; Schwarzer, & Born, 1997; Schwarzer, et al, 1997; Zhang, & Schwarzer, 1995). Research has determined GSE to be a universal construct and useful in explaining a broad range of coping outcomes and behaviors.

### **Hong Kong Context**

Within the Hong Kong context, particularly in the New Territories region, youth issues such as shyness, stress, low self-esteem and youth suicide have been acknowledged as important social issues in need of effective intervention (Chan & Lo, 2016; Harding, 2011; Law, 2016; Tong, Ting, & McBride-

Chang, 2011). Shyness in the Hong Kong context has been associated with language acquisition (Tong, Ting, & McBride-Chang, 2011), extreme social exclusion (Wong, 2008; 2009; 2012), social phobia (Harding, 2011), interpersonal issues and addiction to online gaming (Ng, 2006). A growing body of literature had developed around the notion of *hidden youth*, which typically refers to socially withdrawn youth (Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong, 2006; Chan, & Lo, 2014; Yip & Chan, 2013). In Hong Kong public discourse, these youth issues are attributed to a variety of factors including: laziness (Lau, 2016), social exclusion (Wong, 2008; 2009; 2012; Wong and Ying, 2006), depression (Chan, 2012), self-esteem and family dynamics (Chan & Lo, 2016). Narratives are prevalent in Hong Kong that education provides clear access to social mobility, and thus a lack of social mobility is associated with a lack of academic skill and work ethic; a mantra that has been challenged in the literature (Mok, 2015). Public housing is presented in a generally stable and positive manner in Hong Kong, and despite a narrative of ambiguity effects of living in public housing on education and social mobility, research has noted negative impacts of socio-economic, housing and geographic realities on long-term social mobility (Hu, & Chou, 2016). Current discourse also often omits issues related to the unstable job market despite the findings of job insecurity (Lee, 2015). Chiu and Wong (2018) found a negative correlation between youth happiness, macro-economic conditions and housing prices, and found that these realities had a stronger impact on youth than older age groups since 2000.

Collectively, the discourse on youth issues continues to convey a generally negative portrait of youth in Hong Kong at-large, and in the New Territories specifically, despite evidence that precarious socioeconomic issues represent powerful pressures on contemporary Hong Kong youth. The discourse also centers the lack of social mobility of Hong Kong youth on a lack of important individual characteristics necessary for success in the modern work force, rather than on structural and systemic realities. This study attempts to clarify this public perception through data on the target population of youth in the New Territories to determine the characteristics of GSE and compare these to the general public perception and academic discourse.

Youth issues are impacted by a host of social trajectories which may also interact with GSE. More understanding of the characteristics of GSE among the New Territories youth is needed in order to better address youth issues, which will in turn inform social policy and targeted assistance provided by government agencies, NGOs and youth advocates. Because youth are generally described in a negative manner in public discourse, more clarification is needed to either support or challenge the widely accepted notion that Hong Kong youth's biggest barriers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are personal and internal. Therefore, this research study sought to explore GSE of the youth in the New Territories. Further, the study sought to determine the interaction between New Territories youth GSE, age and gender. This study was designed to answer two research questions: (1) What are the

characteristics of GSE for youth in the New Territories of Hong Kong? (2) How does the age and gender of youth in the New Territories of Hong Kong impact their GSE?

## **Method**

### **Setting**

The current study was implemented in the Hong Kong New Territories town of Tin Shui Wai. Tin Shui Wai was originally planned and constructed for low-income Hong Kong residents and immigrants from mainland China. The land was sold to the Hong Kong government by famous Hong Kong land developer Li Ka Shing and designed with large integrated public housing estates. Proximity to China's border was intended to allow low-income workers access to mainland factory work, and mainland Chinese inexpensive housing on the Hong Kong side of the border. However, the area did not have an economic infrastructure with local manufacturing or other types of employment and thus, locals in Tin Shui Wai must travel for work, often long distances. Since its establishment Tin Shui Wai had developed a negative reputation for its disenfranchised and isolated poor and working class. Several key incidents further cemented this reputation in the public's mind, giving it the moniker the *City of Sadness* (Cheung, 2009; Hou, 1989; Rochelle, 2014). To further exacerbate issues of poverty, Tin Shui Wai also has the highest food prices in Hong Kong (Ng, 2013; Wong & Chung, 2013). Although the area has a high concentration of public housing, it has also seen a recent increase in private housing which is particularly appealing to the Hong Kong middle class due to the lower housing costs in Tin Shui Wai in comparison to other areas. Also, efficient public transportation to and from Tin Shui Wai (including a light rail line and subway system) allows more affluent and socially mobile Hong Kong residents to live more cheaply in Tin Shui Wai while still being able to access the amenities of other New Territories communities as well as Kowloon and Hong Kong island districts. The social and demographic shifts occurring in the community are further rationale for the need to better understand youth issues and trends.

### **Participants**

Surveys for this study were given to 2036 youth in Hong Kong's New Territories town of Tin Shui Wai during the summer months of 2015 and 2016. These youth were approached in public at local shopping areas, public parks and public transportation locations. Participants included 617 females and 1263 males. An additional 156 survey respondents included either no response or an invalid response to the gender survey item. Respondents ranged in age from 10-24.

### **Survey Design and Implementation**

Surveys were developed by one of the researchers of this study as well as NGO staff. The survey included more items addressing additional constructions beyond GSE; however, for the purposes of this study, only the GSE items, as well as demographic items, will be analyzed. Surveys were implemented by one of the study researchers as well as NGO staff. Survey data collectors were selected from a pool of

youth who had participated in NGO programs in the past. These youth were trained in community survey collection techniques in a 1-day training that involved training on ethical considerations, survey best-practices and role-play. Data entry was also conducted by these trained youth helpers. Survey data was collected over a 3-week period in June and July 2015 and a 3-week period in June and July 2016.

Survey items analyzed for this study are based on Schwarzer and Jerusalem's (1995) GSE Scale which has been translated into 33 languages. Validity and reliability of the instrument established further through numerous additional studies (Schwarzer, Bäßler, Kwiatek, Schröder, & Zhang, 1997; Schwarzer, & Born, 1997; Schwarzer, Born, Iwawaki, Lee, Saito, & Yue, 1997). Further, positive correlations have been found between GSE and both self-esteem and optimism, as well as negative correlations found between GSE and both shyness and anxiety (Schwarzer, 1993). The researchers posited that GSE of youth in the New Territories would be relatively low overall, particularly in light of the literature on Hong Kong youth, as well as the informal discussions with NGO staff. Further, the researchers asserted that GSE would interact with other variables such as gender and age.

## **Findings**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Heeding the rule of thumb given by Schwarzer, scores are calculated for all respondents who completed at least seven items of the ten-item scale.  $N = 1908$  respondents fell in the desired age range of 10-21 years and answered at least seven GSE items. The overall mean was 2.93, on par with the mean of 2.9 reported by Schwarzer (2014) as typical for many other samples. The mean and standard deviation for each item and for the overall GSE scores are given in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

In this sample, Cronbach's alpha is 0.892, showing satisfactory internal consistency for the GSE scale in this study. Factor analysis identified a primary factor accounting for 50.7% of the variance. The second factor accounted for only an additional 8.2% of the variance, confirming the single dimension nature of the scale suggested by Schwarzer and other authors.

### **Impact of Age and Gender on GSE**

The relationship between GSE and the variables age and gender is investigated via multiple linear regression model. The predictor variables are age and an indicator variable for gender, while the response variable is GSE average score. Some observations in the data set are missing age or gender values. The regression analysis uses 1680 complete cases. The overall model is statistically significant ( $F = 7.258$ ,  $p = .001$ ), but with low  $R^2 = 0.9\%$ . Age appears to have minimal impact on GSE ( $t = -1.152$ ,  $p = .249$ ). The effect of gender is small, but statistically significant ( $t = -3.728$ ,  $p = .000$ ). The coefficient of gender is  $-.086$ , indicating that, holding age constant, female respondents had GSE average scores .086 points lower than males.



## Discussion

The discourse on youth in Hong Kong has characterized younger generations of its citizens as pathologically shy, socially ill-equipped for success, and lacking confidence in their own abilities (Chan, 2012; Chan & Lo, 2016; Lau, 2016; Lee, 2015; Wong, 2008; 2009; 2012; Wong and Ying, 2006), often situating these concerns squarely with a lack of family support (Chan & Lo, 2016; Du, King, & Chu, 2016). Our study results provide data that represents a counterpoint to this prevailing narrative. For example, the generalized self-efficacy of Hong Kong youths fall within the normal range of scores predicted by Schwarzer (2014) and shown in similar studies conducted in numerous countries. When reflecting on youth programming designed to increase self-efficacy, confidence, and socialization, our data suggest that these efforts may be short-sighted and/or presumptuous. Rather, findings suggest a need for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners concerned with youth issues in Hong Kong to look beyond placing primary blame for social mobility shortcomings at an individual level, and look, instead, toward systemic and structural realities that may limit the social success of youths in Hong Kong despite apparently typical levels of generalized self-efficacy.

Perhaps, the issues related to hidden youth, language acquisition, social exclusion, and social phobia have less to do with an internal lack of personal qualities, and more to do with limited access or opportunity, particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, for opportunities that can lead to social mobility. Perhaps, youths have internalized the brutal economic realities of contemporary Hong Kong, which have inherent exclusivities and inequalities and which cannot be overcome solely through individual-level traits for a substantial segment of the population.

Although this study does not definitively illustrate the micro-level versus macro-level issues, we hope our findings open a conversation among researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to resist a narrative that assigns responsibilities for social issues in modern Hong Kong on the shoulders of youth. Contrarily, more robust discourse and action are needed that focus on structural and systemic issues that negatively impact youth in Hong Kong. Resources, policy, and a shift in perspective that actively counters the current *deficit-based* view of Hong Kong youth may be more effective when combined with the efforts of practitioners, NGOs, and educators working to improve the social mobility of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth.

In conclusion, discourse on youth issues in Hong Kong involves problematic narratives that place the blame for structural barriers and economic systems on the individual characteristics of youths. These negative characteristics are assumed to be widespread among Hong Kong youths. Indeed, they have become a scapegoat for society's problems. Little effort has been made to counter the negative messages promulgated by researchers, practitioners, educators and policy-makers. These findings present a counter

thread to the popular message. Much more research is needed to investigate youth issues from perspectives that do not automatically assume deficit attitudes of or toward youth.

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Table 1

## Descriptive Statistics for General Self-Efficacy Scale Items

Scale items	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.	1906	3.15	.51
2. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.	1906	2.99	.56
3. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.	1903	2.74	.78
4. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.	1906	2.86	.66
5. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.	1898	2.81	.66
6. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.	1905	3.07	.57
7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.	1900	2.99	.59
8. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.	1905	2.93	.64
9. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.	1907	2.97	.59
10. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.	1904	2.76	.69

*Note.* Response format: 1=Not at all true, 2=Hardly true; 3=Moderately true; 4=Exactly true. Adapted from <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~health/engscal.htm>