

Westernization of Self-Perception in Modern Affluent Indonesian School Children

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Conflict of Interest:

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Abstract

Background Subjective Social Status is used as an important predictor for psychological and physiological findings, most commonly measured with the MacArthur Scale (Ladder Test). Previous studies have shown that this test fits better in Western cultures. The idea of a social ladder itself and ranking oneself “higher” or “lower” is a concept that accords to the Western thinking.

Objectives We hypothesize that in a culture where only the elites have adapted to a Western lifestyle, the test results reflect a higher level of accuracy for this stratum. We also expect that self-perception differs per sex.

Sample and Methods We implemented the Ladder Test in a study of Indonesian schoolchildren aged between 5 and 13 years (boys $N = 369$, girls $N = 364$) from non-private and private schools in Kupang in 2020.

Results Our analysis showed that the Ladder Test results were according to the Western expectations only for the private school, as the Ladder Scores significantly decreased with age (LM: $p = 0.04$). The Ladder Test results are best explained by “Education Father” for the non-private school pupils ($p = 0.01$) and all boys ($p = 0.04$), by “School Grades” for the private school cohort ($p = 0.06$) and by “Household Score” for girls ($p = 0.09$).

Conclusion This finding indicates that the concept of ranking oneself “high” or “low” on a social ladder is strongly implicated with Western ideas. A ladder implies social movement by “climbing” up or down. According to that, reflection of self-perception is influenced by culture.

Take home message for students Most Indonesian children lack a Western concept of social positioning and in perceiving their social position as “high” or “low” among their peers. This is different in affluent children. With increasing age, they become capable of ranking their position within the social hierarchy, and to recognize life as a career.

Introduction

Self-perception and social identity is that aspect of an individual's self-concept that is derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group, group identification and identity signaling, and shapes common goals and social norms (Tajfel, H., Turner, J. C. 1986; Smaldino 2019).

The Western culture, that arose in Europe from Judaism (homo aequalis) to Christianity to the Enlightenment, is perhaps best characterized by the concept of individualism. Liberty and equality are in place to ensure that, ideally, only the individual's effort and education determines what (social rank) one can achieve in life, rather than marital status, external social pressure, or any kind of religious restrictions and regulations (Lal 2000). This creates a social dynamic in which all social positions are interconnected. Since these positions are traditionally ordered in a vertical hierarchy, individuals perceive their status in a group or in society as "high" or "low" (Hoebel et al. 2015). A social ladder is commonly used to illustrate such Western social dynamics, as one can actively "climb" up or down due to one's actions but also personality traits (shy, dominant) (Massey et al. 2015).

The question we want to answer in this study is whether children raised in a social environment that greatly differs from European and Western norms and cultural concepts are able to perceive their social status in terms of "high" and "low", or "up" and "down", and to express this self-perception on a rank scale visualized by a wooden ladder.

To address this question, we used the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (SSS). In this simple test an individual is asked to rank himself/herself by marking that rung on a picture of a ladder, in which the highest rung is considered "best

of" and the lowest is considered "worst of" reflecting his/her own position within a specific society (Adler and Stewart 2007). This method has been successfully used in medical research to predict the risk of human disease and has been shown to be more accurate for this task than the objective socioeconomic status (SES) (Adler et al. 2000), which is generally measured with the variables "education", "occupation" and "income" (Kumar et al. 2012). It is assumed that the feeling of being treated unfairly or of having fewer opportunities for social participation and realization compared to others, is likely to influence the perception and evaluation of one's own social status (Hoebel et al. 2013; Jackman and Jackman 1973). Associated worries about the future and status fears could trigger psycho-social stress and thus lead to a higher vulnerability to diseases (Adler et al. 2000).

Despite its simplicity the accuracy of this test depends on the participants' cultural background. Studies carried out in Brazil or Indonesia, for example, showed inconsistencies in their results that were difficult to interpret in relation to objective social status or health risk (de Almeida Ferreira et al. 2018; Nobles et al. 2013). The authors considered various aspects as possible explanations for the deviations in perceived social status for some social groups, ranging from poor education and thus a lack of proper understanding the task, to having different concepts of social status. This alludes to a characteristic problem of such tests that are almost exclusively conducted in and adapted to Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies, yet are claimed to be representative for all societies (Henrich et al. 2010).

In a study conducted by Amir et al. (2019), in which Western and non-Western societies were compared, a tendency was shown that the less a population resembled a WIERD society, the less the Mac-

Arthur test results followed the expected pattern. Also a test's sensitivity to different ethnic groups within one society has been revealed, as in American studies the test appeared to work best for White and Chinese Americans (Ostrove et al. 2000) and less well for Latino and African Americans (Ostrove et al. 2000; Allen et al. 2014). This further indicates a certain bias in the test, which apparently applies to specific types of people only.

Self-ranking by MacArthur Scale appears higher in younger pupils and declines with age until it stabilizes in older teenage years. Goodman et al. (2001) suggest that the perception of social stratification matures with age, as more developed abstract thinking enables a reliable assessment of social position. This age-dependent pattern, which Goodman found in adolescents, was also confirmed by Amir et al. (2019) for younger participants (aged between 4 and 18 years). The presented study was carried out in Kupang, (West-Timor) Indonesia. The MacArthur Scale (referred to as the Ladder Test) was implemented in an anthropometric examination of schoolchildren, aged 5 to 13 years (see Table 1), derived from different social backgrounds as reflected by the status of the attended school (private school, middle class school, school for people living in poverty). In order to improve our approach with these children, we slightly altered the original MacArthur Scale test version in cooperation with local pediatricians. The social situation on the individual level was assessed by using the variables of parents' education, school grades and the presence of basic home equipment.

To reveal the general influence of social class and age towards the test's functionality, the following two hypotheses were tested:

1. If the social background influences a child's self-perception, the Ladder Test results should differ between schools.

2. With increasing age a child's self-perception of its social position in society should change towards a rank that reflects its family's objective social status more realistically.

Additionally, we took into account that Indonesia is generally a patriarchal society with different demands on the sexes (Kollo and Sunarso 2018; Wulan and Bajari 2021). Even though positive developments are in progress; for instance, Indonesia has the highest literacy rate in Asia (females 93.59%, males 97.17%) and investments are directed to reduce maternal mortality, women still face structural and cultural inequality. Discriminatory laws on taxes and inheritance are still in place and so are legal barriers in the economy (<https://data.em2030.org/countries/indonesia/>). The 2016 Women's Health and Life Experiences Survey found that one in three women reportedly experienced sexual violence, often with little to no legal consequences for the offenders. This patriarchal structure seems to be religiously independent. The majority of Indonesia is Muslim. In our study location Kupang (West-Timor) 81% are Christians (Hutagalung 2016). Generally, monotheistic religions have been brought to Indonesia by various rulers throughout history, and traditional animism and beliefs in magic and witchcraft remain strong (Farram 2002).

The inequality women experience in society are based on cultural constructs of gender, not on factual differences in biological sex. Since gender is a broad and complex topic, we have only assessed biological sex and will use it throughout the study as a representative of gender.

With the following hypotheses, we examine whether these gender-related unequal conditions that the children are exposed to influence their self-perception.

3. Self-perception of social position differs between boys and girls.

4. Self-perception of boys and girls are influenced by different social variables.

To test this hypothesis we used the attended schools and the social variables which were evaluated during the study as markers for the social background.

Sample and Method

Sample

In Kupang, Indonesia, three different types of schools were visited, a private school for children from affluent social backgrounds, (referred to as School 1), two state schools (put together as School 2) and a rather dilapidated school for very poor children (School 3). In total 723 children between 5 and 13 years of age participated in the study (mean age 9.05 ± 1.62), 369 boys and 364 girls (Table 1). For tests, in which age was relevant, 5 and 13 year old age groups were eliminated because of their low number.

The social situation on the individual level is represented by the variables education of mother and father, school grades of the child (“education”) and the access at home to water, TV and a fridge (“income”).

The education level of the parents was categorized in the approximate years of attending an educational facility, ranging from 1 (no school) to 18 (PhD degree). Access to water was ranked from the least favorable condition 1 (getting water from a lake or river) to the most optimal condition 5 (having running water at home). The presence or absence of a TV and a fridge at home was noted as 0 (absent) and 1 (present). These three equipment factors (water, TV, fridge) were later summed up in a “Household Score” which ranked from 1 (least favorable access to water, absence of TV and Fridge: $1 + 0 + 0 = 1$) to 7 (optimal

water access, presents of TV and fridge: $5 + 1 + 1 = 7$).

The school grades of each child were asked for the subject “math” and “language” and were given in percentage (0–100%). The mean of the two grades were calculated and used in the later analysis.

Lastly, each pupil was asked to rank themselves on an eight-level toy ladder. The highest rung (8) was stated to be presidential-like for the reason that the Indonesian president is a familiar figure to each child. Two steps below was associated with the social rank of a medical doctor. Although, all other ladder steps were left without any particular symbolic figure, it was clear, that the lowest rung represented the weakest and poorest in society. Note, the original MacArthur Scale is predicated on a ten level-ladder scale in which the highest rung is considered “best of” and the lowest rung “worse of”. Since more specific associations per rung are left open to the research setting, the reduction of two steps, and the usage of a toy ladder instead of an illustration, are the only deviations that

Table 1 Number of Indonesian children (boys and girls) by age and school

Age	School 1		School 2		School 3	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
5	0	0	1	0	0	0
6	10	8	14	9	5	2
7	12	18	31	29	6	7
8	12	9	38	49	13	4
9	26	22	37	52	3	7
10	26	23	39	43	6	6
11	14	12	47	37	6	4
12	4	0	12	10	4	2
13	0	0	3	1	0	0
Totals	104	92	222	230	43	32
Over-all	723					

Altered Version of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status

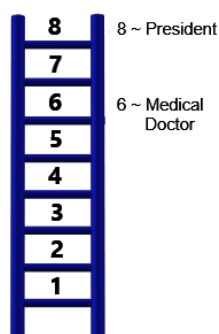


Figure 1 This picture of an eight-level ladder illustrates a wooden toy ladder that was used to assess students' self-perception within the society. Via putting their finger on it the students were asked where they see themselves most represented on the ladder, with level 8 regarded as the most powerful (presidential like), level 6 as a respected citizen (medical doctor) and each step below as persons of decreasing importance and power.

were made to the MacArthur Scale in this study.

The questions and the Ladder Test were performed by local-language speaking physicians and pediatricians in the presence of the children's teachers. Parental informed consent was given. Anonymity was maintained throughout the study. Ethical approval was provided by the Medical and Health Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Ref. no. KE/FK/1140/EC/2019.

Statistics

For the analysis the program R-Studio was used with R 4.0.2 as running system.

As the Ladder Test consists of discrete numbers (1–8) and the results did not follow a normal distribution for school, sex or age (Shapiro-Wilk Test), we used non-parametric tests to assess whether the outcomes of

the SSS differed between cohorts. In order to compare the two groups (per sex, private vs. non-private school) the Mann-Whitney U Test was performed. Additionally, the Kruskal Wallice Test was conducted in order to compare more than two groups (per school, per age in complete years). The critical p-value was set at 0.05.

Additionally we used a linear model to identify a potential relationship between age and the Ladder Test results for the whole data set and per school. Due to the similar trend in schools 2 and 3 and the low student numbers in School 3, these two schools were categorized as “non-private school”, in contrast to the “private school” – School 1.

Using the “step” function of the multiple linear model, we tested whether and which variables of the social components were suitable to explain the results of the Ladder Test. The input for the model was “Education Mother”, “Education Father”, “Grades”, “Household Score”, “Age in Completed Years”, “School” and “Sex”. With the settings on “backwards” this function generates different multiple linear models by step-wise taking out variables. The final output is the model with a combination of variables that achieve the lowest AIC value. With this approach our goal was to examine a general, possibly subtle trend. For this reason, the critical p-value of a variable's contribution to the model was set at 0.1 instead of 0.05. A step-wise generation of multiple linear models was performed for the data set as a whole as well as for the private and non-private schools and for boys and girls separately.

Results

Per school

For School 1, the most frequently chosen level on the MacArthur Scale was rung 5 at 27.6%. Twenty nine point 9 percent and 28.0% of pupils from Schools 2 and 3 frequently ranked themselves at level 7 and 8 respectively, indicating an exaggerated self-perception. The distribution of each school is shifted to the high levels of the Ladder Score (Figure 2). The median was 6 for School 1 and 3 and 7 for School 2. The means of the different schools showed no significant differences when analyzed with the Kruskal-Wallis Test.

Per age

The age groups 5 and 13 years were omitted due to low numbers (Table 1). The median rung for all ages ranged between 6 and 7 years. No significant difference was found between the results of any age group (Figure 3). A linear relationship between age and Ladder Score results for the whole group could not be found.

Per age and social class

To further evaluate the relationship between age and Ladder Score results, we divided the data by private (School 1) and non-private schools (School 2 and 3). For the private school a significant linear relationship was found, as with increasing age the Ladder Score ranking tended towards the lower levels, i.e. from the imperious self-perception “I am the greatest” to a view that we would consider more realistic in terms of social position within Indonesian society. For the non-private schools such a relationship was not found (Figure 4).

Per sex

When assessing the data according to sex, the distribution was shifted towards the higher Ladder Scores for boys as well as for girls (Figure 5). In both groups the second-best level 7 was most often chosen, with 28.8% for girls and 23.3% for the boys. The median for the girls was 7, and for the boys it was 6. However, conducting the Mann-Whitney U Test showed that the mean did not significantly differ between the sexes.

Linear model

Using the step-wise function for the multiple linear model to explain the Ladder Test outcome for the whole data set, the variables “School”, “Sex” and “Age in Completed Years” were discarded, leaving “Education Mother”, “Education Father”, “Grades” and “Household Score”. As we set the threshold of significance at a p-value of 0.1, all variables but “Grades” had a significant influence to the model (Table 2).

When separating the data by sex, the boys’ Ladder Score was best explained with the variable “Education Father” ($p = 0.01$). For the girls only “Household Score” had a significant contribution to the model ($p = 0.09$).

We also divided the data in terms of private and non-private schools. “Education Father” explained the Ladder Test outcome for the non-private pupils significantly ($p = 0.04$), for the private school children, the variable “School Grades” shaped the Ladder Test results the most ($p = 0.06$).

In the plots shown in Figure 6, we can see the significant relationships per school cohort graphically.

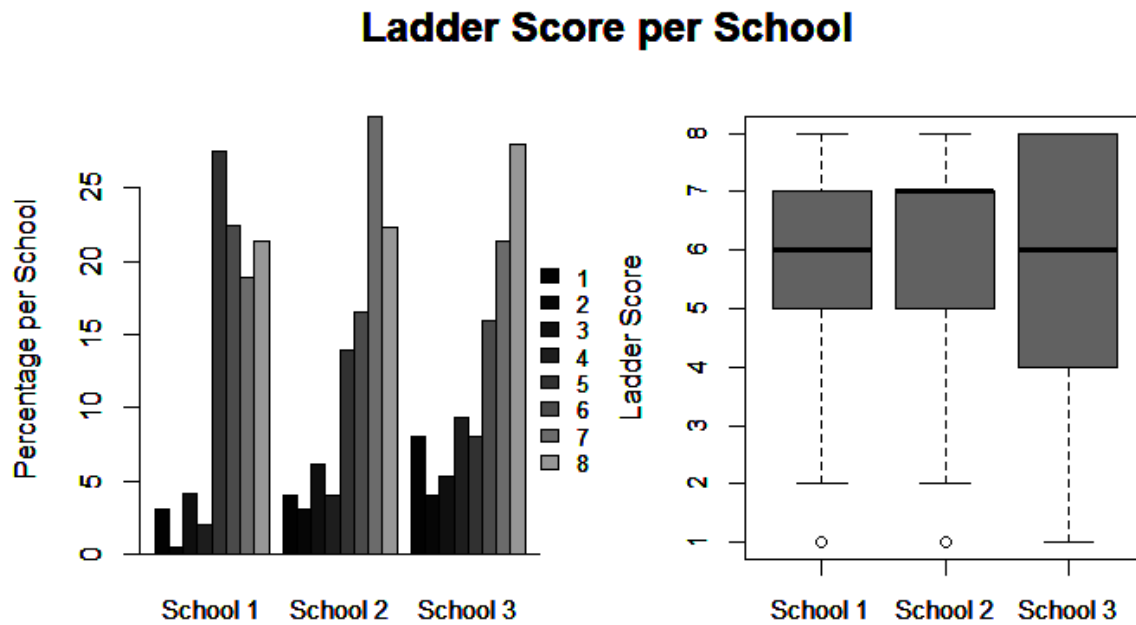


Figure 2 Distribution of the Ladder Score results per school (Kupang, West-Timor, Indonesia). The Kruskal-Wallis Test shows no significant difference between the means: $\chi^2 = 1.25$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.53$ (School 1 = private school, School 2 and 3 = non-private schools).

Discussion

In this paper, we examined to what extent the social backgrounds of Indonesian children influenced their self-perception. We used Ladder Test results in order to highlight the differences in self-perception in relation to the kind of schools they attend. The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Ladder Test) has been shown to be a suitable instrument to assess the relationship between children's self-perception and status in society. We primarily assumed that if children were able to correctly assign their social status position in society, children living in poverty would rank themselves lower than children living in an affluent environment did.

Thus, we expected differences in the self-perception between private school children and children attending state schools (hypothesis 1).

Regardless of the social background, we generally observed a broad overestimation

of children's perception of their social position.

The Ladder Test results indicated that approximately 50% of children from non-private schools and 40% of children from private schools regarded themselves to be in a higher social position than a medical doctor, with approximately half of them perceiving themselves to be on the same level as the Indonesian president.

They ranked themselves as “the greatest”. This concurs with previous findings, in that younger children rank themselves high on the MacArthur Scale (Goodman et al. 2001; Amir et al. 2019). Yet, in contrast with our second hypothesis: “With increasing age a child's self-perception of its social position in society should change towards a rank that reflects its family's objective social status more realistically”, there was no decline in ranking with increasing age when evaluating the entire group. Only when assessing the data separately for each school that we found the decline in ranking solely in older

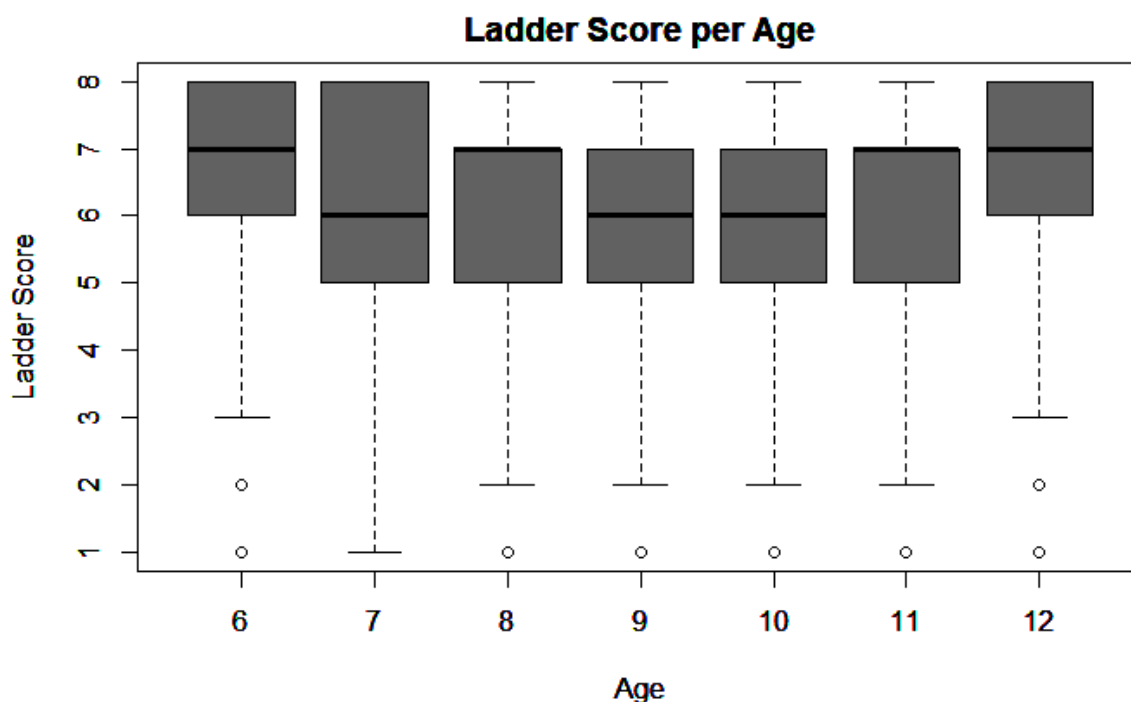


Figure 3 Box-plots of the distribution of the Ladder Score results per age in complete years for all children (Kupang, West-Timor, Indonesia). The median ranges between 6 and 7. The Kruskal-Wallis Test shows no significant difference in means between the age groups: $\chi^2 = 10.222$, $df = 8$, $p = 0.2498$.

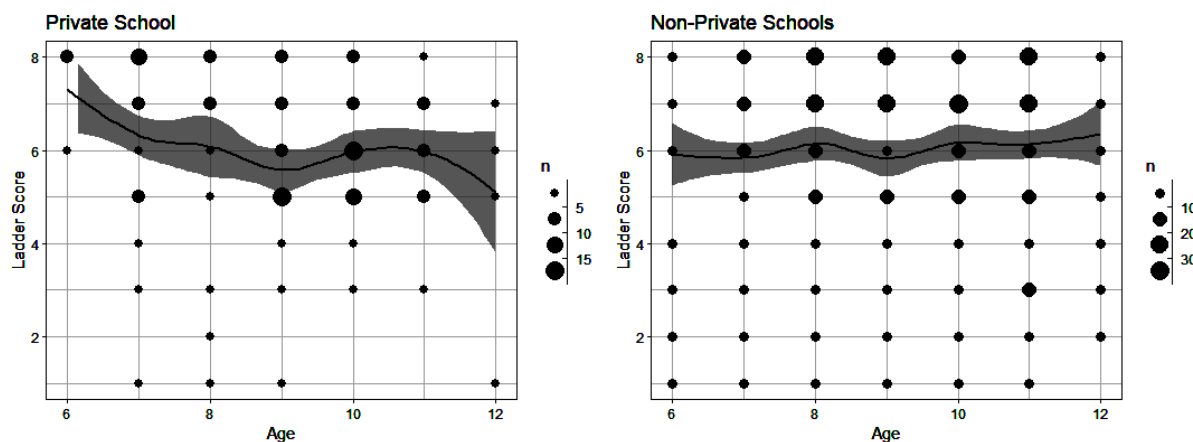


Figure 4 Linear relationship between age and Ladder Score for private and non-private schools (Kupang, West-Timor, Indonesia). Private School: intercept = 7.4, slope = -0.156 , p -value = 0.0398^* , Non-Private School: intercept = 8.87, slope = 0.0375 , p -value = 0.314 .

children from private schools. Children attending non-private schools continued ranking themselves at a high level at all ages (Figure 4).

To sum up we found that Indonesian children attending upper class private schools ranked their position in society in a more

moderate, and therefore, more realistic manner than other school participants. Only the responses of the private school pupils were age-dependent. In other words, the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status worked as expected only for Indonesian children from a high social class.

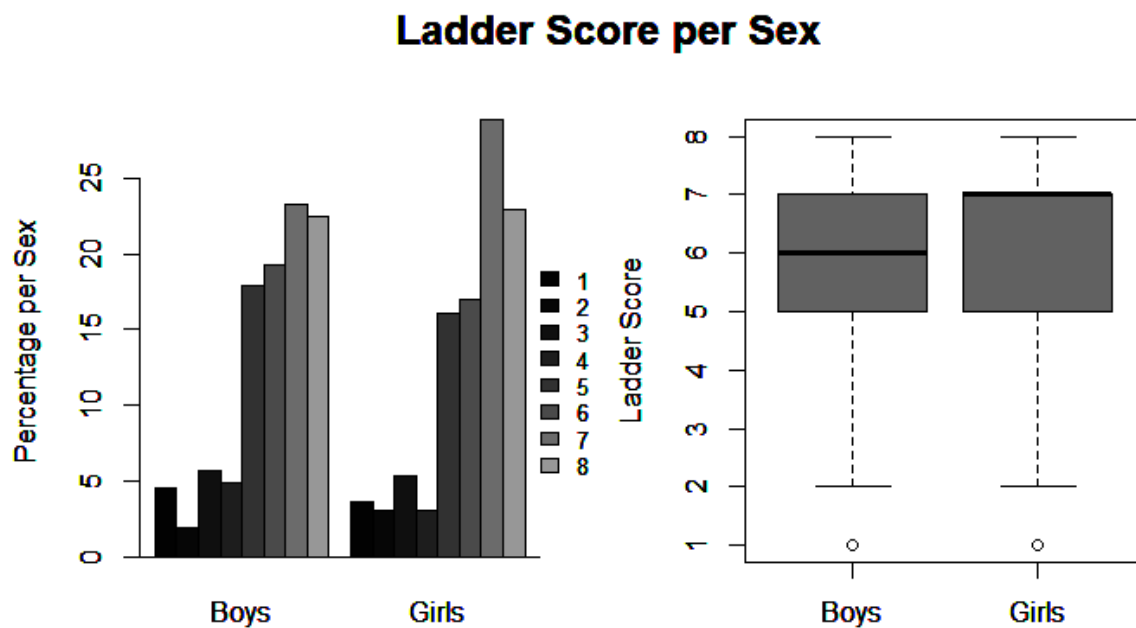


Figure 5 Ladder Score distribution per sex of schoolchildren (Kupang, West-Timor, Indonesia). The Mann-Whitney U Test shows no significant differences in means between the groups ($W = 0.624$, $p = 0.29$).

Within the last two decades, globalization has led to the trend for Indonesian elites and upper class families to “Westernize” and adapt to an “international” lifestyle (Tanu 2014). Our findings suggest that results obtained by the MacArthur test will be more reliable the more a tested cohort resembles a Western (WIERD) society (Amir et al. 2019; Henrich et al. 2010). The private school pupils seemed to be better adapted to the Western culture and therefore the Ladder Test is more suited for them than for their non-private school peers.

Being able to judge one’s position in society using the symbolic figure of a ladder, is an artifact of Western culture. For people socialized in a Western way, symbols such as a ladder, or a staircase are familiar pictures to visualize the hierarchical structure of society. Individualism is the key aspect here: all of these pictured structures are meant to be “climbed”, or actively moved on, and depending on the individual’s effort and/or starting position one will end up on a level

in society considered “high” or “low”. In contrast, painting a feudal society as a ladder would be rather ridiculous, as social classes are predestined by birth with no intention for an individual of moving up or down. A ladder or any corresponding image thus is unable to appropriately illustrate such a society.

Presumably, the children from non-private schools neither have a concept of a hierarchic ladder nor do they grasp the idea of placing themselves “higher” or “lower” in relation to the social status of others.

In an Indonesian Family Life Survey, that was conducted in the years 1997, 2000 and 2007, the SSS was assessed for adults using a version of the Ladder Test. With great computational efforts and various assumptions, attempts were made to align the self-ranking to health risk with no significant outcome (Nobles et al. 2013). Powdthavee (2007) used the same data set to examine what influences the sensation of feeling “richer” or “poorer” than others

Table 2 Output values of the Multiple Linear Models per cohort from children in Kupang (West-Timor, Indonesia) with the variables that explain the variance of the Ladder Test outcome the best (generated via a Step-wise Regression, a p -value of 0.1 was considered as significant, significant codes: 0.00 = ***, 0.01 = *, 0.05 = .).

Groups	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	p value
Overall				
(Intercept)	4.23	0.68	6.2	0.00 ***
Edu. Mother	-0.06	0.03	-1.88	0.06.
Edu. Father	0.06	0.03	1.8	0.07.
Grades	0.01	0.01	1.48	0.14
Household-Score	0.17	0.08	2.15	0.03 *
R ²	0.02			
R ² adj.	0.01			
Private School				
(intercept)	5.10	0.90	5.66	0.00 ***
Edu. Mother	-0.07	0.04	-1.61	0.11
Grades	0.02	0.01	1.91	0.06.
R ²	0.03			
R ² adj.	0.02			
Non-private School				
(intercept)	4.54	0.51	8.88	0.00 ***
Edu. Father	0.07	0.03	2.07	0.04 *
Household-Score	0.13	0.09	1.56	0.12
R ²	0.02			
R ² adj.	0.02			
Boys				
(Intercept)	4.95	0.39	12.82	0.00 ***
Edu. Father	0.09	0.03	2.65	0.01 *
R ²	0.02			
R ² adj.	0.02			
Girls				
(Intercept)	4.12	1.08	3.81	0.00 ***
Edu. Mother	-0.05	0.04	-1.46	0.15
Grades	0.02	0.01	1.56	0.12
Household-Score	0.19	0.11	1.72	0.09.
R ²	0.02			
R ² adj.	0.01			

in Indonesia. He concluded that the degree of collectivism leads to the distortion of self-ranking: The poor tended to rank

themselves higher, the rich tended to rank themselves lower. [Saraswati \(2003\)](#) states in his dissertation that Western individu-

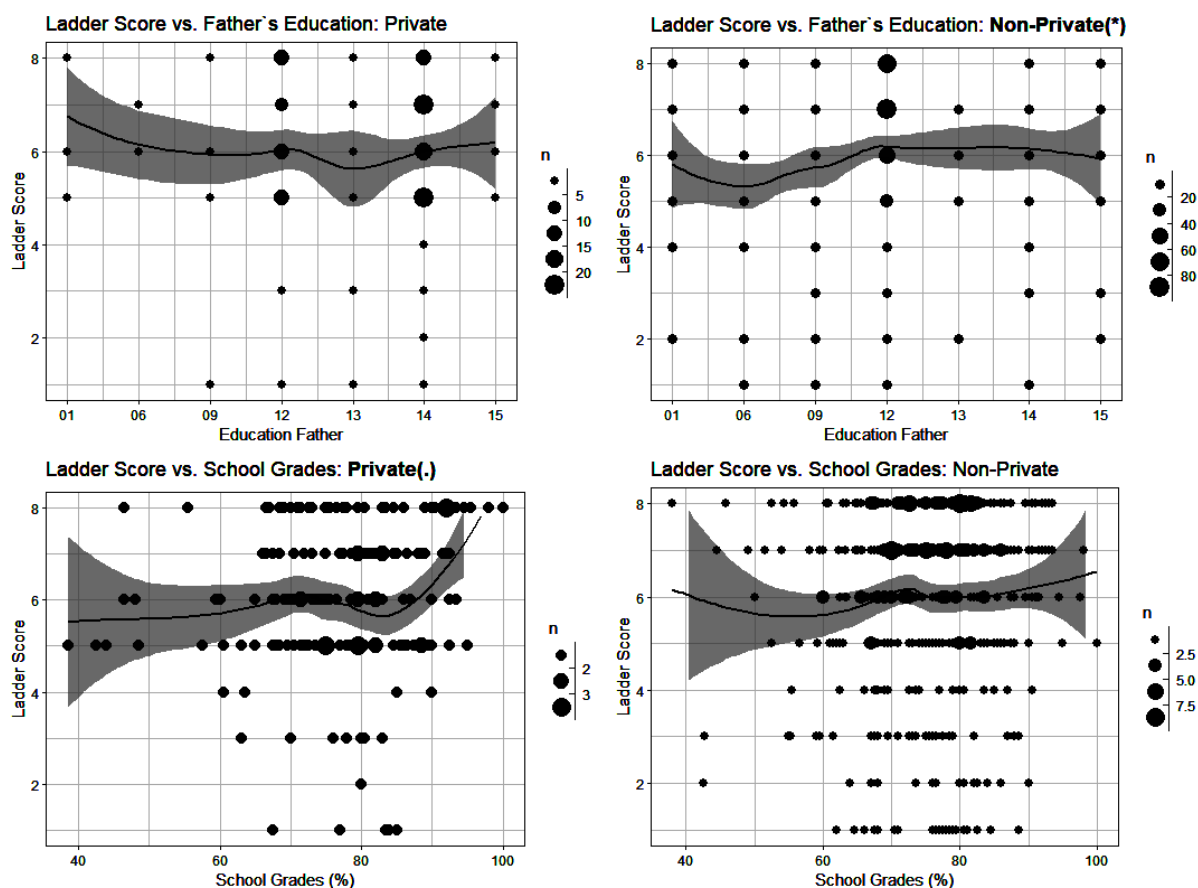


Figure 6 Linear relationship between the social variables and the Ladder Score for private and non-private peers (Kupang, West-Timor, Indonesia). Note: If the variable is part of the multiple linear model output (using step-wise regression), the concerned cohort is printed in bold. If there is a significant relationship according to that model, this is also added to the title (significant codes: 0.01 = *, 0.05 = .).

alism has a negative connotation for traditional Indonesians. These findings further support our assumption, that the concept of Western individualism is a prerequisite embedded in the MacArthur Scale, making it unsuitable for non-Western cultures.

Nevertheless, in the multiple linear model we found explanatory variables that seem to reflect cultural influences for all tested cohorts.

Self-perception according to “School Grades” offers an interesting explanation for the responses of the private school pupils. This aligns with Western ideology as it strongly emphasizes the individual and his*her own responsibility for accruing social status and prestige.

In contrast, the non-private school group seems to have been significantly influ-

enced by the variable “Education Father”. Indonesia is a patriarchal society. Hence, children’s responses to the Ladder Score appeared to depend on structural norms in which the father is considered the “breadwinner” and head of the household (Sathiparsad et al. 2008).

The distribution of the global self-rating of boys and girls did not differ significantly. Thus, we rejected hypothesis 3: “The self-perception of social position differs between boys and girls”. However, even though the distribution was similar, we found that the results per sex were influenced by different social variables. That in turn fits to our last hypothesis: “Self-perception of boys and girls are influenced by different social variables”. The self-perception of boys significantly correlated

with “Education Father”. For girls, domestic wealth (represented by “Household Score”) was the variable that influenced self-perception the most.

Boys apparently orient more towards the dominant father figure, as they are expected to be the future household heads, reflecting enduring patriarchal structures in modern Indonesia. Girls being far less independent, appear to rely on external financial security provided by someone else (family, husband). Even though Indonesia is changing laws to ensure women’s equality, the unemployment rate is disproportionately high for females (Equal Measures 2030), indicating that women are often seen as subordinate and are expected to be home carers and mothers (Sathiparsad et al. 2008).

The present findings suggest to modify the notion that measuring self-perception of one’s social position using the Ladder Test is not suitable for non-Western societies. Our analysis showed that children’s responses do differ from Western concepts of the social structure. Western cultures tend to describe social positions in terms of “high” and “low”, or “up” and “down”, often visualizing such constructions by a ladder. People are able to rank themselves within a vertical hierarchical model. This appears to be different in non-Western societies. These people appear to have difficulties ranking themselves on a vertical scale. They may rank themselves as “great” and “strong”. This perception reflects their personal self-appraisal, but it does not describe their social position as “high” or “low” within a vertically structured concept.

In conclusion, the present study shows that Indonesian children from non-private schools lack a Western concept of social positioning and fail to self-perceive their social position as either “high” or “low” among their peers. This is different in children from affluent backgrounds attending

private schools. With increasing age, private school children increasingly rank their position within the social hierarchy, and appear to recognize life in terms of career and social opportunities based on success in school.

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