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Adolescents' Self-Perceptions of Competence in Life Skill Areas

Millicent E. Poole[1] and Glen T. Evans[2]

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The perceptions of a sample of 1061 adolescents of their own competence in a number of life-skill areas were assessed. Three sets of scales were used—those concerned with competence viewed as efficacy in various life areas and situations, those concerned with competence as the satisfaction of goals based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and assessments of the structural complexity of performance on a short essay task. In addition to comparisons among self-perceptions for different areas, a number of major comtextual and personal variables was studied for differences in self-perceptions—course type, school type, state, career aspirations and expectations, major life concerns, age, and gender. There were strong gender differences that suggested that females generally underrated their own competence. The major educational or work contexts reflected important differences in patterns of self perceptions of skill. Differences between those with different major life concerns and career hopes and expectations aligned with course type differences. Finally, there were strong indications that the self-perceptions of competence that were reported formed a strong general factor, favoring the notion of generic over domain specific self-perceptions.

[1]Professor of Education, Faculty of Education, Monash Unitersity, Clayton, Victoria 3168, Australia. Reveived Ph.D. in Socio- and psycholinguistics from La Trobe Unitersity. Research interests include youth and adolescence and social policy. To whom reprints requests should be addressed.

[2]Professor of Education, Department of Education, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Queensland 4067, Australia. Received Ph.D. in educational psychology from University of Queensland. Research interests include adolescent life skills and learning and cognition.

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines adolescents' perceptions of their own competence in life-skill areas, and how they relate to their concerns and aspirations. In addition, perceptions of competence are examined in terms of the major educational contexts in which adolescents are situated. Self-perceptions of competence are related to the notion of self-efficacy and to perceptions of importance of values in life skills.

The concept of "competence" has been variously used in the literature. First, competence has been regarded as a motivational construct, referring to goal formation and effortful goal-directed activity (cf. Deci, 1975; Harter, 1979). Such a view of competence may be related to the satisfaction of various levels of needs (Maslow, 1962). Once the person is competent in achieving lower level needs, goals are set at a higher level.

Second, several researchers have conceptualized competence in terms of "agency," i.e., self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967), perceived control (de Charms, 1968; Rotter, 1966), or lack of competence in terms of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Bandura, for example, regarded self-efficacy as a sense of confidence in one's ability to perform (carry out an action) as a situation demands. Self-efficacy thus influences many aspects of behavior—e.g., people who doubt their abilities tend to give up in the face of difficulty, while those who believe in themselves work harder to master challenges (Bandura and Schunk, 1981). Efficacy may thus be regarded as the individual's expectancy of obtaining valued outcomes through personal effort (Fuller *et al.,* 1982). Several authors conceive of competence in terms of components of the "competent self," which include self-perception of efficacy and control, together with the independent pursuit of goals (e.g., Argyle, 1981; Edgar and Maas, 1984; Ochiltree and Amato, 1984).

A third focus has been on "equipment for competence," variously perceived. White (1959) saw competence as the fitness or ability to carry on transactions with the environment that result in self-maintenance and growth. Berger and Luckman (1967) conceived of differential allocation of resources for the growth of the competent self; Brewster-Smith (1968) stressed capacities for role performance, i.e., the objective knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for adequate performance in one's role in society; and Raven (1984) proposed a set of qualities and understandings that people require to be competent in modern society. Such approaches suggest competence can be recognized as effective utilization of personal, social, and organizational resources in relevant contexts. Criteria for judging such effectiveness in different life circumstances and in different domains of competence (e.g., academic, social, athletic) have been suggested (Feldman *et al.,* 1981; Waters and Stroufe, 1983). In each case, competence is defined as an achievement or

attainment of personally or socially desired outcomes in some set of relevant contexts (Ford, 1985), using appropriate means and resulting in positive developmental outcomes (Ford, 1982).

A different definitional problem concerns generality. Competence has been variously conceptualized as global, general, or "generic," e.g., general self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) or self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), in which a general feeling of self-worth or self-efficacy relates to behavior and actions in various contexts. Alternatively, competence may be "domain specific." Although a relationship between domain-specific and generic competence might be expected, it has been argued and found that people do vary in their perceptions of their behavior in different contexts. For example, Richman *et al.* (1955) reported general and specific self-esteem in late adolescents in areas such as academic, physical, and social. Carver and Ganellen (1983) found young women over generalized a specific failure to a more global perception of inadequacy or lack of competence. The issue is obviously complex and the findings by no means clear, with results increasingly indicating interactive effects of gender, race, and social class (Carver and Ganellen, 1983; Richman *et al.*, 1985).

These various views of competence may be grouped under three main headings: (a) competence as the satisfaction of goals generated by hierarchically ordered levels of need; (b) competence as perceived self-efficacy in being able to achieve valued goals in different situations; and (c) competence as proficiency, in some way objectively assessed, in important socially desirable skills. This paper is concerned with the first two of these views of competence, that is, with self-perceptions of competence and the values placed on competence in different situations. Within this framework, a number of questions arise. These include the relationship between self-perceptions of particular competencies and values placed on them by young people, the relationship between self-perceptions of competence and the major life contexts of young people, and the relationships between people's self-perceptions of competence in different situations and overall or general perceptions.

Earlier research (Evans and Poole, 1983, 1985, 1986) identified major life-skill areas that were considered to be of most concern to adolescents—e.g., personal relationships (peers, family, relatives, opposite sex), communication (transactional, expressive, nonverbal) relationship processes (cooperation, interpersonal understanding, belonging), life-course activities (education, jobs, leisure), personal development and self-management (self-motivation, self-esteem, use of time, coping with problems), social awareness (social responsibility, conscience, altruism), and learning to learn. Self-perceptions of competence in those life areas regarded as salient by adolescents were obtained through self-report measures in four major educational settings, details of which are reported below.

Specifically, the present study aimed to

1. extend contemporary theories of competence to include life skill areas and major areas of adolescent concerns;
2. explore adolescents' perceptions of their competence in these life areas and to assess the value adolescents attach to these areas of concern;
3. show the effects of major life contexts and personal variables on perceptions of competence in life concerns (state, course type, school type, gender, age, and vocational aspirations and expectations,); and
4. compare and contrast self-perceptions of competence across life-skill areas and concern areas, in order to discern generic or domain-specific perceptions of competence.

METHODS

Sample

A sample of 1061 adolescents from Sydney and Brisbane was selected (Table I) with approximately equal numbers of males and females. Four major educational contexts were sampled: (1) Mainstream Year 11 secondary school students; (2) Transition or alternative course secondary school students aged 15+ years; (3) TAFE (Technical and Further Education Colleges) prevocational courses for 15- to 17-year-olds; and (4) CYSS (Community Youth Support Scheme Centres) for unemployed youth aged 15–18 years.

Data Sources

The scales used were developed from a pilot questionnaire tested initially with a small sample of secondary students ($N = 40$) for clarity, length, and appropriateness as judged by the students. The scales used, discussed

Table I. Sample

		Transition	CYSS	TAFE	Academic	Total
Queensland	M	56	12	92	109	268
	F	34	16	73	136	259
	Subtotal	90	28	165	244	527
New South Wales	M	30	9	72	135	246
	F	28	17	78	165	288
	Subtotal	58	26	150	300	534
	Total	148	54	315	544	1061
	Total male: 514			Total female: 547		

below, were developed from a priori considerations and from the results of an earlier study (Evans and Poole, 1983, 1987) in which adolescents were asked to nominate in order the five most important things in life for people of their age. The resulting responses suggested categories of relationship, communication, life-course activities (health, education, jobs, budgeting, etc.), self-management and achievement, social and ethical awareness, and learning to learn. These categories are reflected in the scales described below. It was considered important to validate the scale produced for coherence and independence with the sample actually used in the main study. In addition, a replication sample of the same composition as that shown in Table I (N = 956) was available one year later. Data on reliability were thus available from this group also.

Scales Used

Two of the sets of scales in the questionnaire were concerned with competence viewed as efficacy in different life areas and situations, on the one hand, and competence as the satisfaction of goals based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs on the other.

I. Scales Related to Values and Self-Efficacy

The first set of scales comprised two measures concerned with value, five with perceptions of self-efficacy, and one derived measure concerned with the difference in perception between value and efficacy. These scales were developed as described above from a priori considerations of competence and from a previous study of the life-skill areas considered important by adolescents.

Scale 1: Life Skill Competence (LSC). This 36-item scale was designed as six sets of 6 items each, the items in a set assessing self-perceived competence in each of six different life-skill areas: relationships; communication; everyday activities related to buying, health, reading directions, or using equipment; self-management of time, goals, and choices; social awareness; and getting, learning from, and using information. These six areas were repeated in every group of six items. The response categories for the general question "How I think of myself" were 1 (*not so good*), 2 (*just OK*), 3 (*pretty good*), and 4 (*great*). In order to check whether these separate components were contributing to a general self-perception of life-skill competence or whether they amounted to independent perceptions, a factor analysis of the 36 items (principal components analysis with varimax transformation) was undertaken with the study sample. The first latent root in the component analysis was

9.43, accounting for 26% of the variance. Subsequent latent roots greater than 1.0 accounted for a further 26% of the variance, but the largest was 2.06. The coefficients for the first principal component were also large, ranging from .39 to .64. The varimax transformed factors corresponding with latent roots greater than unity did not parallel the design structure. These results were taken as indicating a strong general self-perception of competence across a variety of areas. While the scale of 36 items was not unifactorial, all items contributed to the general measure. A subsequent item analysis indicated a similar result. Corrected item total correlations ranged from .34 to .60, and the overall Cronbach alpha reliability was .91. For this and other variables, the total score was divided by the number of variables to enable ease of interpretations. For the study sample, the mean rating was 2.74, corresponding to "pretty good," and SD = .40. For the follow-up study, alpha = .91.

Scale 2: Life Skills Importance (LSI). This 36-item scale used the same item statements as the previous scale (for example, relationships, communication, using information), but with a different stem question and response categories. These were "How important it is to do well" in these life-skill activities, and 1 (*not important at all*), 2 (*not very important*), 3 (*quite important*), and 4 (*very important*). The data on items from the study sample were analyzed by principal components analysis as described above. The first component accounted for 25.3% of the variance, while the next six ranged from 6.8 to 2.9%. Coefficients on the first component ranged from .38 to .59; the seven varimax-transformed components corresponding to latent roots greater than 1.0 showed only partial correspondence with the design constructs. Again it seemed more appropriate to regard the 36 items as measuring a single tendency to value performance in life-skill areas. The item analysis of this scale with the study sample yielded corrected item-total correlations ranging from .35 to .55 and an alpha coefficient of .91. Mean rating = 3.22, corresponding to a rating higher than "quite important." SD = .36; reliability, follow-up study: alpha = .90.

Scale 3: Perceived Situational Competence (SC). This 14-item scale entailed responses on the same 4-point scale as in the first measure. The items sampled a variety of situations: "When I am: with friends, family, people of the opposite sex, boyfriend or girlfriends, strangers, my teachers, other adults; in my favorite leisure activities; at sport, social or dance, a party; in a big crowd, class, my favorite school/college/CYSS activity." Corrected item total correlations ranged from .25 to .55, and the alpha coefficient was .81. Mean = 2.84, corresponding to a rating a little less than "pretty good," and SD = .42. Reliability, follow-up study: alpha = .87.

Scale 4: Situation Value (SV). This 14-item scale was derived from the same statements as Scale 3, and the same response format as scale 2, constituting a general measure of value for these situational skills. Corrected

item-total correlations ranged from .33 to .55 and the alpha coefficient was .81. Mean = 3.11 and SD = .42, indicating a strong endorsement of the value of the skills. Reliability, follow-up study: alpha = .82.

Scale 5: Coping with Stressful people (CSP). This 10-item scale sought adolescents' perceptions of their competence in coping with stressful interpersonal interaction—people being foolish, grumbling, wasting time, angry with each other, angry with you, upset with you, unhappy, badly treated, getting in a flap, and getting in your way. Response categories were as for Scale 1. Corrected item-total correlations ranged from .32 to .48 and the alpha coefficient was .85. Mean = 2.28, SD = .59, indicating a mean response corresponding with "just OK." Reliability, follow-up study: alpha = .86.

Scale 6: Coping with Stressful Situations (CSS). This 11-item scale probed adolescents' perceptions of their ability to cope with stressful situations—being bored, upset, under pressure, working without supervision, taking blame (when it's your fault), taking blame (when it's not your fault), not being appreciated, being bossed about, working when you don't want to, making quick decisions, and being in a rapidly changing situation. The response categories were as for Scale 1. Corrected item-total correlations ranged from .30 to .54 and the alpha coefficient was .77. Mean = 2.30, SD = 4.7, indicating somewhat less confidence, in general, in these situations than in those of Scale 3. Reliability, follow-up study: alpha = .78.

Scale 7: Lack of Efficacy (LE). This was a derived measure of discrepancy in ratings between the ratings of importance in life-skill areas (How important it is to do well, LSI) and perceptions of coping in those areas (How I think of myself, LSC). This Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was .90, mean = .48, suggesting a sizable mean difference between value and competence ratings, SD = .41. Alpha, follow-up = .89.

Scale 8: Self-Perceived Academic Ability (AA). This scale comprised 2 items, perceived level of competence in best and worst subject at school or college. In each item, the adolescent reported which quartile she/he was/is in. The Cronbach alpha coefficient = .52, the item mean rating = 2.95, and the SD = .66. Follow-up study: alpha = .50.

II. Scales Related to Goals Hierarchy and Self-Presentation

The second set of scales comprised a number of 5-point semantic differential scales (5, *high;* 1, *low*), initially chosen a priori to measure health, security, belonging, achievement, and success, corresponding to Maslow's (1962) needs levels of physiological needs, safety, belonging, and esteem, which were taken to reflect major life goals. From 4 to 7 items were devised for each scale and checked initially with the pilot group for clarity. In addi-

tion to these items, 10 further semantic differential items were devised to assess the respondents' views of how they presented themselves to, or influenced, others. One group of 4 items was intended to assess outgoing behavior vs. withdrawal, a second group of six items was intended to measure "considerateness" or care for others, and a third group, interpersonal influence. All seven sets of items were combined into a 36-item set administered as one group of items to the study group and the original a priori scales checked for coherence and independence as judged by correlational and principal components analysis of the data from the study sample. The a priori groupings of items and those suggested by the PCA are shown in Table II, together with coefficients on varimax-transformed components. The components analysis suggested the merging of the "security" and "belonging" scales, the relocation of Items 3 and 23, and the deletion of three items. The a priori scales were thus substantially validated in the study group. The scales that were finally used are as follows:

Scale 9: Self-Perception of Health. Measured by three semantic differential items. Alpha = .49, mean = 3.51 on the 5-point scale, SD = .66. Alpha for follow-up study = .55.

Scale 10: Self-Perception of Security. Based on 12 items. Alpha coefficient = .87, mean = 3.92, SD = .63. Alpha, follow-up = .90.

Scale 11. Self-Perception of Success. Based on 6 items. Alpha = .73, mean = 3.56, SD = .60. Alpha, follow-up = .74.

Scale 12. Self-Perceived Influence. Based on 3 items. Alpha = .63, mean = 3.52, SD = .63. Alpha, follow-up = .65.

Scale 13. Self-Perception of Outgoing Self-Presentation. Based on 3 items. Alpha = .72, mean = 3.35, SD = .90, Alpha, follow-up = .75.

Scale 14. Self-Perceived Considerateness. Based on 5 items. Alpha = .70, mean = 3.91, SD = .62. Alpha, follow-up = .71.

III. SOLO Assessments

In addition to the self-assessments, the participants were asked to write short essays on the ways in which school (or college or CYSS Centre) had affected their lives, ways in which they had affected their own lives, and what difference it would have made if they had been of the opposite sex. These were then coded for complexity and used to yield a SOLO (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes) assessment scale (Biggs and Collis, 1982).

Scale 15: SOLO Level. The SOLO taxonomy contains five levels of complexity: (1) prestructural, (2) unistructural, (3) multistructural , (4) relational, and (5) extended abstract. The three essays were each assessed for a SOLO level and the numerical average calculated. Alpha = .85, mean = 2.52, SD = .53. Follow-up alpha = .86.

IV. Context and Demographic Variables

There were additionally a number of context and demographic variables.

16. Course Type. This referred to the type of setting in which a young person was located—transition or alternative course; academic Grade 11 courses entailing mathematics, science, humanities, and social sciences; TAFE prevocational courses, either business or trade based (engineering and construction); CYSS Centres with programs for unemployed young people.

17. School Type. This referred to type of secondary schools (government or nongovernment—i.e., public vs. independent or private).

18. State. The data were collected in two states—New South Wales (Sydney) and Queensland (Brisbane)—for the purposes of comparison and replication.

19. Aspirations. The occupational aspirations of the respondents at age 20 were rated on a 13-point scale of status levels (Broom, Jones, and Zubrzycki, 1976) and a 3-point scale was derived from these (*High,* 3; *Medium,* 2; *Low,* 1).

20. Expectations. This was similar to Variable 19 but involved the young person's perception of actual likely job or career, in contrast to hoped-for occupation. This measure was perceived as an indicator of competence and of perceived likely life track.

21. Life Concerns. The classification for these areas was devised from Evans and Poole (1986), and included personal relationships, communication, life-course activities, personal development, social awareness, and learning to learn, and the priorities young people attached to those life areas. Each area had subcategories—e.g., life course had major subsections such as education, jobs, the future, money, and budgeting. The final major categories, in terms of the number of respondents nominating the concern, were relationships, personal development, education, jobs, money, and concern with the future.

22. Age. Ages of participants were categorized as less than 16; 16 to 17; 17 to 18; and over 18. The contrast less than 16 vs. 16 and over was also used.

23. Gender. Gender was taken as an important life space variable.

Analysis

Factor analyses were used as described above to confirm a priori groupings. The scales in Group I, related to self-efficacy and values, were the basis for multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), as were those in Group II, concerned with goals satisfaction. The SOLO ratings were analyzed separately. The designs for the analysis of variance were (a) Course Type

Table II. A Priori and Empirical Measures Based on Semantic Differential Scales

	A priori	Empirical	Varimax coefficient		
Health	1	1	I	.69	Healthy-unhealthy
(.49)[b]	20	20		.52	Energetic-slow[a]
	35	35		.56	Strong-weak
		23		.41	Tough-gentle
Security	5	5	II	.52	Well fed-hungry
(.87)	8	8		.41	Rewarded-punished[a]
	9	9		.51	Safe-in danger
	13	13		.57	Secure-insecure
	17	—		(.11)[c]	(Confident-anxious)[a]
	18	18		.69	Enjoy life-don't enjoy life
	19	19		.53	Hopeful-despairing
	22	22		.66	Happy-unhappy[a]
Belonging	3	—		(.23)	(Popular-not popular)
	7	7		.53	Accepted-rejected
	11	11		.63	Loved-unloved[a]
	12	12		.48	Praised-blamed
	15	15		.66	Have good friends-no real friends
	16	16		.59	Appreciated-not appreciated

Success	2	2	III	.60	Succeeding-failing[a]
(.73)	4	4		.36	Useful-not useful
	6	6		.36	Winner-loser
	10	10		.71	Clever-not clever
	14	14		.36	Good at doing things-poor at doing thing
	21	21		.52	Study hard-don't study hard
Influence	32	32	IV	.63	Interesting-boring[a]
(.63)	33	33		.40	Influential-powerless
	36	–		(.31)	(Can make things happen-don't have much control over things)[a]
		3		.64	Popular-not popular
Outgoing	23	–	V	(.40)	(Tough-gentle)
(.72)	24	24		.78	Outspoken-quiet
	30	30		.67	Outgoing-shy
	34	34		.76	Loud voice-soft voice
Considerate	25	25	VI	.65	Help others-don't help others
(.70)	26	26		.65	Honest-dishonest
	27	–		(.34)	(Reliable-often forget)[a]
	28	28		.61	Try hard-don't care
	29	29		.53	Careful-careless[a]
	31	31		.48	Tidy-untidy[a]
(Reliability)		(17)	VII	(.62)	(Confident-anxious)
		(27)		(.58)	(Reliable-often forget)[a]

[a]These scales were reversed in the questionnaire administration.
[b]Cronbach alpha coefficients.
[c]Items shown in parentheses were not used in the final scale.

× State × Gender, (b) school type, (c) most important concerns, (d) age, (e) job expectation, and (f) job aspiration, as separate analyses, with each of the three sets of variables—self-efficacy and values, goal-related self-concept, and SOLO. The correlations between the dependent variables were also examined. Following on the MANOVAs, univariate tests were conducted where the overall multivariate tests were significant and, where appropriate, multiple range contrasts on the means were performed using the Studentized Newman-Keuls procedure.

RESULTS

Self-Perceived Competence

The data on the measures reported above indicated support for the a priori constructs of situational skills (SV), coping with interpersonal stress (CSP), and coping with stressful situations (CSS). With adjustments in the placement of 2 items and conflation of the security and belonging scales, the goals-related scales derived from the semantic differential items were also supported by factor analyses and reliability analysis, although the scales for health and influence had low reliabilities because of the small number of items in each, as was the case for the measure of perceived academic ability. These three measures, however, were retained in subsequent analyses.

The means reported above on the variables suggest that this sample of adolescents, on average, rated themselves as having a fair degree of competence in most of the various aspects measured. However, mean ratings on coping with interpersonal stress and coping with stressful situations were each below the middle points of the scales, indicating some lack of confidence for many of the participants. The means on the two importance scales suggest that the young people saw the six life skills and situational competence as being of considerable importance.

The mean self-ratings on the three goals-related scales—health, security, and success—were well above the middle point of the 5-point scales, perception of security (3.92) particularly so. Considerateness also was rated high on average (3.91), while outgoing behavior and influence each also had mean ratings well above the middle point of the scales.

The discrepancy in mean ratings between importance and competence on the scales referring to general life-skill competence and situational competence suggest that these young people, in general, saw themselves as somewhat lacking in efficacy in these areas. This tension between value and competence could be due to systematic response bias, but could also be taken to indicate an important motivational force in the skills selected.

State Differences

The use of urban samples from two states was aimed principally at replication. Significant state differences were not expected in the results. While there were no State × Gender interactions, there were significant Course Type × State interaction effects for four variables. On only one of these variables was there a significant main effect for course type—with the SOLO assessments (interaction: $p = .01$; main effects: $p < .0001$). However, the rank order of course type means was similar for each state, with highest mean for academic students and lowest for transition. The orders for the CYSS and TAFE means were, however, not consistent. Overall the means for Queensland participants were higher than for those from New South Wales.

The other three variables for which there were significant interaction effects (probability for each = .05) were those concerned with self-presentation—influence, outgoing behavior, and considerateness. Since these interactions were generally small, since there were no main effects, and since it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a theoretical account for state differences, they are not dealt with further.

Age and Gender Differences

There were few age differences found. Mean SOLO ratings for the under 16-year-olds were significantly greater than those for the 16 years and older. This possibly reflects and confounding with course type (see below) since the academic students were generally younger than others. Outgoing self-presentation was also self-rated higher on average by the younger students.

Gender yielded many more differences on self perceptions of competence (Table III). There were no significant interactions between gender and state or course type. While females rated life skills as more important than did males, there was a larger difference for them between mean ratings of how they saw themselves and of importance. Males provided self-ratings that were, on average, significantly higher than those for females for a number of the measures of competence and self-presentation—coping with stressful situations, academic ability, health, success, and outgoing behavior. Females, on the other hand, rated themselves more highly on considerateness. Further, on the SOLO assessment, the one measure not dependent on self-ratings, the females had a significantly higher mean. This suggests that the females in the study tended to underestimate their competence, compared with the males, generally expressing lower self-esteem and confidence.

Table III. Means and SDs for Significant Age and Gender Effects

	Age					Gender					Overall	
	Means					Means						
	16+	<16	*df*	*t*	*p*	M	F	*df*	*t*	$p \leq$	Mean	SD
Life-skill importance						3.16	3.27	837	4.4	.0001	3.22	.37
Lack of efficacy						0.42	0.53	757	3.8	.0001	0.48	.40
Coping stressful situations						2.37	2.23	1022	4.8	.0001	2.30	.47
Academic ability						2.99	2.92	1062	2.0	.05	2.95	.65
SOLO level	2.50	2.64	709	3.1	.01	2.38	2.64	785	6.5	.0001	2.53	.54
Health						3.66	3.35	1051	8.6	.0001	3.50	.61
Success						3.59	3.46	1043	3.71	.0002	3.52	.60
Outgoing	3.30	3.59	993	3.2	.01						3.36	.90
Influence						3.59	3.49	1036	2.5	.02	3.54	.66
Considerateness						3.83	3.99	1049	4.0	.0001	3.91	.65

Course Type Differences

Course type (Table IV) was found to be weakly related to the importance attributed to general life skills and to situational competence, but there were no significant differences for perceived actual competence. Young people in transition and academic courses rated these skills as slightly more important or valuable than did TAFE students, with CYSS students in between. There were very similar results for ratings of the importance of competence in various situations and ratings of actual competence.

There were, however, significant differences for ratings on various competencies also. The school attenders (transition or academic) rated themselves significantly more highly on coping with stressful people than either TAFE students or CYSS clients. TAFE students also rated their ability to deal with stressful situations somewhat less. As might be expected there were stronger differences for perceptions of academic ability. Academic and TAFE students gave similar ratings, on average higher than those from transition students, who in turn rated themselves more highly than the CYSS students. This ordering corresponds closely with educational selection procedures. The ordering is similar to that for the SOLO assessments, with the difference that academic students performed significantly better than TAFE students, who in turn performed better than transition students overall. The significant Course Type $\times$ State interaction for this variable mainly concerned the relative means of TAFE and CYSS students. Given the small number of CYSS students, the situation for them is not well determined by these data.

Academic students also rated themselves more highly on the security and success scales than did other groups. TAFE students rated themselves higher than did the transition students.

These results indicate that differences related to academic selection generalize to some extent to other areas of competence. However, there were no significant differences between course types on a number of the life-skill variables—life-skill competence, situational competence, consideration, outgoing behavior, and influence.

School Type Differences

This variable did not significantly affect adolescents' perceptions of their life-skill competence or of the importance they attached to doing well in major areas of life concern, althought there was a small but significant difference in the perception of the value of situational skills (Table IV). Young people in nongovernment schools (Table IV), however, did rate themselves more highly in coping with interpersonal stress than did their counterparts in government schools. On the SOLO assessments, students in nongovernment

Table IV. Means and Standard Deviations for Significant Course Type and School Type Effects[a]

	Course type (means)				Probability	School type (means)			Overall	
	AC	TR	TF	CY	≤	G	NG	Probability	Mean	SD
Life-skills importance[b]	3.24	3.26	3.16	3.20	.05				3.22	.37
Situational value[c]	3.13	3.18	3.05	3.07	.02	3.14	3.08	.05	3.11	.43
Stress people[d]	2.34	2.35	2.17	2.16	.003	2.24	2.40	.0001	2.28	.59
Stress situation[e]	2.32	2.36	2.22	2.33	.004				2.30	.47
Academic ability[f]	3.06	2.73	3.04	2.40	.0001				2.95	.66
SOLO level[g]	2.66	2.38	2.45	2.34	.0001	2.48	2.63	.001	2.56	.54
Security[h]	4.02	3.81	3.88	3.68	.001				3.93	.63
Success[i]	3.66	3.34	3.47	3.40	.0001				3.52	.60

[a]AC, academic; TR, transition; TF, TAFE; CY, CYSS; G, Government; NG, Non-government.
[b]TF < TR.
[c]TF < TR.
[d]TF, CY < TR, AC.
[e]TF < TR, AC, CY.
[f]CY < TR < TF, AC.
[g]TR, CY < TF < AC.
[h]TR, CY, TF < AC.
[i]TR < TF < AC; CY < AC.

schools produced somewhat more complexly structured written products than did young people in government schools ($p < .01$). These results suggest that there were few differences between the perceptions of students in the two kinds of schools as far as life skills were concerned.

Most Important Life Concerns

The participants reported their own most important life concern was significantly related to each of the sets of dependent variables (multivariate tests: $p < .001$) and to the SOLO assessments ($p < .0001$). Apart from the SOLO assessment, means on four self-ratings—situational competence, academic ability, success, and considerateness—were significantly related to which major concern was nominated (Table V).

For the SOLO assessments, those whose major expressed concern was personal development, interpersonal relationships, or education performed better than those whose concern was the future, money, or jobs. This result may well be due to the links between SOLO assessment and type of course, and expressed major concern and type of course, since both relationships are in the same direction.

The greatest differences due to most important concern were in self-ratings of success. The ordering of means was education, personal relationships, the future, jobs, personal development, and money. Again there may well be confounding with course type, since academic students were most concerned with education and personal relationships and also rated themselves highest on success. The differences in means for academic ability ratings, which had the order of education, personal relationships, jobs and future, personal development, and money, were also predictable from course type differences.

Such was not the case for ratings on situational competence and considerateness, for which there were no significant course type differences. Again, in each case those whose major concerns were the future, money, or personality development rated themselves somewhat lower than others did on both these scales, and those concerned with education, jobs, and personal relationships rated themselves higher on these scales.

Aspirations and Expectations: Self-Perceived Life Track

Perceptions of life-skill competence and general skills importance did not vary in relation to job aspirations at age 20 (high, medium, low aspirations). Job aspirations, however, were found to be associated with scores on self-perceptions of success ($p < .001$) and SOLO assessments ($p < .001$).

Table V. Means and Standard Deviations for Significant Effects on Most Important Concerns

	Concerns								
	Personal relationships $N = 66$	Personal development $N = 67$	Education $N = 247$	Jobs $N = 341$	Money $N = 27$	Future $N = 79$	p	Overall $N = 827$ Mean	SD
Situational competence	2.87	2.79	2.86	2.90	2.80	2.79	.01	2.85	.42
Academic ability	2.99	2.89	3.05	2.94	2.82	2.94	.05	2.95	.66
SOLO level	2.63	2.69	2.61	2.42	2.43	2.48	.0001	2.52	.54
Success	3.58	3.44	3.64	3.49	3.23	3.54	.01	3.52	.60
Considerateness	3.92	3.84	4.00	3.92	3.88	3.90	.01	3.91	.65

Young people holding high aspirations (mean = 3.67) rated themselves as more successful than did those holding medium (3.46) or low (3.55) aspirations. Young people with high aspirations also obtained higher SOLO assessments (2.67) compared with medium (2.43) and low (2.50).

Concerning job expectations at age 20, there were significant differences associated with self-perceptions of health ($p < .05$), security ($p < .05$), success ($p < .001$), and SOLO assessments ($p < .001$). Those with medium levels of job expectation rated themselves as somewhat more healthy (3.55), compared with those of high (3.45) or low (3.42) expectations, but the effect was small. There was a significant contrast between the low (3.82) and high (3.98)/medium (3.94) group means in relation to perceptions of security. There was a relationship in terms of self-perceptions of success (high = 3.70; medium = 3.50; low = 3.47) according to level of job expectation. Those with high job expectations obtained higher SOLO assessments (high = 2.73; medium = 2.47; low = 2.47). Self-perceptions of coping with interpersonal stress ($p < .05$) and self-perceived academic ability ($p < .001$) were also related to job expectations at age 20. Those with the highest level of expectation (2.36) rated themselves a little higher on ability to cope with interpersonal stress than did those with medium level aspirations (2.25) or low (2.34) aspirations. Similarly, those with high job expectations at 20, held higher perceptions of their academic competence (3.15) than did those with medium (2.90) or low (2.84) levels of expectations.

Correlations Between Scales

The use of a variety of scales allowed some study of the question of generic as against domain-specific competencies as judged by the self-perceptions of the participants. For this purpose the scales were intercorrelated and principal factor analysis (using iterations) was conducted using the SPSS PA2 option. The number of factors was set as the number of eigenvalues greater than 1.0 in the original principal components solution. Of the 78 residual correlations, six were between .05 and .10 and one was greater than .10 (.11). This fit was considered adequate. The correlations are shown in Table VI and the oblimin factor solution in Table VII.

The four factors suggest complex relationships among the variables but the correlations between factors also suggest a substantial second-order general factor, the coefficients for which are also shown in Table VII. Factor 1 is defined by "security," "success," and "considerateness," but "health," "influence," and "perceptions of life-skill competence", "academic ability", and "situational competence" are also moderately to highly correlated with this variable, indicating a general competence variable, but only weakly related with 'coping with stress'. Factor 2 shows the relationship between the two

Table VI. Intercorrections Among Value and Competence Scales and Rescaled Means and SDs of Total Sample

	LSC	LSI	AA	SC	SV	CSP	CSS	Health	Security	Success	Considerateness	Outgoing	Influence
LSC	1.00												
LSI	0.45	1.00											
AA	0.23	0.10	1.00										
SC	0.68	0.27	0.23	1.00									
SV	0.36	0.63	0.08	0.42	1.00								
CSP	0.43	0.18	0.08	0.32	0.12	1.00							
CSS	0.57	0.21	0.17	0.37	0.14	0.57	1.00						
Health	0.33	0.07	0.20	0.36	0.20	0.15	0.28	1.00					
Security	0.43	0.19	0.24	0.42	0.22	0.21	0.26	0.39	1.00				
Success	0.45	0.12	0.42	0.38	0.13	0.19	0.27	0.40	0.61	1.00			
Considerateness	0.47	0.33	0.17	0.31	0.27	0.17	0.26	0.25	0.51	0.47	1.00		
Outgoing	0.23	0.11	0.14	0.28	0.15	0.13	0.13	0.35	0.27	0.19	0.06	1.00	
Influence	0.44	0.11	0.22	0.45	0.17	0.21	0.27	0.45	0.54	0.52	0.34	0.43	1.00
Rescaled means	2.74	3.22	2.95	2.84	3.11	2.28	2.30	3.51	3.92	3.56	3.91	3.35	3.52
SD	.40	.36	.66	.42	.42	.59	.47	.66	.63	.60	.62	.90	.63

Table VII. Oblimin Factor Coefficients[a] for Self-Perception Variables

Variable	Pattern coefficients: Factor				Correlations with Factor				Comm.
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
Life-skills competence	.25	.29	.52		.59	.54	.74	.37	.71
Life-Skills importance		.77			.24	.78	.29	.21	.61
Academic ability	.35				.38				.15
Situational competence		.27	.29	.29	.51	.46	.54	.49	.51
Situational values		.82			.24	.80	.21	.22	.66
Coping stressful people			.70		.23		.66		.44
Coping stressful situations			.84		.35	.21	.82	.21	.67
Health	.25			.42	.47		.30	.55	.37
Security	.68				.75	.26	.34	.44	.57
Success	.87				.84		.34	.37	.72
Considerateness	.63	.21			.63	.39	.33		.47
Outgoing behavior				.65	.24			.63	.40
Influence	.40			.49	.62		.36	.67	.59
Percent variance									.53
Factor 1					1.00	.31	.44	.44	
Factor 2					.31	1.00	.32	.15	
Factor 3					.44	.32	1.00	.29	
Factor 4					.44	.15	.29	1.00	
Second order General factor					.77	.40	.63	.50	

[a]Coefficients less than .20 are not shown.

value scales, indicating that perceptions of importance are partly distinct from perceptions of competence, although correlated with them. Factor 3 shows a clustering of self-perceptions involving coping with stressful situations and with interpersonal stress, as well as general life skill competence and situational competence. Factor 4 indicates that a tendency to outgoing behavior is moderately related to self-perceptions of influence and health but less so to other perceptions. The correlations and the communalities show that perception of academic ability is not closely related to other perceptions except for success.

The pattern coefficients for the four factors suggest four interrelated underlying variables of security/success, value, situational and life-skill competence, and buoyancy and influence. There is support for the hypothesis that the competencies studied here are perceived in terms of some overall self-perception of competence with some differentiation for perceptions of success, influence, and situational competence. Perceptions of importance or value are also differentiated from perceptions of competence.

DISCUSSION

Self-Perceptions of Competence and Importance

The scales used in this study are consistent with dimensions proposed by other theorists, viz. situational competence (White, 1959; Raven, 1984), lack of efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Seligman, 1975), and perceptions of influence (de Charms, 1968; Rotter, 1966). Scales such as coping with situational and interpersonal stress have an affinity with White's (1959) concept of ability to carry out transactions with the environment, which produce growth.

Scales for the present study, however, were developed within a theoretical analysis of competence and values that relied on (1) self-perceptions of fulfillment of goals related to a hierarchy of needs based on Maslow's (1962) theory, (2) assessment of efficacy as competence in areas that are themselves highly valued, (3) assessment of competence in stressful situations, and (4) perceptions of self-presentation.

The present study also contributes an analysis of concepts of competence in terms of major life-skill areas and areas of concern. Rather than considering self-efficacy or competence at more general levels, the present study took as its starting point major life-skill areas that adolescents in previous studies had considered to be important (Evans and Poole, 1986, 1987). Adolescents were then asked to rate their perceived level of competence in those areas and to indicate the value they placed on those areas of concern. In the areas specified (Hopson and Scally, 1981), young people generally saw themselves as having at least some competence in the skill areas they considered important. They also considered themselves as fairly secure, healthy, and successful.

The general and fairly optimistic pattern of findings concerning adolescents' perceptions of their competence in life-skill areas and areas of concern should be modified by gender differences. Females saw themselves as less personally efficacious than males; males perceived themselves as more competent in diverse situations, having higher academic ability, better health, more success, and more influence. Such findings reflect continuing patterns of differences usually attributed to sex role socialization (e.g., Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974) and the ideology of structure of society (e.g., Connell, 1982). Ironically, females value competence in the life-skill areas more than males do (perhaps again as a result of their socialization), yet their views of self are more modest. The question arises as to whether these lower ratings on a variety of competence and self-efficacy scales led to lower performance in those life-skill action areas, or whether their views of self more closely reflect actual performance; e.g., do males see themselves as more competent—i.e., through socialized self-construction—even if the world of action

does not provide feedback to that effect? Certainly the results on the assessed SOLO tasks favor the females in this sample rather than the males. Females' perceptions of greater considerateness also agrees with the stereotype expectations of girls being more sympathetic and caring.

Competence and Context

Raven's (1984) concept of competence in the modern world looks to the individual to develop a behavioral repertoire for the achievement of personally or socially desired outcomes in some set of relevant contexts. Many other definitions likewise focus on the individual and his/her capacity to act flexibly in diverse situations or contexts. The present study contributes an analysis of the effects of several major life contexts on adolescent self-perceptions of competence. The assumption is that contexts help create expectations and beliefs about self-efficacy and competence, provide feedback, and send out messages as to how valuable or important certain competencies are for adolescent life-course development.

Leaving aside state-type differences involved in the replications (since the concept of "state theory" and its impact on the individual and society is beyond the scope of the present study), school type and course type did influence self-perceptions of competence. While school type did not appear to influence adolescent perceptions of life-skill competnece or the importance attached to doing well in major areas of life concern, there were differences in perceptions relating to coping with interpersonal stress. Adolescents in the nongovernment sector rated themselves higher in competence in handling interpersonal stress. Students in nongovernment schools also produced more structurally complex written products. Overall, however, the similarity between school types is more notable than the differences, particularly in overall perceptions of life-skill competence and the importance attached to various areas of life concern. The results are somewhat unexpected. Given that the nongovernment sector is thought to provide "better preparation for life" generally, as well as for higher educational grades and occupational expectations, it is significant that young people in the nongovernment sector did not rate themselves higher on dimensions such as success, influence, and ability. Hewstone *et al.* (1982), for example, reported that public school boys differentiated themselves from comprehensive school boys in terms of ability, effort, attributions, and "training for life."

Course type, however, appears a much more powerful context for constructing differential perceptions of competence. Interestingly, young people in transition courses rated both general life skills and situational competencies higher than did others in terms of value or importance. One of the main goals of transition education has been to improve the self-concept

of young people in nonacademic streams and to prepare them for the transition to adult life (Campbell and McMeniman, 1983). The programs appear successful at least in developing values. Transition students are among the superior groups also in their perceptions of coping with interpersonal stress and stressful situations, but they rate themselves lower on academic ability, security, and success. Adolescents in academic type courses likewise seem to view their competencies in terms of the expectations and feedback supplied by those settings. For example, their mean ratings are among the highest for security, success, competence in handling interpersonal stress and stressful situations, and academic ability. In addition, they gained the highest SOLO assessments for structural complexity. In contrast, young people in CYSS centers rated themselves low on success, security, academic ability, and coping with stressful people. They also placed lower value on situational competence, and performed less well on the SOLO tasks. CYSS clients did not differ significantly from other groups in their ratings of general life-skills competence or dealing with stressful situations. However, there is evidence of a lack of self-esteem with this group. Again, while the TAFE settings (prevocational), through specific courses, signal to young people the importance of being competent in life-skill areas, these students valued general life skills and situational competence less than others. TAFE students, however, did rate themselves as moderately secure and successful and academically competent, and ranked second to the academic students in the SOLO assessments. Their average ratings for coping with interpersonal stress and stressful situations were relatively low. These patterns of findings suggest that course settings are influential contexts for the devlopment of self-perceptions of competence and self-efficacy.

Life concerns and levels of occupational aspiration and expectation also appear to create "psycho-social contexts" in which self-perceptions of competence are constructed. The results on these variables can to some extent be predicted from course type, since they are related to it.

The patterns of results for the various context variables suggest the potency of the major work and educational contexts in defining adolescents' values about life skills and their perceptions of their competence in the various areas. Whether it is the case that these views of self have been formed from prior experience and adolescents gravitate or are forced into contexts they see as consistent with these views, or that the contexts define their adolescent clients through expectations of these competencies, or that adolescents' views of themselves are roughly consistent with their actual competencies cannot be decided by these data. However, the results do raise important questions about the success of the various institutions in developing self-concepts and competencies in areas that do not appear closely related to academic ability, but that are never-the-less rated as important by the young people concerned.

"Generic" or "Domain Specific" Competence

The findings of the present study, while showing some different perceptions of competence across various life-skill areas, suggest generic competence rather more than domain-specific, at least in the areas nominated by adolescents as important to them. The analytic differentiation of life-skill areas into domain-specific areas (e.g., communication, personal relationships, self-management) was not sustained in the preliminary correlational analysis of the life-skill competence scales, the pattern of results suggesting a generic or global self-perception of competence operating across a number of life skill areas. Further, the composite variables used in this study, as shown by the results of the factor analysis reported in Table VII, are themselves closely related. There appears a strong general factor underlying all of the competence variables, with differentiation into security/success, life-skill and situational competencies, and influence and outgoing behavior, which we described as buoyancy. These results share some similarity with those reported in the area of self-esteem (e.g., Richman, Clark, and Brown, 1985), although obviously further replications are needed before it could be confidently asserted that competence in life-skill areas tends to be generic rather than domain specific, or that there is a single underlying sense of self-esteem.

Overall Conclusion

The present study, then, goes some way toward extending the notion of competence to include those life-skill areas that adolescents consider of importance to them. In addition, it lends some support to a generic rather than a domain-specific view of competence in life-skill areas, although this question needs further examination. In particular, the role of contexts, especially educational course settings, and gender in self-perceptions of competence is indicated.

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