

The Role of Competition in Today's Hong Kong The Views of Hong Kong Chinese Adolescents in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: Open-ended responses to the question “what kind of role does competition play in Hong Kong today?” were obtained from 257 senior Hong Kong secondary school students aged 16-18 years. Content analysis showed the respondents viewed competition in terms of the areas in which competition was involved, the importance of such competition, and the value of this competition. Their views of areas of competition were closest to the reported views of Hungarian and Japanese peers but nothing like those of UK or US adolescents who placed more emphasis on competition in sports. The respondents also viewed competition as very important and generally a positive force leading to the improvement of Hong Kong at both societal and individual levels. Like the research program of Fulop *et al.*, these findings show that views of the nature and function of competition vary across cultures and that collectivist societies can be just or more competitive than individualist.

Key words: Competition psychology, pushing force, development, economy, economic success

INTRODUCTION

In the literature of cross-cultural psychology competition has been viewed as characteristic of individualist, typically Western societies. On the other hand, cooperation has been seen as typifying non-Western collectivist societies^[1]. Competition and cooperation are also often seen as mutually exclusive concepts with the latter being considered by far the more desirable^[2].

However, an ongoing research program by Fulop and her colleagues has challenged the above views^[3-9]. Fulop's work has compared young people's perception of the role of competition in samples of school and/or university students from countries such as Canada, USA, UK, Japan, Nepal and Hungary. Respondents from the first four economically advanced countries (and the poorest, Nepal) tended to consider that they lived in relatively competitive societies but most of the North American and UK students seemed to take competition for granted and had relatively neutral views of its presence. However, most of the Japanese and Nepalese respondents had clearly thought about competition and were able to articulate sophisticated views of its positive effects on their society and their own lives. They often saw competition as a process of mutual improvement beneficial both to them individually and to their society. In contrast respondents from Hungary, in the process of transition from a controlled socialist economy to a free enterprise one, showed little understanding of the role of competition in their country and typically expressed either neutral or negative sentiments towards it. The Hungarian, unlike the other respondents, frequently described negative consequences of competition such as cheating, bribery,

corruption, jealousy, and aggression.

From Fulop's research it is clear that cultures differ in their perception of the nature and value of competition and that the views expressed in the first paragraph here are based on Western conceptualisations. After all there are a number of Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and increasingly China where competition is the norm at least in business. These countries all share a Confucian heritage background with an emphasis on the role of competition in education as a means of upward social mobility^[10]. Research has shown that all five are much less individualist cultures than is typical of North America^[11]. The latter three Chinese societies are also much more collectivist than North America^[11]. Also in these Chinese societies academic motivation has been found to be more socially based than reflected in the Western literature^[12-14].

The Hong Kong Context: “Competition is the hallmark of Hong Kong and one of the key factors of success of East Asian economies”^[15].

Statements such as the above have commonly been found in mass media reports and official reports in Hong Kong for at least the last fifteen years. Intense competition has generally been seen as a necessity for the economic success of Hong Kong at an international level and for the success of companies within Hong Kong. Rising unemployment rates in recent years have also encouraged competition in Hong Kong for good (or indeed any) jobs at the individual level. This latter role of competition is consistent with traditional Chinese society where many thousands competed for selection to coveted government positions through civil service examinations. These examinations were seen as

a major motivation to learn and the tradition of the importance of examinations has become a characteristic of the Hong Kong education system^[10,15]. This emphasis on examinations has long existed along with the belief that success can be achieved through hard work and innate ability is seen as much less important than it is in Western countries^[14,16].

The aim of this research was to explore how Hong Kong adolescents perceived the role of competition in contemporary Hong Kong society. Where possible direct comparisons are made with Fulop's data from other countries.

METHOD

This investigation was based on data collected for a MEd group research project supervised by the author in late 2003. The participants were 257 Chinese students. Of these 169 and 88 were from Forms 4 and 5, respectively; 132, 42, and 83 were from Band 1 (high ability), Band 2 (average ability), and Band 3 (low ability) schools, respectively; 136 were female and ages were mainly in the 16-18 year range.

Each participant was asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions. The question, responses to which are analysed in this paper, was 'What kind of role does competition play in Hong Kong today?' This approach to data collection allows respondents to express their views in their own words so the categories emerging are based on the respondents' rather than the researchers' perspective. It does not allow the probing necessary to ensure that respondents have understood the questions or that their views are interpreted correctly as possible with in-depth interviews. On the other hand the approach is much less time consuming and so does allow much larger, more representative sampling and the analysis is generally straight forward. The questions were written in Chinese after a careful process of translation and back-translation. Their responses were later translated into English by the student researchers involved. All the latter were experienced teachers and all but one were of Chinese ethnicity.

The MEd students worked on the analysis of the responses in groups of four. After a general discussion and analysis of sample responses they worked in pairs to content analyse a subset of the responses. Agreement was first reached on the three main areas of responses to the question of interest here. Then specific categories were agreed and responses were classified according to these categories. Agreement between the specific categorisation of the pairs was checked and found to be over 90%. Subsequently responses were independently reanalysed by the author with only a few minor discrepancies found.

The Hong Kong data was compared to those reported by Fulop where possible. As in Oyserman *et al.*^[11] rank order correlations were calculated to indicate

similar patterns of responses across country samples without assuming metric equivalence.

RESULTS

The Hong Kong respondents' views of the role of competition in their society could be classified into three main general groups: (a) the areas in which competition was involved; (b) the importance of such competition; and (c) their evaluations of the value of this competition.

Areas of competition: Fifty-one (20% of the sample) indicated competition permeated all aspects of Hong Kong life while only 2% indicated that there was no influence at all.

One hundred and fifty-three responses could be classified as showing specific areas influenced by competition. Some of the areas were clearly at a societal level (e.g. 'international'; 'the economy'), others at a personal level (e.g. 'money') while for others it was hard to tell which level was involved. Eight specific areas were identified in our analysis (some respondents reported several). From most to least frequently reported they were 'the economy', 'jobs', 'position in society', 'survival', 'international', 'education', 'money (personal)', and 'sports'. For comparison with Fulop's data a final category 'politics' was added, although it was not mentioned by any of the Hong Kong respondents. Table 1 lists the rank order of these nine categories for Hong Kong, Hungarian, Japanese, English, and American respondents.

Spearman rank order correlations were calculated for the ranks of these five countries. The most similar were the UK and US ranks ($\rho = .66$, $p < .01$) with sport being ranked highly in both Western countries. The main difference being that relative to the US sample, the UK respondents rated 'international' as higher but 'the economy' lower.

The Hong Kong rankings showed little similarity to those of Fulop's data from the UK or USA (with Spearman's ρ s = .08 and .03, respectively) but were closer to the data from Japan and Hungary (with ρ s = .45 and .44, respectively) but none of the correlations were significant at the .05 level. Relative to the other country samples, the HK respondents ranked 'money' and 'politics' lower but 'international' higher than the Hungarians; 'survival' higher but 'education' lower than the Japanese; 'position in society' and 'survival' higher but 'sport' much lower than the UK and US respondents.

Importance of competition: The degree of importance of the role of competition in Hong Kong society was referred to by 190 of our sample (73.9%). The most frequent responses provided and their percentage of the total number of 'importance' responses are shown in Table 2. Unfortunately Fulop's data is reported in terms

Table 1: Specific areas of competition in rank order of frequency as reported by adolescents in Hong Kong, Hungary, Japan, United Kingdom, and United States of America

Area	Hong Kong	Hungary ^a	Japan ^a	United Kingdom ^b	United States ^a
The economy	1	2	2	5	1
Jobs 2	3	4	2	4	
Position in society	3	=5,6	5	8	8
Survival	4	4	9	9	9
International	5	8	3	3	7
Education	6	7	1	4	3
Money (personal)	7	1	6	=6,7	5
Sports	8	9	=7,8	1	2
Politics	9	=5,6	=7,8	=6,7	6

a data based on Fulop^[4] b data based on Fulop^[6]

Table 2: The importance of competition in Hong Kong society

	Number of Responses	Percentage of responses
Very important	64	33.7%
Important	107	56.3%
No importance	4	2.1%
Too important	4	2.1%
Not important enough	2	1.1%
Don't know	9	4.7%

Table 3: Evaluation of the role of competition in Hong Kong society compared to the views of Hungarian, Japanese, United Kingdom and American adolescents (as percentages)

Negative category	Hong Kong	Hungary ^a	Japan ^a	United Kingdom ^b	United States ^a
Positive role	59.2%	20%	39%	48%	32%
Negative role	6.7%	32%	29%	9%	12%
Positive and negative role	6.2%	8%	22%	11%	5%
Neutral	27.9%	40%	10%	32%	51%

a data based on Fulop^[4] b data based on Fulop^[6]

of the 'intensity' of competition whereas for the Hong Kong data 'importance' was clearly the appropriate dimension given the responses obtained. Thus direct comparison with Fulop's data was not possible. However, Fulop^[4,6] reported that 'very intense' or 'intense' responses were given by 93% of her UK respondents, 63% of the US, 41% of the Hungarian, but only 8.3% of Japanese, respectively (56.5% of the latter reporting it was too intense').

It can be seen that competition was described as 'very important' or 'important' by 90% of those Hong Kong respondents who discussed this dimension (66.5% of the total sample). Typical comments were the following (note that none of these responses are clearly at the individual level while the last two are definitely at the societal level):

"Competition has an important role: the survival of the fittest"

"Competition has a very important role. Everyone wants to get a good job so they must compete. When they have a job people will strive for promotion. If we do not continue to learn we will be thrown out of the race."

"Competition plays a very important role in pushing us to improve ourselves. It helps to improve our society for the next generations."

"Competition has an important role. Hong Kong being an international city must continue to improve and develop."

Evaluation of the role of competition: The Hong Kong responses were categorized where possible as indicating whether the role of competition in their

society was 'positive', 'negative', 'positive and negative', or 'neutral'. The percentages of Hong Kong responses so classified are presented in Table 3 together with comparative data from Fulop's work. Further analysis showed that there was no relationship between the evaluation of competition and the area in which competition most occurred in each country.

It can be seen that the Hong Kong respondents generally viewed the role of competition more favourably than the UK, US, Japanese, and (particularly) Hungarian samples. While the Hungarian and Japanese were much more likely to perceive a negative role for competition, few of the Hong Kong sample agreed. The US and Hungarian samples were also much more likely to report 'neutral' evaluations.

Comments from the Hong Kong sample typically pointed to the motivational and improvement role of competition at all levels. Such comments included:

"Competition motivates all people to improve. There is a famous Chinese, saying 'no improvement without competition'"

"Competition is a force pushing the development of our economy"

"Competition leads you to strive to do better".

"Competition motivates us in education and the world of work. It leads to progress in society".

DISCUSSION

Hong Kong, as viewed by the adolescent participants in this study, is a highly competitive society specifically in areas such as the economy, jobs, and social status. Such competition is seen as important

for the success both of Hong Kong society in general and of individuals within that society in particular. Few of these respondents saw competition as a negative force, rather the majority considered competition played a positive role contributing to increased motivation and to improvement at both societal and individual levels.

The findings also support those of Fulop and her team, confirming once again that competition is a multifaceted concept and that views of the nature, role, and value of competition vary considerably across cultures. These adolescents from a relatively collectivist society such as Hong Kong clearly perceived competition as more characteristic of and beneficial to their society than peers from highly individualistic cultures such as the USA and UK. Together with Fulop's work on other less individualist societies such as Japan and Nepal, it is clear that cross-cultural psychology should rethink the equating of competition with individualistic cultures.

Compared with the responses to Fulop's research, relative to US and UK peers the Hong Kong adolescents placed much less emphasis on sport as an arena for competition (consistent with the low priority placed on sport in Hong Kong society generally). Not surprisingly perhaps, given the highly 'controlled' democratic system in place in Hong Kong, politics was not seen as an area of competition by any of the respondents, unlike all the countries sampled in Fulop's work. More surprising, given the criticisms by education reformers of the overly competitive nature of the Hong Kong education system particularly at senior secondary level, our sample of students at this level did not view education as a major area of competition. Perhaps, educationists need to rethink the validity of their perceptions of the education system in Hong Kong.

Of course, these findings while based on a fairly representative sample of 16-18 year olds, can only be generalized with caution to the wider Hong Kong population. This is something future research should address but the views of today's adolescents will help build the Hong Kong of tomorrow.

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