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Gender differences in developmental assets profile of college going youth: a report from India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Recent years have seen a paradigm shift in the way development during young age is considered where the focus of attention has moved from the deficit based approaches to one that of strength based. Among the various strength based approaches in youth development, developmental assets profile has achieved a prominent place. The present study is aimed at providing a preliminary evaluation of developmental assets on a group of young people from Kerala State, India.

Methods: One hundred and forty (63 females, 77 males) participants were assessed on developmental assets profile survey.

Results: Of the sample, 6.4%, 58.6%, 33.6%, and 1.4% of youth fell in the thriving, adequate, vulnerable, and challenged categories, respectively. Analysis of composite internal assets showed that 15.7%, 47.9%, 33.5%, and 2.9%, fell in the thriving, adequate, vulnerable, and challenged categories respectively. In the external assets scores, this was 22.1%, 49.3%, 27.9%, and 0.7%. Significant gender differences were found in the number of total internal, external, and total assets reported.

Conclusions: The present study is one of the first studies attempting to assess the developmental assets profile of the college going youth in India and to analyse the gender differences on the same. This way, the study provides a preliminary, nonetheless important understanding about the developmental assets profile of a sample of college going youth.

Keywords: Developmental assets profile, College youth, External assets, Internal assets, Thriving, Vulnerable, Challenged

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1990s, the predominant understanding of young people was one that considered them as problems to be managed or as broken.^{1,2} This assumption of youth as a problematic period led to the researchers and practitioners in the field of youth development to focus on reducing the problem behaviours with no or minimal focus on the positive aspects of young age.³ This

traditional ‘deficit approach’ focused itself around the identification, reduction, and prevention of factors that are considered to hinder healthy development as well as the reduction and prevention of unhealthy behaviours.⁴

Despite being a model with considerable influence on the conceptualization of youth mental health and development, this approach came to be criticized on various grounds.⁵ For instance, contrary to the

‘vulnerable youth’ concept, many young people showed resistance and flourishing, even in the face of life’s great adversities.⁶ It was also criticized for being reductionist, which separated young individual from his or her own context.⁷ However, recent advances in the field of life span development strongly pointed towards a development characterized by mutually influencing relations between the developing individual and his or her context in different levels.⁸ There was also growing understanding that preventing a problem from occurring did not guarantee positive development.⁹

These newer insights lead to the formation of a new vision about the youth development called positive youth development bringing about a shift in the existing deficit based paradigm about the youth.¹⁰⁻¹² Moving beyond the problem identification and risk reduction, the positive youth development perspective emphasized promotion of mental health and wellbeing, bringing it closer to the concept of health as encompassing more than the mere absence of illness. Further, it focused on understanding and fostering experiences and resources that promote educational, social, and health outcomes.⁴ These experiences and resources are considered as the building blocks for successful development and is present in the individual and the context or community to which an individual belongs to. It was hypothesized that an alignment of the various resources within the individual and his or her context, will promote positive youth development, where this alignment involved marshalling developmental assets.¹³

These developmental assets exist across key settings of youth development and constitute the social and ecological nutrients for the growth of a healthy person.¹⁴ Grounded on various concepts of resilience, prevention, and adolescent development, the developmental assets approach grew out of research involving more than two million students, spanning more than a decade.¹⁵ Originally proposed as having 30 assets the model was expanded to include a total of 40 developmental assets and is divided under to broad asset categories – 20 internal (resources that are present within the individual) and 20 external assets (resources and opportunities that are found in the community to which the individual belong to) with four distinctive categories under each.^{15,16}

Studies conducted by search institute and several other researchers has consistently provided, cross-sectional as well as longitudinal, support for the developmental assets framework as a potential means of approaching youth development. For example, one study by the Search Institute show that there is a positive relationship between the number of assets reported by an individual and reduced risk taking and thriving, and was seen longitudinally.¹⁷ They also reported an accumulative effect of developmental assets on youth development. This finding was confirmed in a large study involving 99,462 youth, where it was found that more number of assets in a youth was related with lower levels of alcohol use, depression and suicide, and violence.¹⁸ Specifically,

they found that youth with less than 10 assets were at the highest risk, followed by youth reporting 11-20 assets and 21-30 assets. Youth with 31 or more assets were at the lowest risk category. Another study found that among various indicators of thriving, developmental assets predicted about 10% to 43% of the variance.¹⁹ Further, they found a positive association between number of developmental assets and success in school, overcoming adversity, maintaining physical health, and gratification delay.

Despite the huge potential that the positive youth development approaches provide, there seems to have a lack of adequate attention on this field. It is found that promoting positive development also contributes to the prevention or reduction of high risk behaviours.¹³ However, building programs and policies within the developmental assets framework requires that we have a better understanding about where the young people of the country stand with respect to the developmental assets. This would give the researchers a foundation to work from. Even though developmental assets framework has become a leading force in guiding the field of youth development, our country is still to catch up. It may be particularly critical for a country like India, with a large proportion of young people, to enhance the developmental assets. The present study is unique in it that an attempt at assessing the developmental assets profile of a sample of young people is almost non-existent in our country. Under these circumstances, present study aimed at assessing the developmental assets profile of a sample of college going youth and to conduct a gender comparison.

METHODS

Participants

One hundred and forty students within the age range of 18-22 (M=18, SD=2) years, attending regular college located in sub-urban Kerala participated in the present study. No specific inclusion or exclusion criteria was set. Of the total sample, 55% were males and the rest 45% females. Thirty percent of the sample belonged to Hindu religion, while Muslim and Christian participants were 53.6% and 16.4%, respectively. About 82% of participants belonged to middle socioeconomic strata while 11% were from lower socioeconomic status. Ten participants (7%) did not respond for the item. Majority of the participants (88.6%) came from nuclear families and 10% from extended families. Both genders differed significantly on the variable of religion. No significant difference was found between male and female participants on variables of family type, socioeconomic status, and habitat.

Procedure

The researcher visited different classes of the college with the permission from the college authority and explained to the prospective participants about the nature

of the study. Time was given for clarifications, if any. Once clarifications were over, the researcher requested for volunteers who would like to take part in study. One hundred and fifty students showed interest to take part in the study, of which 10 did not turn up on the day of assessment, which was two days from the date of announcement. Written informed consent was taken from all the participants. Researcher stayed with the participants while they filled the assessment tools clarifying doubts regarding questions. Standardized administration procedures were followed. The assessment was done in groups of 10-15 to facilitate easier conduction increasing the reliability of the data obtained. Considering the fact that the data was collected in small groups and from different classes, the total data collection was completed over a period of two weeks during the month of October, 2017.

Tools

Present study used basic demographic data sheet along with the Developmental Assets Profile Survey.²⁰ Permission to use the survey was obtained. One of the most widely used tool in the field of youth development, DAP is constructed in line with the developmental assets framework developed by Benson and his colleagues at Search Institute. This 58-item questionnaire provide a simple, valid, and reliable self-report of the developmental asset categories currently being experienced by adolescents and can be used for both genders. The DAP has two alternate ways of scoring. The Asset View provides scores on eight asset categories (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity). The Context View provides scores on five contexts (personal, social, family, school, community). The tool is found to have sound reliability and validity.²⁰ The psychometric properties of this survey were found to be acceptable in non-western cultures also suggesting cross-cultural suitability of the tool.²¹

Data analysis

The obtained data was coded and analysis was carried out using the PSPP 1.0.1. For analysing socio-demographic variables, frequency, percentage, and chi-square tests were used. The continuous variables were analysed using frequency, mean, standard deviation, and t-test for testing the significance of difference between groups. P value of 0.05 was kept as level of significance for the present study. All the graphs in the study was made using Windows Excel software.

RESULTS

The following section provides the findings from the statistical analysis of the data.

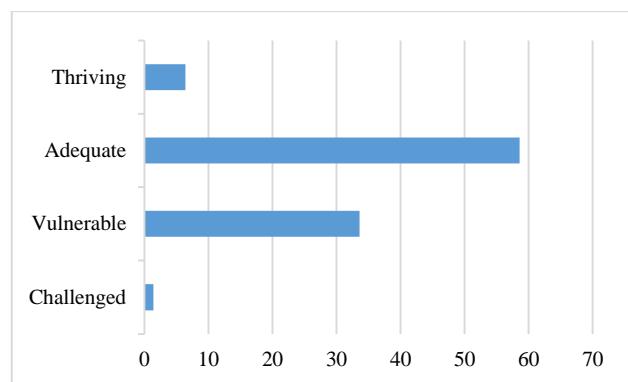


Figure 1: Categories of participants according to the average of total assets scores.

As shown (Figure 1), 1.4% of the 140 participants had a composite asset score of 52-60 (thriving), 58.6% had a composite asset score of 42-51 (adequate), 33.6% had composite asset score of 30-41 (vulnerable), and 2% had composite asset score of 29 or below (challenged). Further, the average total scores for the present sample was found to be 44.17 which was higher than the Western normative sample (Mean=42.6; DAP, 2005).

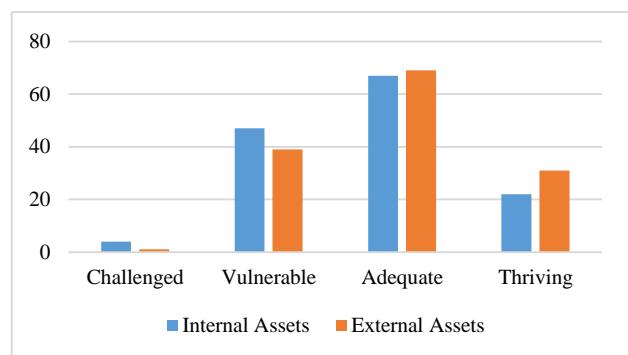


Figure 2: Categories of participants according to the average internal and external assets scores.

As shown (Figure 2) in the internal assets scores, 15.7%, 47.9%, 33.5%, and 2.9%, of the participants fell in the thriving (26-30 assets), adequate (21-25 assets), vulnerable (15-20 assets), and challenged (0-14 assets) categories respectively. In the external assets scores, this was 22.1%, 49.3%, 27.9%, and 0.7%.

Table 1 shows that on the internal developmental assets, male participants had a significantly higher assets score on the domains of commitment to learning ($p<0.01$), social competencies ($p<0.01$) and positive identity ($p<0.05$). The positive identity domain showed no significant gender difference. On the external developmental assets, male participants had significantly higher scores on the domains of support ($p<0.01$), empowerment ($p<0.01$), and boundaries and expectations ($p<0.01$). The external asset domain of constructive use of time showed no significant gender difference. Further, comparison of both genders on the composite internal,

composite external, and composite total developmental assets scores showed that male participants had significantly higher composite internal ($p<0.01$),

composite external ($p<0.01$), and composite total ($p<0.01$) scores compared to female participants.

Table 1: Internal, external, and composite developmental assets: gender comparison.

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	p
Commitment to learning	Female	63	17.68	5.10	0.000
	Male	77	21.22	4.85	
Positive values	Female	63	21.11	3.86	0.154
	Male	77	22.01	3.55	
Social competencies	Female	63	21.44	4.51	0.000
	Male	77	24.38	3.63	
Positive identity	Female	63	20.86	5.07	0.039
	Male	77	22.60	4.80	
Support	Female	63	22.02	4.22	0.000
	Male	77	24.44	3.39	
Empowerment	Female	63	21.95	4.55	0.006
	Male	77	23.91	3.69	
Boundaries and expectations	Female	63	20.76	4.90	0.000
	Male	77	24.44	4.20	
Constructive use of time	Female	63	21.78	5.37	0.178
	Male	77	20.57	5.14	
Composite external assets	Female	63	20.35	3.84	0.000
	Male	77	22.66	3.42	
Composite internal assets	Female	63	21.75	3.64	0.002
	Male	77	23.47	2.90	
Total assets	Female	63	41.98	6.78	0.000
	Male	77	45.97	5.80	

DISCUSSION

Present study assessed the developmental assets profile of a sample of college going youth and provides preliminary report on where our youth stand on various developmental assets.

Developmental assets profile

The study shows that majority of the participants have adequate levels of developmental assets, a finding which is seen in a number of reports assessing developmental assets. Present sample had higher composite assets score than the Western normative sample (DAP, 2005).²⁰ In the average internal assets score also, the present sample had a higher scores than the normative sample. One reason may be that it is due to the unique nature of the present sample as present study included college going youth, mostly from middle socioeconomic strata from sub-urban Kerala. It is found that in contrast to other states, Kerala has achieved major progress in various fields of human development, including equality, education and other human resources.²¹

Nevertheless, about one third of the sample fell in vulnerable group with regard to developmental assets. This is important keeping in mind that higher scores on developmental assets are associated with a number of

positive outcomes including increased engagement in thriving behaviors and reduced engagement in high-risk behaviors.^{18,19} Similar findings were reported in a study involving four developing countries where higher developmental assets score were associated with increased workforce development, civic engagement, and education.²² Also, studies show that young people who report high-risk behaviors report lower levels of internal and external risk-protective factors.²³

Gender differences in internal, external and total assets

Contrary to the existing literature present study found that levels of commitment to learning among young females was less compared to young males, in turn, indicating a lower level of overall school engagement.^{24,25} It may be that, young females experience the disadvantages of gender-linked stereotypes where higher academic engagement leading to negative social feedback causing reduced engagement.²⁶ Even for gifted young women, it is found that their career aspirations are lower than men and even when the academic performance was similar, young males reported higher competency.²⁷ In social competencies also, the young females scored lesser than young males. Though the authors could not find any literature on gender differences in social competencies, a few studies suggest that on different dimensions of this domain, females tend to do less compared to men. For

instance, in the area of problem solving, it is found that young females report higher levels of emotion focused problem solving more than young males which is implicated as a reason for higher levels of depression experienced by young females.²⁸ Positive identity was the third internal asset category where young females reported significantly lower scores than young males in the study. A number of factors may be contributing to this. For example, it is found that young females tend to have less belief in themselves and have lower levels of self-esteem which are components of positive identity.^{27,29} However, the findings are not conclusive as there are studies suggest that young females perform better in sense of purpose, which is a component of positive identity.³⁰

Gender differences was also found in the external asset of support where female participants reporting lower scores on this asset than the male participants, a finding contradictory to the existing literature. Studies have shown that women, in general, report higher levels of perceived support than males. For instance, young women report high on both measures of receiving and providing support.³¹ However, it is also found that young men were as satisfied with support received from friends as was young women.³² Another study from India, however, did not find any significant difference between women and men on the variable support.³³

The study also found that young female participants report less on the asset of empowerment compared to young males, indicating that the feeling of safety, being valued and respected by others. Similarly, in the boundaries and expectations asset also young females reported less scores than young males. This finding is consistent with the existing literature that young females in India experience higher levels of discrimination in education, independent decision making, etc. despite the fact that young female reported higher levels of gender egalitarian attitudes suggesting that gender equality prevails family life in India.³⁴ It may be that, various restrictions placed on women, and socialization practices which are affected by socio-cultural norms might have led to this findings.

The study also found gender differences where young females reported significantly lower in the composite internal, external and total assets. Importantly, the scores of female participants on composite external and total developmental assets were lower than the population norms. This may be a reflection of significantly low scores on various internal and external assets of the young female participants than their male counterparts leading to a lower scores on composite assets scores.

CONCLUSION

The study provides preliminary information regarding the status of a sample of college youth with respect to the level of developmental assets. It revealed that the current sample reported a higher number of developmental assets

than was reported from studies from western population. The significant gender gap in the reported levels of developmental assets despite the fact that overall scores were higher than the western norms showing that young females, even from a population who are relatively doing good, are at a disadvantage. There also seems to have a proportion of youth who fall in the challenged or vulnerable category. Specific steps need to be taken to improve the status of those young people in the vulnerable and challenged categories and also the young females to promote universal health and wellbeing and to prosper as a society.

Limitations

Some of the limitations of the present study are outlined here. The sample for the present study was collected from a single institute which limited the range of the study population. Further, there was a high proportion of students belonging to the middle socioeconomic strata of the society. This homogeneity of the study sample would make it difficult to generalise the study findings to a more varied and heterogeneous population. In addition, for a variable like Developmental Assets, where the socioeconomic, educational, and cultural milieu of the individuals has an important role, the present study had a relatively low sample size.

Future directions

Considering the limitations of the study, a number of suggestions for future research is provided. For a better understanding of the status of our youth and to know where they are standing on level of various developmental assets, it is important to have studies including large sample size, with a heterogeneous sample representing all different sections of youth. A more detailed understanding of various socio-demographic variables need to be analysed which would further our understanding about its role in developmental assets of youth in our communities. The researches should also need to go beyond understanding the developmental assets and increase the scope of the studies by including other variables. This would in turn, increase the generalizability of the study findings providing more valuable insights. Further, studies including high-risk participants are also needed. This group deserves a special mention as there is a direct link between the number of Developmental Assets that a youth reports and the engagement in high-risk behaviours. Also, longitudinal researches can take the scientific community a long way in achieving the goal of promoting developmental assets among its youth, enhancing youth mental health and wellbeing.

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