



# Self-esteem and its association with depression among Chinese, Italian, and Costa Rican adolescents: A cross-cultural study



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 September 2014

Received in revised form 20 February 2015

Accepted 26 February 2015

### Keywords:

Self-esteem

Depression

Adolescent

Individualism–collectivism

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factor structure of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), the differences in mean level of self-esteem and its association with depression in adolescents in three different cultures. The RSES and the Children's Depression Inventory were administered to Chinese ( $N = 350$ ), Italian ( $N = 352$ ), and Costa Rican ( $N = 343$ ) adolescents. Confirmatory factor analyses supported the two-factor model of the RSES and it was demonstrated to be invariant across cultures using multi-group confirmatory factor analyses. MANOVA results indicated that Costa Rican adolescents scored higher on positive and negative self-esteem than their Chinese and Italian counterparts. Furthermore, both positive and negative self-esteem was related to depression across cultures. In conclusion, there are both cultural differences and similarities in self-esteem.

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## 1. Introduction

Self-esteem refers to one's general sense of worthiness (Rosenberg, 1965). People in different cultures have different perceptions about themselves (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and therefore cross-cultural perspective is an important approach to investigate self-esteem. To date, some debates have not been completely solved. First, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), a popular instrument to assess self-esteem, is conceptualized as unidimensional (Schmitt & Allik, 2005), but some studies argue that it consists of two distinct, yet related, components (Greenberger, Chen, Dmitrieva, & Farruggia, 2003). Second, some studies have found that people in individualistic cultures have higher self-esteem than in collectivistic cultures (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), while others have not supported this view (Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Last, some scholars posited that self-esteem plays a role in numerous outcomes (e.g., depression) only in individualistic cultures, because self-esteem is more emphasized in individualistic than in collectivistic cultures (Heine et al., 1999). However, others contended that the function of self-esteem is equally important in individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Cai, Wu, & Brown, 2009).

To our knowledge, there is scant research comparing the factor structure of the RSES, the differences in mean level of self-esteem,

and its relationship with depression among East Asian, European, and Latin American adolescents. For example, Farruggia, Chen, Greenberger, Dmitrieva, and Macek (2004) investigated the factor structure of the RSES, the differences in mean level of self-esteem, and the relationship between self-esteem and depression in Chinese, Korean, U.S., and Czech adolescents, but it did not include a Latin American sample. Schmitt and Allik (2005) investigated the factor structure of the RSES and the differences in mean level of self-esteem in 53 countries, but they did not focus on adolescents and did not examine its relationship with depression. To fill these gaps in the literature, the present study investigated the factor structure of the RSES, the differences in mean level of self-esteem, and the relationship between self-esteem and depression among Chinese, Italian, and Costa Rican adolescents.

### 1.1. Individualism and collectivism

Individualism–collectivism is an important framework to investigate cultural similarities and differences. At first, individualism–collectivism is viewed as one bipolar dimension (Hofstede, 1980). However, this classification is criticized for its oversimplification, and some studies proposed more complex models (Freeman & Bordia, 2001; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Triandis and Gelfand (1998) considered individualism and collectivism as two general orthogonal dimensions and they further divided these two dimensions into four categories (i.e., vertical individualism, vertical collectivism, horizontal individualism, and horizontal collectivism)

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by including whether people emphasize equality or hierarchy, a contention similar to Hofstede's power distance (defined as the extent to which people within a country accept that power is distributed equally, geert-hofstede.com) although there are some conceptual differences (Shavitt, Torelli, & Riemer, 2010). Triandis and Gelfand (1998) supported that people could be both collectivist and individualist at the same time. Freeman and Bordia (2001) stated that this does not mean people are collectivistic in one context and individualistic in another, but that "people may endorse both individualist and collectivist attitude statement within the same context" (p. 107). On this basis, they found that individualism and collectivism was a general bipolar higher-order construct that included individualism and collectivism within different contexts (i.e., individualism–collectivism within family, individualism–collectivism within peers, individualism–collectivism within nation, and individualism–collectivism within school).

Although there is not clear definition, based on the scores of individualism and power distance (<http://geert-hofstede.com>), China can be roughly viewed as a vertical collectivistic culture (low individualism and high power distance), and Costa Rica can be roughly seen as a horizontal collectivistic culture (low individualism and low power distance). Italy is a representative of individualistic country but it is in the middle of horizontal and vertical dimension (high individualism and medium power distance). According to Triandis and Gelfand (1998), in vertical individualistic cultural contexts, people like to become distinguished and acquire status through competition with others; in horizontal individualistic cultural contexts, people focus on expressing their uniqueness and building one's ability to be successfully self-reliant and see themselves as equal to others in status; in vertical collectivistic cultural contexts, people highlight the integrity of the in-group and are willing to sacrifice their own personal goals to comply with authorities; in horizontal collectivistic cultural contexts, people tend to view themselves as being similar to others and emphasize sociability and interdependence, but do not easily submit to authority.

### 1.2. Factor structure of the RSES

Numerous studies reported that the RSES contained two factors, with five positive-wording items indicating positive self-esteem and five negative-wording items reflecting negative self-esteem (Farruggia et al., 2004; Greenberger et al., 2003). However, some researchers found that the RSES was unidimensional (Corwyn, 2000; Schmitt & Allik, 2005), concluding that the two-factor structure should be due to method effects (Marsh, Scalas, & Nagengast, 2010). For example, Carmines and Zeller considered that if the two factors (i.e., positive and negative self-esteem) were truly different, then one factor should be related to a certain criteria in a different way (e.g., magnitude, direction) in comparison to the other factor, but no evidence supported this claim in their study (c.f. Marsh et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, both the one-factor and the two-factor models are demonstrated to be culturally equivalent (Farruggia et al., 2004; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Schmitt and Allik (2005) found that most items of the RSES were loaded significantly on a single factor across 53 countries, except that item 8 was not significant in some collectivistic countries (e.g., China). Farruggia et al.'s (2004) study revealed that the two-factor model of RSES was equivalent across American, Chinese, Czech, and Korean adolescents after deleting item 8. However, to our knowledge, to date there is no information about the factor structure and equivalence of the RSES in Costa Rican samples.

### 1.3. Mean level of self-esteem

It is consistently found that East Asian people report lower self-esteem than Westerners (Cai, Brown, Deng, & Oakes, 2007; Farruggia et al., 2004). Although there is no direct evidence comparing the mean level of self-esteem in Chinese, Italian, and Costa Rican adolescents, indirect evidence exists. According to Schmitt and Allik's (2005) study, Chinese sample's mean score on the RSES was 27.54, which was lower than in the Italian sample ( $M = 30.56$ ). Although this study did not include Costa Rican sample, other Hispanic participants' scores ranged from 31.24 (Argentina and Bolivia) to 33.01 (Peru), suggesting that Chinese adolescents' self-esteem is very likely to be lower than their Italian and Hispanic counterparts. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that Chinese adolescents would score lower on the RSES than Italian and Costa Rican adolescents.

### 1.4. Relationships between self-esteem and depression

Depression is related to self-esteem (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Farruggia et al. (2004) considered that the dimension of the RSES should be taken into account when examining the relationship between self-esteem and depression. This is because compared to Western cultures, self-enhancement (e.g., expressing positive views about the self) seems to be less appropriate than self-criticism (e.g., admitting to faults) in some Asian countries (e.g., China). As a result, the relation of the two dimensions to other outcomes may differ across cultures. Previous studies found that both a positive and a negative self-esteem were negatively related to depression in Italian adolescents (Delvecchio, 2013), but only a negative self-esteem was related to depression in Chinese adolescents (Farruggia et al., 2004). However, we did not find any published study addressing this issue in Costa Rican adolescents.

### 1.5. The present study

This study examined the factor structure of the RSES, differences in mean level of self-esteem, and the relation of self-esteem to depression among Chinese, Italian, and Costa Rican adolescents. The RSES was found to be invariant across individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Farruggia et al., 2004; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). However, equivalence is not known in Costa Rican samples, because to our knowledge, this topic has never been addressed previously. Because Chinese culture requires people to be modest and not to show off their personal achievements (Cai et al., 2007), we anticipated that Chinese adolescents would show a lower level of self-esteem than their Italian and Costa Rican counterparts. Last, based on previous findings (Cai et al., 2009; Delvecchio, 2013), we assumed that self-esteem would be negatively related to depression in Chinese and Italian samples, but it was not known how depression and self-esteem would be related in the Costa Rican sample.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The current study included three samples recruited from middle schools and high schools (grade 7–11,  $M_{\text{grade}} = 8.82$ ;  $SD = 1.46$ ). Chinese ( $N = 350$ , 183 boys, 167 girls;  $M_{\text{age}} = 14.17$  years,  $SD = 1.51$ ), Italian ( $N = 352$ , 169 boys, 183 girls;  $M_{\text{age}} = 14.17$  years,  $SD = 1.74$ ), and Costa Rican ( $N = 343$ , 140 boys, 203 girls;  $M_{\text{age}} = 14.73$  years,  $SD = 1.59$ ) adolescents were selected in Guangzhou, Milan, and San José, respectively. Participants were recruited in private and public cooperative schools that served

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