

Disability Views: Contrasting Singapore with the U.S.

Lois M. Verbrugge
Visiting Professor

Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore



TOPICS

- **Older persons' views of assistance, independence, dependence, and disability**
- **Compare Singapore and American seniors**
- **Issues in survey design on comparative aging**



STUDY DESIGN

- **Community dwelling persons ages 70+ with disabilities and elder-care services**
 - Singapore: clients of day-care centres**
 - US: assisted-living residents**
- **Exploratory with open- and closed-ended items**
- **Quantitative and qualitative analyses**
- **Completed interviews: 30 SG, 34 US**



PROJECT COLLABORATORS

Lois M. Verbrugge
Research Professor
Institute of Gerontology

Kalyani K. Mehta
Associate Professor
Dept. of Social Work & Psyc



SAMPLE FEATURES

	Singapore	US	signif.
Female	63%	79%	ns
Age	76.3	83.9	P≤.001
Chinese/White	70%	94%	P≤.05
Not married	57%	82%	P≤.05
Household size	4.1	1.4	P≤.001
Education (years)	4.1	14.9	P≤.001
Low income	97%	50%	P≤.001



HEALTH, DISABILITY, AND ASSISTANCE

	Singapore	US	signif.
Medical conditions (18)	6.9	7.6	ns
How much health problems affect daily life (1-5)	3.4	2.8	P≤.05
Disabilities (22)	9.6	8.2	ns
Severity of disabilities (1-3)	2.6	2.2	P≤.05
No. of tasks with			
Personal help only	5.1	5.0	ns
Equipment help only	2.7	2.6	ns
Both personal & equipment	0.8	0.7	ns









INDEPENDENCE & DEPENDENCE



INDEPENDENCE

- “What does it mean to you to be independent?”
- “How would you rate your own level of independence?”



DEFINITION OF INDEPENDENCE

	Singapore	US	signif.
Doing activities on one's own/ no help for tasks	97%	67%	$P_{\leq}.01$
Defined by its absence (help for tasks)	43%	21%	$P_{\leq}.10$
Personal autonomy	43%	47%	ns



Doing activities on one's own

SG: "When you can do things on your own, like a normal person."

US: "It's caring for yourself rather than other people (doing so)."

Maintainining personal autonomy

Positive psychological features

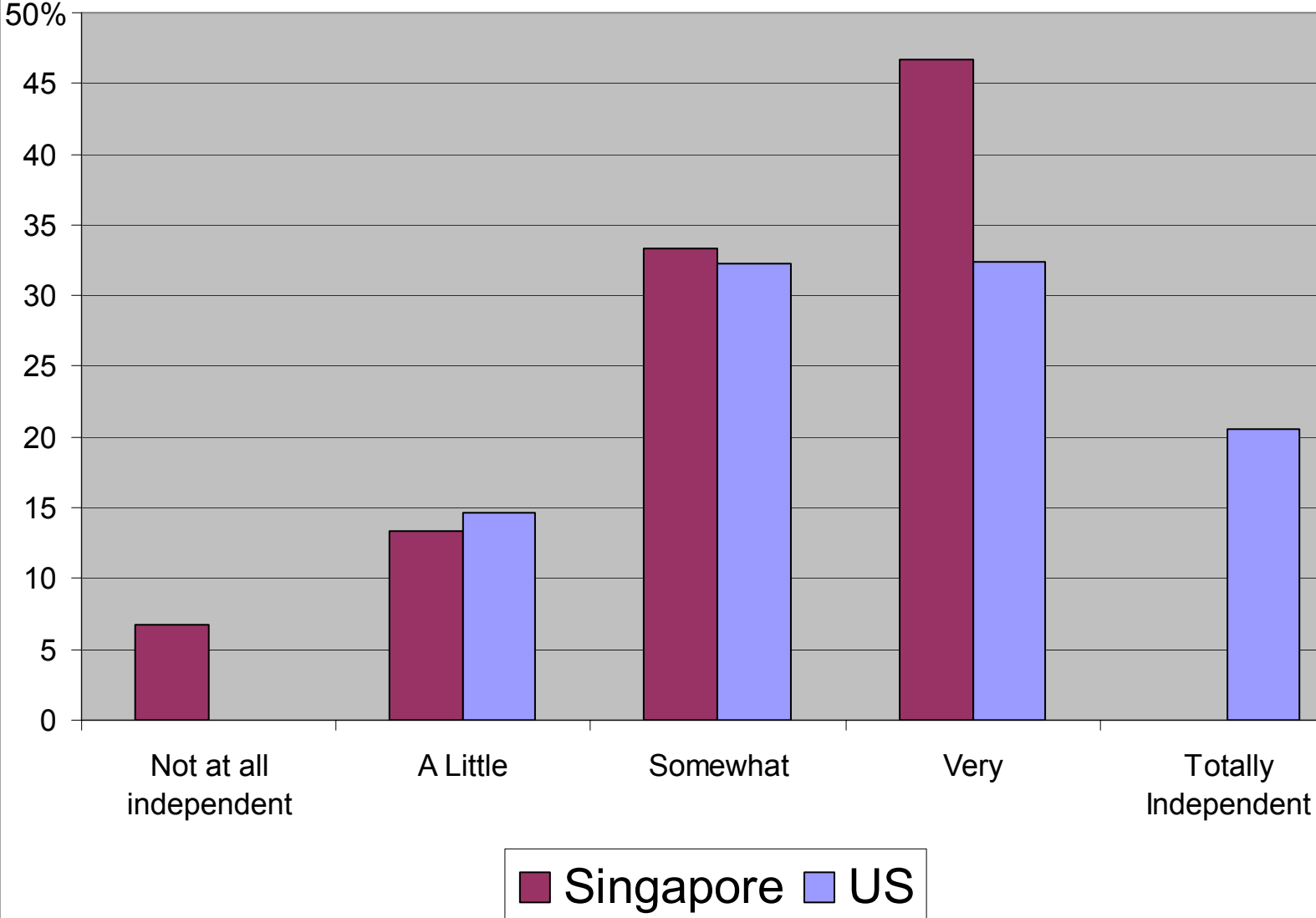
SG: "The stronger your willpower and perseverance, the more independent you can be. You should internalize the idea."

In charge of own life and decisions

US: "To be able to take care of myself, get up when I want, watch TV when I want. It's very important to me to have my freedom of choice."



HOW INDEPENDENT YOU FEEL



DEPENDENCE

- “What does it mean to you to be dependent?”
- “How would you rate your own level of dependence?”



DEFINITION OF DEPENDENCE

	Singapore	US	signif.
Need or have help from others	63%	42%	**
Difficulty doing activities you used to do easily	53%	36%	φ
Loss of own decision-making	30%	18%	ns
Social reliance and bonds	10%	18%	ns
General negative feelings	27%	36%	ns



Need or have help from others

SG: “You are not able to eat and get dressed on your own; you have to depend on the maid’s help. You are financially dependent on your children; you have no savings on your own. You use a walker or other equipment, and you have to exercise your limbs under the guidance of a physiotherapist.”

Social reliance and bonds

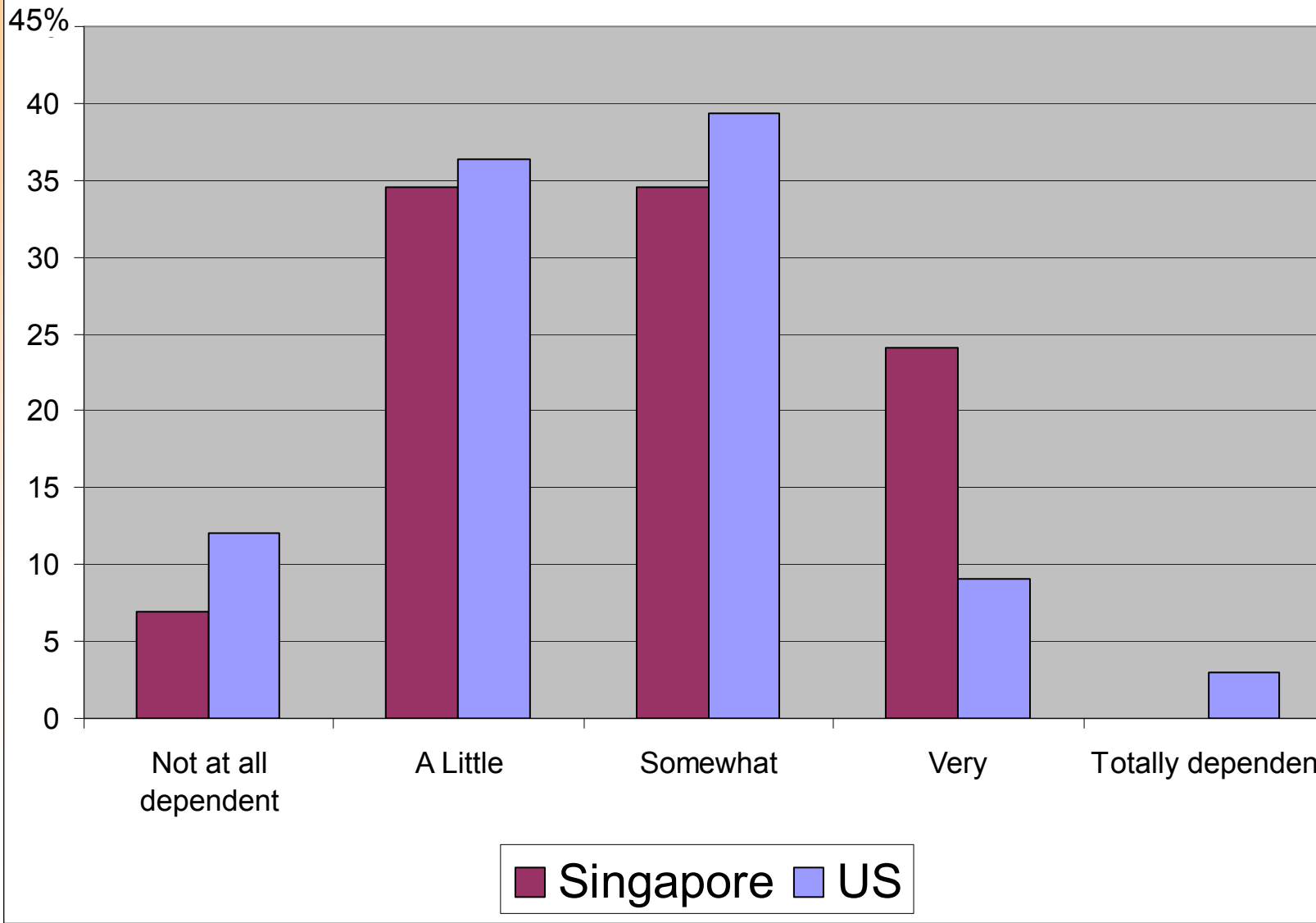
SG: “In society, people depend on each other to work, so humans are dependent beings. We have to remember that.”

Negative feelings

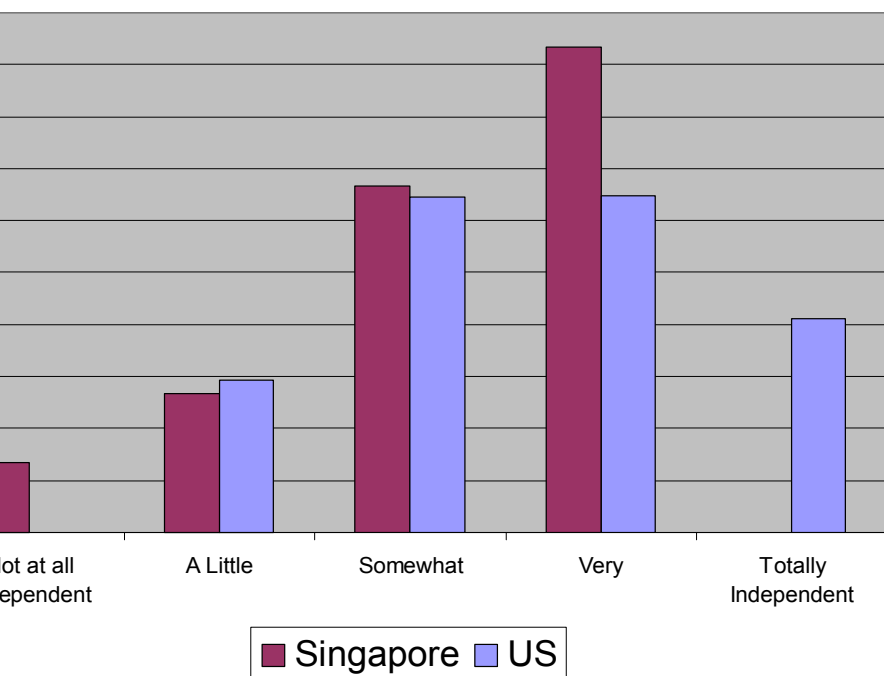
US: “It means I’m not fit. If I have to depend on someone, I’m ashamed.”



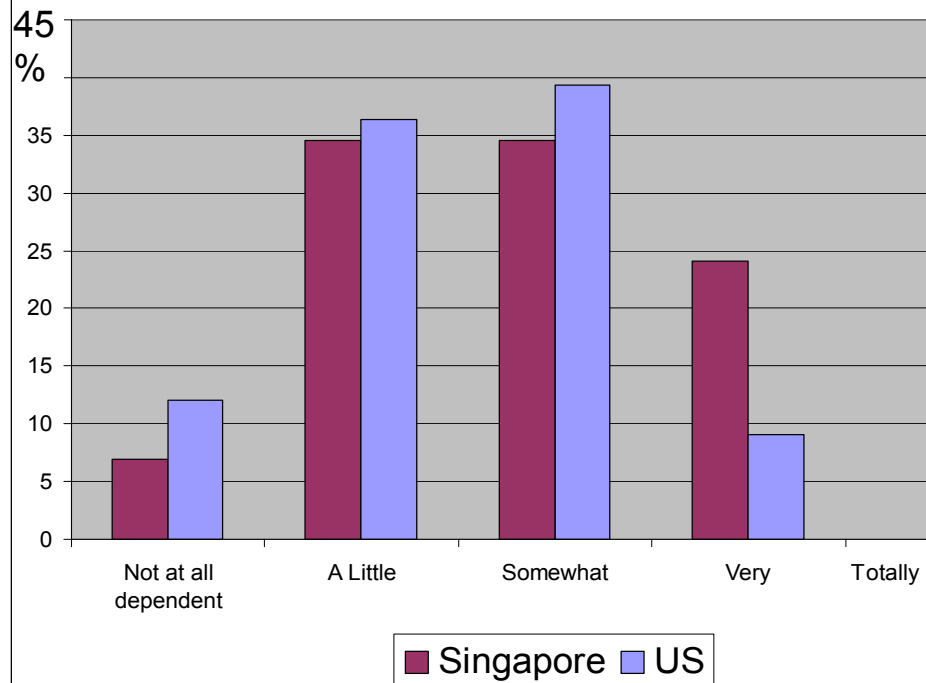
HOW DEPENDENT YOU FEEL

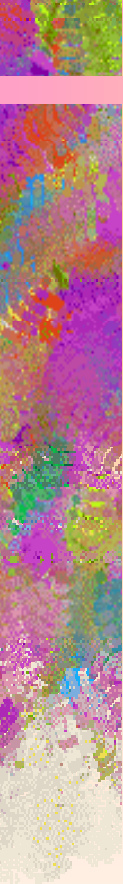


HOW INDEPENDENT YOU FEEL



HOW DEPENDENT YOU FEEL





DISABILITY



WHAT IS DISABILITY?

- “When you think of someone with a disability, what comes to mind?”
- “Do you consider a person with [problem] to have disability?”
- “Do you consider yourself to be a person with disability?”



SOMEONE WITH A DISABILITY

Physical limitations, and activities people cannot do as a result

US: “Unable to walk and talk. Inability to express oneself. Inability to physically take care of self. Inability to think clearly.”

SG: “Wheelchair-bound and crutch-using people. They are unable to do many activities. Most of the time, they have to stay at home. This is a kind of long-term suffering.”

SG: “A person whose arms or legs are dysfunctional. But he has to be flexible and accept the reality. Flexible mind is more important than functional four limbs.”

SG: “Perseverance and strong will power are important for them, and also important are optimism and peace of mind.”



PUBLIC CRITERIA OF DISABILITY

Singapore

US

Public criteria for “person with disability”⁽¹⁸⁾

7.0

12.3

Can't walk/wheelchair

93%

100%

Blind

87%

100%

Deaf

77%

97%

Assistance toileting

77%

90%



YOURSELF

	Singapore	US
If respondent thinks s/he is a person with disability	43%	48%

US: "Yes, because I compare myself with a year ago, and I'm in very different shape. Balance isn't good."

SG: "Yes, because I cannot walk. When I sit down, I can do nothing."

US: "No, 'cause I don't have any."

US: "No, I'm just getting older."

SG: "No, I can still walk, eat, and sleep. I'm not totally dependent, so I'm not a person with disability. When I can't walk and eat, I [still] won't think I'm a person with disability because I will still be able to think."

SG: "No, because I can still do many small things. [And because] I have a hope that I will be mobile without the walker one day."



SYNTHESIS & IMPLICATIONS



PROFILES

OLDER SINGAPOREANS

- Ambivalent about the family help that occurs in everyday life
- Wish for more personal autonomy and freedom
- Being disabled is a difficult situation in Singapore -- people help one-on-one, but societal buttresses are lacking
- Reliance on own psychological strengths as they age

OLDER AMERICANS

- Insist on sense of freedom and doing things on their own
- Have options to match their residence to that goal
- See social progress in relieving social and physical problems of disabled persons



LAY AND PROFESSIONAL DEFINITIONS

- **Disability**

Difficulty doing activities on one's own due to health or aging

- **Independence**

Having help and personal autonomy

Autonomy is psychological for SG, and more behavioral for US

- **Dependence**

Behavioral and wide-ranging subjective content

Not necessarily opposite of independence



IMPLICATIONS FOR SURVEYS

- **Using Western surveys as models for Asian ones**
 - Different daily activities, and task demand of those activities**
 - Different embedded meanings of words**
- **Interviewing older Singaporeans**
 - Reticence to state strong opinions (“ok, lah”)**
 - Fear of the government**
 - May know little about their current society due to illiteracy and staying at home**



CONCLUSION

Independence and dependence should always be treated as psychological concepts. Although they have some behavioral content, their psychological content is always great.

Closed-ended questions cannot capture differences in disability experiences across societies. Open-ended questions in pilot studies and large-scale surveys are a necessary adjunct.







UNSOLICITED HELP

	Singapore	US	signif
If ever receive help when don't need or ask for it	53%	47%	ns

How does such help make you feel?

Positive	94%	39%	$P \leq .01$
Negative	3%	44%	$P \leq .01$
Neutral	3%	17%	$P \leq .10$



UNSOLICITED HELP

POSITIVE

- **SG:** *“I feel relieved and happy that someone is willing to help.”*
- **SG:** *“I don’t feel inferior. Others want to help you and of course you should thank them.”*

NEGATIVE

- **US:** *“I’m not mad, but I just think they’re kind of telling you that you aren’t doing it right.”*
- **US:** *“Sometimes it’s difficult to stop people. (But) nobody helped me very long when I don’t want them to!”*



CURRENT COHORT

- They are isolated by little education and by dialects
- They have lived through difficult political/social periods
- Singapore developed swiftly and is vastly different from their expectations and mores
- They need slowness, patience, and comfort
- They need seamless access, else they will stay at home





THANK YOU FOR PHOTOS



Prof. James Harrison



Prof. David Robson

