

The Impact of Adolescence on the Development of Moral Values

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Abstract: *The study delves into the critical issue of 'values' in adolescents, shedding light on the complex factors and influences that shape the personality development, behavior, and overall well-being of young individuals. It underscores the importance of collective efforts aimed at mutual growth and competence-building, advocating for interdisciplinary and indigenous methodologies. The primary objective of this research is to analyze and promote values among students. It investigates the shifts in moral values among students and their implications on Indian academic institutions, family structures, lifestyles, and governance. To conduct this study, a sample of 400 school students from the cities of Delhi and Kolkata was carefully selected. A questionnaire measuring character strengths, adapted from Seligman's VIA (2002), was administered to the participants. The findings of this research reveal notable distinctions between the two cities. Specifically, the Kolkata sample exhibited higher values in courage, integration, and teamwork compared to the Delhi sample. Conversely, when it comes to integrity and humanity, girls from Delhi scored higher than boys in both sample groups. The overall comparison of these two regions, Delhi and Kolkata, yields intriguing results. Students from Kolkata showcase greater character strengths in courage, integration, and teamwork, while respondents from Delhi excel in love of learning and humanity.*

Keywords: Values, adolescents, behaviour

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a transformative phase in an individual's life, with far-reaching effects on their well-being in adulthood. This period is marked by rapid physiological changes and significant psychological development. Health, in the context of adolescence, is a multifaceted concept, shaped by diverse factors including environmental influences, social interactions, cultural norms, and biological processes. Additionally, elements like diet, nutrition, stress management, and overall well-being play a pivotal role in determining the health of adolescents.

Among the key determinants of adolescent health are the choices they make concerning nutrition, lifestyle habits, and their response to societal influences. Adolescence is a time of profound biological changes that impact emotions, aspirations, rational thinking, and judgment. This transitional phase is often characterized by uncertainty, as adolescents find themselves neither fully children nor adults. It is during this period of ambiguity that the development of moral values becomes paramount, influenced by biological shifts and heightened susceptibility to emotional, aspirational, rational, and judgmental influences. This critical juncture of transition can contribute to identity crises and the emergence of egoistic behaviors in adolescents.

2. Review of Literature

Research studies have illuminated the profound impact of rapid technological and multimedia growth on the emergence of ethical dilemmas, threats, and violence across various levels of governance (UNESCO, 2002). Furthermore, investigations have unveiled a significant correlation between peer status and individual behavior within school environments, with clear implications for later issues such as school dropout, delinquency, and mental health problems. The formation and sustenance of deviant peer groups and gangs among adolescents, particularly those with behavioral issues, have been the subject of scrutiny (Goldstein, 1994). In this realm of study, the interconnectedness of leisure activities and transitional

behaviors has been explored, along with the relationship between engaging in specific activities like sports and the creation of new friendships (Brown, 1990; Fine, 1980).

Adolescents navigate complex relationships with both parents and peers simultaneously, with specific facets of these relationships demonstrating a clear link to overall adjustment. Seligman's seminal learned-helplessness study (Overmier & Seligman, 1967) provided insights into the effects of a lack of control over one's circumstances, resembling the behavior of depressed individuals. This lack of control is seen as an underlying factor in certain forms of depression (Klein & Seligman, 1976; Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Seligman, 1975). Adolescents often use their parents as a secure base for exploration, returning to this haven during times of distress, illness, fear, or stress (Marvin & Britner, 1999).

Empirical data supports the notion that low levels of child disclosure, negative feelings toward parents, and perceptions of excessive parental control are concurrently associated with higher delinquency rates, affiliation with deviant peer groups, and poor performance in both social and academic aspects of school life (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Social scientists contend that individuals occupying lower positions in various status hierarchies tend to have lower self-esteem compared to those more favored by society (Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi, 1964). Low self-esteem and aspirations are closely intertwined with maladjustment, with adolescents who perform poorly in school and harbor low educational aspirations being at greater risk of involvement in alcohol and substance use/abuse (Dryfoos, 1990). This is corroborated by Hawkins and colleagues (1992), who report that low school grades, especially during junior high school, are linked to an increased likelihood of engaging in alcohol and substance use/abuse. Adolescents who associate with peers harboring low expectations for school or who have friends who dropped out are also more likely to experience academic failure or dropout, compared to adolescents whose peers hold high expectations and exhibit positive attitudes toward school (e.g., Powell-Cope & Eggert, 1994; Rumberger, 2001; Wang et al., 1999).

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Data drawn from a national sample of high school seniors reveal concerning statistics regarding substance use among adolescents, with a significant portion having experimented with alcohol, cigarettes, and illicit drugs by the end of the eighth grade (Johnson et al., 2016). The consequences of heavy involvement in drug use, whether with a single substance or multiple substances, can be profoundly detrimental, affecting both physical and psychological well-being.

The presence of low family support, characterized by limited warmth and affection among family members, has been consistently linked to antisocial behaviors during adolescence (Farrington, 1998; Hawkins et al., 2000; Henggeler, 1989; Herrenkohl et al., 2001). For many adolescents, involvement with deviant peer groups has become a critical factor contributing to their delinquent behavior (Dahlberg & Potter, 2001; Hawkins et al., 2000; Herrenkohl et al., 2001; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Perry, 2000). Consequently, researchers have uncovered substantial evidence of an association between antisocial behavior, delinquency, and engagement with peers involved in antisocial behaviors.

Neuroscience research has also revealed links between personality characteristics and gender differences, with females being less prone to behavior problems in school (Barnes and Farrell, 1994). Gurian (2004) highlighted gender differences in thought processes and emotions, emphasizing that the male brain is biologically wired to seek competition and assert self-worth and identity. In contrast, females tend to display greater emotional sensitivity due to increased secretion of oxytocin and serotonin in the female brain.

Comparing the social values of Indian and American female students, the Rokeach Value Survey (1973) revealed notable differences. Indian students assigned higher importance to friendship and eternal life/salvation as values, while mature love and national security held greater significance for U.S. students (Canabal, M.E., 2004).

Research has consistently demonstrated that school climate significantly influences adjustment. Schools that prioritize competition, testing, and tracking while maintaining low expectations tend to have higher rates of school failures and dropouts compared to schools that foster high expectations, encourage cooperation, and feature supportive teachers (Powell-Cope & Eggert, 1994; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Rutter, 1979). Additionally, there is substantial empirical evidence, derived from both cross-sectional and longitudinal research, linking school failure and dropout to low socioeconomic status (Eccles, 1999). Resilience research has shifted its focus from negative developmental outcomes, such as risk behaviors, to successful adaptation despite childhood adversity (Luthar, 1991; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Human strengths and values exhibit cultural variations. The pursuit of personal happiness, well-being, and self-enhancement is generally viewed more positively in individualistic cultures than in collectivist cultures (Diener et al., 1999; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, and

Norasakkunkit, 1997). Social psychologists have taken a keen interest in the interplay between individualism and collectivism, examining how these cultural frameworks impact basic psychological variables, including the devaluation of self in collectivist cultures and relationships in individualistic cultures, as discussed by Markus and Kitayama (1991). Cross-cultural studies on moral development have also contributed valuable insights (Kohlberg, 1971).

The development of values is a significant aspect of childhood and adolescence. Research indicates that core values among American teenagers often include achieving success in a career, graduating from college, and starting their own families. The concept of individual values holds central importance in certain psychotherapeutic approaches, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT: Hayes et al., 2011) and Behavioral Activation for the Treatment of Depression (BATD: Lejuez et al., 2001, 2011).

3. Methodology

The present study aims to modestly explore how different cultures and institutional environments influence the development of human virtues among adolescents. It is a part of an ongoing extensive research project focused on investigating the impact of educational institutions on the cultivation of positive values in young children. This study encompasses two major metropolitan cities in India, involving a sample of 400 XII-grade (secondary school) students from Delhi (North India) and Kolkata (East India). To assess these aspects, participants were administered a questionnaire that measures 24 characteristics of human strengths, adapted from Seligman's signature strengths.

Seligman's theory suggests that a virtuous person typically demonstrates all or most of these traits through various actions. He asserts that each of these virtues can be quantified and acquired. These 24 values can be grouped into six core virtues, as detailed below:

The core values and their associated cluster values are as follows:

- 1) Wisdom: Curiosity, Love of learning, Judgment, Ingenuity, Social intelligence, Perspective
- 2) Courage: Valor, Perseverance, Integrity
- 3) Humanity and Love: Kindness, Loving
- 4) Justice: Citizenship, Fairness, Leadership
- 5) Temperance: Self-control, Prudence, Humility
- 6) Transcendence: Appreciation of beauty, Gratitude, Hope, Spirituality, Forgiveness, Humor, Zest

These core values and cluster values represent essential aspects of human strengths and virtues, as proposed by Martin E.P. Seligman. They serve as a framework for understanding and measuring positive character traits and values in individuals.

Source: Martin E.P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 2002.

We selected fifteen 'virtues' randomly out of the 24 'signature strengths' mentioned above. Items selected from original questionnaire available in the website at www.authentic happiness.org from VIA Strengths Survey*.

We selected 100 items only. The measure includes fifteen virtues: Love of learning/curiosity/general awareness, perseverance, perspective/worldly, social intelligence/emotional intelligence, courage/integrity/honesty, humanity/love/kindness, teamwork/sense of duty, self-control/prudence, humility/modesty, gratitude, hope/optimism, judgement, spirituality, humour, forgiveness.

* The questionnaire is the work of the Values-In-Action (VIA) Institute under the direction of Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman.

The scale has five response categories, 1 to 5. The score 5 represents the highest positive value and 1 the least. Students were asked to tick in one of the five response categories out of 100 items that described them the best.

Sample

In the sample selection process:

- A total of 400 students from the XII grade in Delhi and Kolkata were chosen.
- Two prominent schools were selected, one being a coeducation school and the other a Christian Missionary School for girls, from both Delhi and Kolkata.
- These schools were chosen based on their similarity in terms of school status (prominence), medium of instruction (English), parents' education, occupation, income, and overall academic performance.
- The selection of Christian Missionary Schools aimed to investigate potential influences of Christian education and disciplines on the values held by students.
- The questionnaire was administered exclusively to students in the XII grade, with a focus on those aged 17 and older.
- The sample consisted of a total of 400 students, evenly divided between males and females, with 200 students in each gender category in both Delhi and Kolkata.

This sampling methodology aimed to provide a balanced and representative group of students for the study, allowing for meaningful comparisons and analysis.

4. Limitations

The limitations of the study include:

- 1) Varied Items Measuring Virtues: The test used in the study contained items that measured virtues within specific clusters. Some of these items were very general and did not capture unique virtues. For instance, statements like "I dread getting up in the morning" and "If candy or cookies are around, I usually eat them" are common experiences, but they may not specifically measure core values. These items could be culture-specific and more related to general behaviors rather than core values.
- 2) Sample Composition: The sample from Christian missionary schools included only girls, and no Christian missionary school for boys or coeducation school was chosen. This limitation restricts the ability to compare schools, especially in terms of the potential influences of Christian culture and discipline on values among students. Additionally, the analysis of missionary girl

schools in Delhi and Kolkata is incomplete, which may limit the comprehensive understanding of these schools' effects on values.

- 3) Exclusion of School Teachers and Parents: The study did not include the perspectives of school teachers and parents of the respondents. Including these stakeholders could have provided valuable insights into the variations in results and a more holistic view of the factors influencing adolescent values.
- 4) Merging of Characteristics within Clusters: Some of the characteristics within each cluster (domain) were merged in certain items, showing little difference. As a result, some values were found to be similar across all cases. This lack of differentiation may have affected the ability to detect significant differences in mean scores, as no variance test was applied. However, the results still offer a general trend.

These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the study and may offer avenues for further research to address these challenges and provide a more comprehensive understanding of adolescent values.

5. Analysis and Findings

The analysis and findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

- Data analysis was conducted based on the Mean Scores of 15 "virtues" measured in the study.
- Female students from Christian missionary schools and coeducation schools scored higher on humility and forgiveness, with a Mean score of 4.50 and 3.85, respectively.
- Male students from Kolkata demonstrated higher scores in courage ($M = 4.81$) and teamwork ($M = 3.83$).
- A comparison between female students from Delhi and Kolkata revealed that female students from Delhi scored higher in integrity and humanity (kindness and love), with a Mean score of 4.85.
- Among male students in Delhi, "love of learning" and "curiosity" were found to be dominant virtues, with Mean scores of 4.60 and 3.90, respectively.
- Female students, on the other hand, exhibited greater strengths in self-control, hope, and optimism compared to their male counterparts.
- Male students from Delhi demonstrated higher strengths in gratitude, humility, modesty, practical knowledge, and perspectives compared to females from both Delhi and Kolkata.
- The analysis also indicated that male students from Delhi showed higher strengths in practical knowledge and perspectives.

Here are some major strengths and their rank order based on the findings of the study. Please note that these are general trends observed in the data:

- 1) Female students from Christian missionary and coeducation schools: Higher in humility and forgiveness.
- 2) Male students from Kolkata: Higher in courage and teamwork.

- 3) Female students from Delhi: Higher in integrity and humanity (kindness and love).
- 4) Male students from Delhi: Dominant strengths in "love of learning" and "curiosity."
- 5) Female students: Greater strengths in self-control, hope, and optimism.
- 6) Male students from Delhi: Higher strengths in gratitude, humility, modesty, practical knowledge, and perspectives.

These findings provide valuable insights into the distribution of virtues and strengths among students in different settings and genders.

Rank order of major values between Male and Female Students (Mean score)

| Rank | Virtue | Male | Female |
|------|------------------|------|--------|
| 1. | Humanity | | 4.85 |
| 2. | Courage | 4.81 | |
| 3. | Love of Learning | 4.60 | |
| 4. | Humility | | 4.50 |
| 5. | Curiosity | 3.90 | |
| 6. | Forgiveness | | 3.85 |
| 7. | Team work | 3.83 | |

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the cultivation of positive strengths and the prevention of maladjustment among adolescents. The overall comparison between two major metropolitan regions, Delhi and Kolkata, has yielded intriguing findings. Kolkata's students exhibit greater character strengths in courage, integration, and teamwork, whereas respondents from Delhi show higher levels of love for learning and humanity.

The study underscores the importance of understanding Indian cultural diversities, particularly in the context of survival strategies. It emphasizes the need to move beyond simplistic cause-and-effect relationships and calls for a more nuanced exploration of cultural influences. Furthermore, the study advocates for collective efforts in mutual growth and competence building, encouraging interdisciplinary research with indigenous methodologies. It highlights the pivotal role of Asian Social Psychology in regional and inter-sectoral development, particularly in promoting positive social development among adolescents. Ultimately, the research aims to position psychology as an effective tool for comprehending and nurturing positive values in young minds. It acknowledges that this is an ongoing process and that the results presented here serve as indicators of cultural diversity and gender stereotypes, opening the door to further exploration and understanding in this vital field.

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