

Self-perceived Character Strengths in Urban Indian Youth: Observations and Reflections

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Positive psychology emphasizes the role of identification and applications of positive traits that are seen as linked to positive adaptational outcomes. Strengths may have different meanings and variations in manifestations in different cultures. The aim of the present study was to examine the profile of character strengths in Indian youth. Nine hundred thirty seven community-dwelling young adults (20 to 35 years) participated in the present study. An indigenously developed measure, derived from the VIA classification of strengths was used to capture self perceived character strengths. The results indicated that 'close loving relationships' was the most commonly endorsed strength followed by 'gratitude and thankfulness', 'kindness', 'justice and fairness' and 'honesty and genuineness'. Further the youngest group scored lower on social responsibility, persistence, practical farsightedness as well as self discipline. The results pertaining to gender differences on strengths subscales revealed that males scored higher on social strengths whereas females were higher on relational strengths. The implications for further research are discussed.

Keywords: Character strengths, Indian youth, Self perceived strengths, Positive psychology

The emergent field of positive psychology emphasizes the role of identification and applications of positive traits that are seen as linked to positive adaptational outcomes. The study of positive traits received an impetus after Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a system of classification of character strengths based on a review of historical and contemporary literature across multiple fields such as ethics, philosophy and psychology. In their system, virtues refer to the core characteristics 'valued by moral philosophers and thinkers across ages' while character strengths refer to 'the psychological ingredients (psychological processes and mechanisms) that serve as distinct routes of manifesting specific virtues' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Several studies have since been undertaken to examine the profile of strengths and their socio-demographic correlates using VIA taxonomy of strengths in varied samples across nations (e.g. Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006; Shimai, Otake,

Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006; Linley et al., 2007; Proctor, Maltby & Linley, 2011). Although many of these studies are international/ cross-cultural in nature, non-western nations have been poorly represented. Moreover, in several of these studies, the sample is restricted to internet users. There are only few studies from India on character strengths, their correlates and assessment issues (e.g. Singh & Jha, 2008; Singh & Choubisa, 2009; 2010; Banth & Singh, 2011; Mehrotra, Tripathi, & Banu, 2012). The VIA taxonomy of strengths was developed with the goal of providing a universal system of classification of strengths, applicable across cultures. But recent literature is pointing towards the possibility that certain strengths that are valued in some cultures, especially eastern cultures may have been neglected (Shimai et al., 2006; Mehrotra et al., 2012). The development of strengths is viewed as involving processes that are deeply embedded in the individual's culture (Smith, 2006). Cultures can vary in term of the availability of nurturing or

constraining elements that differentially shape the development of strengths (Smith, 1985a, 1985b). The expressions of strengths is also seen as contextually dependent (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003) and involving interactions with one's material and interpersonal environments (Staudinger & Pasupathi, 2000). It can be speculated that strengths may have different meanings and variations in manifestations in different cultures. There are also likely to be cultural differences in the extent to which each of the strengths are valued and fostered. Strengths are also likely to vary in terms of their salience, manifestations and applications according to the developmental stage.

The present study

To the best of our knowledge, young adulthood has been a relatively neglected developmental phase in the character strengths literature. Young adulthood may be characterized as the period that is marked by consolidation of one's identity on one hand and the emphasis on mastery of multiple environmental demands on the other hand. The growing recognition of the need for programs for positive youth development makes the assessment and development of character strengths a highly relevant exercise in the current scenario. The positive youth development approach emphasizes on allowing youth to be the agent of their own growth with adults motivating the discovery of their potentials (Larson, 2006). A study of character strengths and their applications during this period thus assumes high importance due to its implications for well-being of the youth as well as for mental health promotion. In the above backdrop, the present study aimed at examining the profile of character strengths in Indian youth, highlighting the strengths that are most endorsed by the Indian youth as well as exploring age and gender differences if any, within the young adulthood period.

Method

Procedure:

The study was initiated after ethical clearance from the authors' Institute Ethics Committee. Inclusion criteria were: age between 20 to 35

years, ability to respond to the questionnaire in English and minimum 15 years of formal education. Students as well as working youth were represented in the study. The student participants were recruited from eighteen colleges across the city. An attempt was made to represent students in various course streams, depending on the availability of permission from college authorities. The young adults in the workforce were recruited through snowballing method as well as through contacting six organizations. It was ensured that the working group comprised of individuals in varied occupations. All the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were enrolled after obtaining written informed consent. The questionnaires were mostly administered in groups of sizes varying between 10 and 30, under the supervision of the research staff.

Participants:

The sample consisted of 937 community-dwelling young adults within 20 to 35 years of age range. The mean age of the sampled participants was 24 years. Males and females were almost equally represented (49% and 51% respectively) in the sample. A majority of the participants were unmarried (71%) and Hindu by religion (79%).

Measures:

Basic data sheet: A basic data sheet was used to elicit the socio-demographic details of the participants such as age, gender, education, occupational and marital status etc.

Assessment of character strength: Character strengths were assessed using Self-perceived Strengths Measure (SPS) (Mehrotra et al., 2012). SPS is an indigenously developed measure which is derived from the VIA classification of strengths. It is a 24 items, vignette based-measure of character strengths, standardized for Indian population. Each of the vignettes portrays a hypothetical person with thought patterns and behaviors characteristic of the given strength. The respondents need to use a six point likert type response format to indicate the extent which the hypothetical person is similar to them ('very different from me' to 'very much

like me'). In addition to the scores on individual strengths, the measure provides four factor based subscales, namely, social strengths, relational strengths, learning orientation and pragmatic strengths. Forgiveness, spirituality, social skillfulness, persistence, gratitude and thankfulness are the five strengths that do not load on any of the four factors. The constituent strengths on the four subscales are as follows: a) Social: leadership, hope, social responsibility, courage, sense of humor, wisdom, energetic and lively. b) Pragmatic: Practical and farsightedness, modesty and humbleness, self discipline and open-mindedness. c) Relational: justice and fairness, kindness, close and loving relationship, genuineness and honesty d) Learning orientation: creativity, curiosity, love to learn new things and appreciation of beauty.

Analyses

The distribution of strength scores departed significantly from normal as revealed through

KS-Z test. Hence Kruskal Wallis test was used to compare age groups. Post hoc analysis using Mann-Whitney U test was carried out only when an overall significant difference emerged. The differences between genders were examined using Mann-Whitney U test. Two tailed tests of significance were used.

Results

Patterns of endorsement of character strengths

The distribution of strengths scores for the overall sample revealed that the minimum and maximum scores on each of the strengths spanned the entire continuum of possible range of scores from -1 to 4. Close loving relationships emerged as a topmost self perceived strength followed by gratitude and thankfulness, justice and fairness, kindness, and genuineness and honesty. The bottommost strengths in this sample of youth were: leadership, courage, creativity, sense of humor and wisdom (Table 1).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of character strengths in the overall youth sample (N=937)

S.No.	Character Strengths	Mean (SD)	S.No.	Character Strengths	Mean (SD)
1.	Leadership	1.77 (1.33)	13.	Close and loving relationship	3.07 (1.08)
2.	Forgiveness	2.37 (1.40)	14.	Genuineness and honesty	2.88 (1.06)
3.	Appreciation of beauty	2.81 (1.25)	15.	Practical and farsightedness	2.24 (1.27)
4.	Justice and fairness	2.94 (1.14)	16.	Creativity	2.10 (1.28)
5.	Spirituality	2.41 (1.50)	17.	Modesty and humbleness	2.59 (1.22)
6.	Social skillfulness	2.70 (1.15)	18.	Curiosity	2.32 (1.31)
7.	Hope	2.51 (1.26)	19.	Self discipline	2.26 (1.32)
8.	Sense of humor	2.20 (1.43)	20.	Wisdom	2.22 (1.27)
9.	Social responsibility	2.29 (1.24)	21.	Being Energetic and lively	2.31 (1.25)
10.	Courage	1.87 (1.38)	22.	Open mindedness	2.28 (1.20)
11.	Kindness	2.86 (1.09)	23.	Gratitude and thankfulness	3.00 (1.07)
12.	Persistence	2.46 (1.28)	24.	Love to learn new things	2.46 (1.24)

Table 2. Age differences on character strengths (Overall sample: N = 937)

Character Strengths	Age in years			Kruskal Wallis Chi Square	p value	Post hoc
	20-24 years Mean (SD) N1 = 530	25-29 years Mean (SD) N2 = 261	30-35 years Mean (SD) N3 = 146			
Leadership	1.69 (1.36)	1.94 (1.28)	1.82 (1.32)	5.47	NS	
Forgiveness	2.37 (1.40)	2.40 (1.38)	2.33 (1.45)	0.18	NS	
Appreciation of beauty	2.83 (1.27)	2.86 (1.18)	2.7 (1.30)	1.46	NS	
Justice and fairness	2.93 (1.15)	3.03 (1.10)	2.81 (1.19)	4.07	NS	
Spirituality	2.39 (1.57)	2.38 (1.48)	2.58 (1.40)	1.60	NS	
Social skillfulness	2.71 (1.17)	2.70 (1.14)	2.70 (1.14)	0.15	NS	
Hope	2.50 (1.28)	2.51 (1.24)	2.67 (1.24)	2.72	NS	
Sense of humor	2.32 (1.40)	1.99 (1.45)	2.18 (1.48)	9.08	0.01	1>2
Social responsibility	2.20 (1.28)	2.36 (1.22)	2.52 (1.16)	7.80	0.02	3>1
Courage	1.80 (1.42)	1.97 (1.32)	1.94 (1.40)	2.89	NS	
Kindness	2.82 (1.14)	2.91 (0.98)	2.92 (1.11)	0.94	NS	
Persistence	2.36 (1.33)	2.55 (1.25)	2.70 (1.16)	8.52	0.01	3>1
Close and loving relationship	3.12 (1.08)	3.09(1.05)	2.90 (1.16)	4.69	0.10	
Genuineness and honesty	2.84 (1.08)	2.91 (0.99)	2.97 (1.08)	2.45	NS	
Practical and farsightedness	2.16 (1.26)	2.27 (1.27)	2.51 (1.22)	8.57	0.01	3>1
Creativity	2.07 (1.32)	2.12 (1.27)	2.19 (1.20)	0.65	NS	
Modesty and humbleness	2.55 (1.26)	2.64 (1.16)	2.70 (1.20)	1.71	NS	
Curiosity	2.35 (1.33)	2.32 (1.29)	2.27 (1.33)	0.61	NS	
Self- discipline	2.15 (1.38)	2.41 (1.23)	2.40 (1.21)	7.04	0.03	2>1
Wisdom	2.18 (1.26)	2.27 (1.27)	2.29 (1.31)	1.43	NS	
Being Energetic and lively	2.25 (1.26)	2.44 (1.19)	2.33 (1.30)	3.79	NS	
Open mindedness	2.20 (1.24)	2.38 (1.17)	2.39 (1.20)	4.73	NS	
Gratitude and thankfulness	3.02 (1.08)	3.04 (1.07)	2.89 (1.06)	3.32	NS	
Love to learn new things	2.41 (1.24)	2.49 (1.26)	2.57 (1.21)	2.01	NS	

Table 3. Age differences on character strengths subscales

Character Strengths SPS subscales	20-24yrs N1=530	25-29yrs N2=261	30-35yrs N3=146	Kruskal Wallis X ²	p value	Post Hoc
Social	2.13(0.83)	2.21(0.84)	2.25(0.92)	2.80	NS	
Learning-orientation	2.42(0.92)	2.45(0.91)	2.43(0.93)	0.21	NS	
Relational	2.93(0.77)	2.99 (0.74)	2.90 (0.87)	0.97	NS	
Pragmatic	2.26(0.89)	2.43(0.83)	2.50(0.88)	10.3	0.006	2>1, 3>1

The frequency and pattern of endorsing extreme negative options on the character strengths items ('different from me' or 'very different from me' respectively) provided important information regarding the extent to which various strengths are dis-owned by the Indian youth. An examination of this pattern revealed that strengths with highest frequency of dis-owning were: courage, leadership, sense of humor, spirituality and forgiveness. The first three are also the strengths that had the lowest means as mentioned above. Approximately, fourteen to twenty percent of the participants disowned these strengths in the study sample.

The overall sample was divided into three age-groups viz. 20-24 years, 25-29 years and 30-35 years in order to examine differences between them, if any. No significant differences between age groups emerged on most of the 24 strengths (table 2). On five out of the 24 strengths, the age groups were significantly different and pair-wise comparisons were carried out. The youngest age group (20-25 years) obtained higher scores on sense of humor and lower scores on social responsibility, persistence and practical/farsightedness as compared to the oldest age group (30-35 years). On self discipline, the youngest group was lowest and significantly different from the 25-30 years age group. The two older groups did not differ from each other on any of the strengths scores. As far as differences between age groups on strengths subscales are concerned, significant overall difference emerged on the pragmatic subscale with each of the two older groups scoring higher on this strength as compared to the youngest age group (table 3).

Significant differences between genders emerged on 12 out of the 24 strengths (table 4). Males scored significantly higher than their female counterparts on curiosity, open mindedness, hope, sense of humor, social responsibility, leadership and courage, while females had higher scores on spirituality, appreciation of beauty, close loving relationship and gratitude and thankfulness.

In supplementary analyses, gender differences were examined separately within two age groups (below 25 years and 25-35 years).

This was in view of the findings of significant differences on strengths across the age groups. As the two older age groups (25-29 years and 30 to 25 years) did not differ significantly from each other on any of the strengths, these were combined for examining gender differences. Within both the age groups, males scored significantly higher on courage, creativity and sense of humor and significantly lower on close relationships. In addition, the younger, males scored significantly lower than their female counterparts on spirituality and thankfulness but higher on open-mindedness. On the other hand, older males scored higher on leadership, hope, team-work but lower on appreciation of beauty and modesty compared to the females in the same age group.

The gender comparisons on strengths subscales revealed that males scored higher than females on social subscale whereas females were higher on relational subscale (table 5).

Applications of Strengths in day- to -day life:

An open ended item used as part of the study also enquired about day to day applications of what the participants considered their top three strengths (self-designated top three strengths from the listing of the 24 strengths). On this item, they had to mention one or more (maximum three) specific incidents/situations in their recent past wherein they believed that they had used one of their top character strengths. This question was asked after the participants had gone over the SPS items (vignettes) and filled in their responses. This helped in the participants having a relatively common understanding of the meaning of strengths (as portrayed in the respective vignettes). The responses to the open ended items were content analyzed.

Five hundred and sixty two participants responded to the open ended item. Content analysis of the responses resulted in exclusion of irrelevant/vague examples provided by 102 participants (phase 1). In the next phase, the remaining responses were subjected to further content analysis of responses of the remaining 460 individuals (47% males and 53% females; 62% students and 38% working youth). Both

Table 4. Gender differences on character strengths

Character strengths	Male (N1 = 462) Mean(SD)	Female (N2 = 475) Mean(SD)	Mann- Whitney U	p value
Leadership	1.95(1.31)	1.61(1.33)	93450.0	0.00
Forgiveness	2.42(1.36)	2.32(1.43)	105900.0	NS
Appreciation of beauty	2.73(1.25)	2.89(1.24)	100700.0	0.02
Justice and Fairness	2.92(1.15)	2.95(1.13)	108357.5	NS
Spirituality	2.21(1.58)	2.61(1.42)	937940.0	0.001
Social Skillfulness	2.71(1.17)	2.70(1.13)	108600.0	NS
Hope	2.61(1.26)	2.42(1.25)	99380.0	0.01
Sense of humor	2.52(1.35)	1.90(1.44)	82800.0	0.001
Social Responsibility	2.39(1.19)	2.19(1.28)	100300.0	0.02
Courage	2.06(1.32)	1.68(1.42)	93032.0	0.001
Kind	2.85(1.10)	2.86(1.09)	109700.0	NS
Persistence	2.50(1.29)	2.53(1.27)	103256.0	NS
Close & loving Relationship	2.91(1.12)	3.23(1.09)	90250.0	0.001
Genuineness & Honesty	2.85(1.06)	2.91(1.05)	105900.0	NS
Practical & Farsightedness	2.24(1.29)	2.23(1.26)	108557.0	NS
Creativity	2.32(1.22)	1.99(1.31)	8.8820.0	0.001
Modesty & Humbleness	2.52(1.26)	2.66(1.18)	103500.0	NS
Curiosity	2.43(1.27)	2.22(1.34)	100200.0	0.02
Self discipline	2.26(1.27)	2.25(1.36)	109300.0	NS
Wisdom	2.24(1.26)	2.20(1.27)	107700.0	NS
Being energetic & lively	2.32(1.27)	2.30(1.22)	107900.0	NS
Open mindedness	2.41(1.18)	2.15(1.20)	95820.0	0.001
Gratitude & Thankfulness	2.93(1.05)	3.07(1.09)	98633.5	0.005
Love to learn new things	2.46(1.26)	2.45(1.22)	109100.0	NS

Table 5: Gender differences on Character Strengths Subscales

Character strengths subscales	Males (N1 = 462)	Females (N2 = 475)	Mann- Whitney U	p value
Social	2.30 (0.83)	2.05 (0.84)	89995.5	0.001
Learning-orientation	2.49 (0.89)	2.37 (0.94)	102536.0	NS
Relational	2.89 (0.80)	2.99 (0.76)	101363.5	0.04
Pragmatic	2.36 (0.89)	2.33 (0.86)	107135.5	NS

these phases, involved two researchers who jointly coded each of the examples (responses) provided regarding manifestation of strengths in daily life. This resulted in extraction of dominant themes for each of the character strength self-identified as one of the top three

strengths by one or more of the participants. The clusters of themes identified with reference to manifestations/application in daily life are referred to as action portraits in the present study. About a quarter of the initial responses were independently examined by the main

investigator and cross checked against the codings of the research team to ensure accuracy.

These action portraits provide further glimpses of how the youth understand the meanings of character strengths in term of their manifestations or usage/application in their day to day life. The themes that emerged with respect to the day to day life applications of the top five character strengths of the overall youth sample are mentioned below:

Close and loving relationships: Taking care of close others' practical needs, sharing thoughts and feelings, making time for being together, freely helping in times of need, sacrificing something for the sake of not hurting others or for others' happiness, being understanding of the reasons behind arguments, providing emotional comfort and support to close others.

Gratitude: Being grateful to close others for things they give, for help and support, thanking God, being appreciative of good things and good people around in general, feeling a deep sense of gratitude to significant people in life, feeling generally thankful for all the opportunities in life, to people who are not close but still lend help, being thankful for others' 'smallest acts' of kindness, expressing thanks even to individuals who are being paid to do a job.

Genuineness and Honesty: Honestly revealing, doing original work rather than copying, apologizing rather than hiding a mistake, being true to self and God, sharing openly with close others, explaining honestly at work something that goes wrong, not shirking from one's responsibility even when no one might notice, giving one's best at work, keeping and returning others things safely and returning fully, voicing a need for a change openly rather than pretending something else, providing honest feedback, not supporting someone close for doing something wrong.

Kindness: Helping strangers in need (through charity/physical assistance to an elderly person/ Disabled person in a public place) helping an acquaintance financially, sacrificing one's own

comfort for helping someone in need, being gentle in interactions

Justice and Fairness: Taking active steps to curb and prevent animal abuse, protection of weak animals, supporting a friend facing injustice, raising voice on injustice to an employee at workplace, resolving an issue at work fairly, giving back to others what is due to be given.

Discussion

Self-reported top-most and bottom- most character strengths in the Indian youth

In our study, the most commonly endorsed character strengths are close loving relationships, gratitude and thankfulness, kindness, justice and fairness and genuineness and honesty. Mostly, these are strengths that are interpersonal in nature, with a focus on how individuals relate to one another in society, especially to close others. It is observed that four out of these five strengths fall under the relational subscale of the measure utilized. These results are not very surprising given the fact that various other studies also report these to be some of the high ranking strengths (e.g. Park et al., 2004; Shimai et al., 2006). Moreover, the predominantly collectivistic culture is likely to facilitate the development of these strengths as well as the value of these strengths in the minds of individuals. The contemporary scenario within the country with significant competitions at various levels as well as growing awareness of issues related to integrity, corruption and justice in the society may have at least partly contributed to the emergence of 'justice and fairness' and 'honesty and genuineness' as two of the top strengths. In fact the country has witnessed a recent upsurge in the youth participating in forums meant to raise awareness about the need for fair and transparent systems to fight corruption (e.g. Goswami & Bandhopadhyay, 2012).

The strengths on which the Indian urban youth reported themselves to be low include the strengths of 'leadership', 'courage', 'creativity', 'humor' and 'wisdom'. Further we noted that courage, leadership and humor were also the strengths which were most disowned by

the participants (marked as 'different' or 'very different from me' on the vignettes). Youth are often considered as agents of change in any given society and the perceptions of youth as their being low on leadership and courage are matters of concern. If these findings are replicated in other studies within the Indian context, it raises several questions worth debate, further research and action. Is it that the modern Indian youth find themselves in a very competitive environment, especially one that is loaded with emphasis on academic excellence and does not sufficiently encourage or reward young people with varying kinds of strengths and assets? Highly competitive learning environment have been shown to be linked with negative outcomes such as quality of learning, motivation and well being (e.g. Benjamin, Kaszniak, Sales, & Shanfield, 1986; Sheldon & Krieger, 2007). Do the current educational environments provide insufficient encouragement to young people to hone their skills and enhance their comfort in leading groups of different kinds? Is a high popularity of social networking sites (e.g. Jain & Gupta, 2012) also a reflection of lower exposure of youth to opportunities for working together in live-groups and teams? The vignette on 'courage' focused on social and moral courage (e.g. standing up in the face of opposition to raise one's viewpoint). The results indicate that youth see themselves as low on courage which in turn means that they probably find themselves ill equipped with skills to confront issues when others around them have differing views. Could this be a reflection of the difficulty in taking an autonomous stance as an individual especially when it means contradicting the voices of the majority / the authority? These speculations raise the need to examine the current patterns of socialization practices in a predominantly collectivistic society that may inhibit the inclination to think and act in an autonomous fashion. Although research indicates that smaller, nuclear families and affluence have contributed to Indian middle-class parents becoming less authoritarian and more responsive to children (Saraswathi & Pai 1997; Saraswathi & Ganapathy 2002), this may not be a very pervasive and consistent picture

at various levels of inquiry. Bansal (2013) in her exploration of narratives of youth in contemporary India observed that the male participants tended to desire nurturance and approval in return of respect and loyalty to father figures and the latter's authority was infrequently challenged in a direct and explicit fashion although covert/ indirect and at times passive aggressive modes of dealing with conflicting issues were noted. Whether and in which contexts the need to belong and stay connected amongst youth tends to override the need to express one's opinions or take a stance is a question worthy of attention for social and developmental psychologists as well as proponents of positive youth development in the country. Yet other questions that the data raise are about the low endorsement of creativity. Could this be a byproduct of the nature of education system currently prevalent which maximally emphasizes rote learning and gives relatively less attention to and opportunities for development of thinking skills and divergence in ideas? (NCERT, 2006). Bansal (2013) highlighted the need for opportunities for the youth to engage in non-obligatory, voluntary activities, their involvement in decision making, need for valuing creativity in thinking in educational environments as well as need for fostering intergenerational democratic relationships,. Wisdom is considered to reflect the highest level of maturity and is seen as arising out of the experience of dealing with the multiple existential challenges in leading one's life (Ardelt, 2004). Youth rated themselves as low on wisdom in the present study. Further research is needed to examine the self perceptions of wisdom as character strengths across various developmental phases.

Day to day applications of character strengths

The present study is one of the first few that provide a portrait of character strengths in action. It has been well recognized that strengths manifest in day to day life of people but their manifestations can vary from culture to culture or one life domain to another. The themes mentioned in the results section about applications of the top five strengths provide a glimpse of how

character strengths manifest in daily life of Indian youth. The examples given were often rich and elaborate. The action portraits were derived from highly specific descriptions given by the participants. A few points are worth noting as these reflect the nuances of strengths in action in the Indian culture. Descriptions of Close loving relationship strength sometimes involved elements of giving up or sacrificing for a close other and deriving a sense of fulfillment from this. Kindness was mentioned as being manifested in a broader context; sometimes described as entailing sacrificing of self-interests and at times perceived to have subtle manifestations such as being gentle in interactions with others. The examples of gratitude and thankfulness often described the experience of gratitude more than behavioral/verbal expressions. The examples of justice and fairness were not restricted to human beings. Most of the themes under this strength were rather circumscribed and pertained to either close relationships or immediate social circle. The overall description of strengths-use are in synchrony with how these strengths are described and understood in the scientific literature including VIA system but in addition, these also highlight how strengths are used in synergy or in service of one another (e.g. courage and justice). Cultivation of both self-oriented (e.g. truth, austerity, detachment) and other oriented values (compassion, and non-violence) are advocated in the Indian tradition (Srivastava, & Misra, 2011). According to Bhangaokar & Kapadia (2009), in the contemporary urban Indian context too, lay interpretations of ideal fulfillment of dharma has been said to involve fulfillment of familial and societal duties without expectations, goal achievements related (e.g. being self sufficient, making superiors happy, controlling materialistic urges) and conscience related (e.g. coordination between thoughts and feelings, continuing good karma, living in accordance with moral values). The expression or manifestations of strengths is influenced by cultural values and norms (Smith, 1985a) and this is supported by the observations in the present study.

Role of Age and Gender

The present study was conducted on a narrow age range of 20 to 35 years as it

focused on the young adulthood. Even within this range, statistically significant differences emerged on five out of 24 strengths between the three age groups (20-24 years, 25-29 years and 30 to 35 years). These differences were most prominent between the youngest and the oldest group. The youngest group scored lower on social responsibility, persistence, practical farsightedness as well as self discipline, suggesting that these strengths tend to increase with age within the young adulthood period. Only on one of the 24 strengths, namely, sense of humor, the youngest group had significantly higher score than the middle group although the oldest and the youngest groups were not significantly different. Whether sense of humor fluctuates to some extent over one's life course depending on the developmental demands and adaptations during adulthood needs to be answered through further studies. Modest positive correlations with age have been reported for most of the strengths when participants are sampled within a broader age range (Linley and colleagues, 2007). Linley et al. (2007) who sampled participants from 18 years to 65 years and above found that sense of humor had a trend towards negative correlation with age. Literature is sparse and fragmented on the developmental trajectories of VIA strengths though it is theorized that development of strengths is influenced by an interaction of various factors such as temperament, cognitive maturity, social- emotional development and one's environment. Family environment and role models are seen as having significant impact on strengths development. Major life events and experiences can also bring about changes in strengths and strengths can be cultivated in various ways in educational settings (Park & Peterson, 2009). The age differences seen on some of the strengths in the present study within in a small age range of 20 to 35 years suggest that perhaps this period of young adulthood is ripe with forces, in terms of developmental challenges and demands and experiences that continue to influence development of character strengths. This seems especially true for pragmatic strengths that showed a rise from the younger to the older age range within the young adulthood period covered in the study.

In contrast to age-wise analysis, there were several significant findings with respect to gender. Significant gender differences were observed on 12 out of the 24 strengths. While males on the whole scored higher than their female counterparts on curiosity, open mindedness, hope, sense of humor, social responsibility, leadership and courage; females scored higher on strengths such as spirituality, appreciation of beauty, close loving relationship and gratitude & thankfulness. Gender differences on strengths subscales interestingly revealed that males were higher on social strengths whereas females were higher on relational strengths. This finding reiterates the meaningfulness of the distinction between social and relational strengths made on the Self Perceived Strengths measure. Research suggests that there are gender differences in terms of salience/accessibility of different types of social selves (e.g. Seeley, Gardner, Pennington, & Gabriel, 2003). While relational self (much more prominent in women) refers to inclusion of relationships within one's self representation, the collective self (more prominent in men) refers to inclusion of group identity/group membership as part of one's self. (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The sense of belongingness which is fundamental human need may be satisfied differently by men and women (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997). It is speculated that such differences may give rise to variations in frequency and nature of experiences in men and women and that in turn may differentially nurture social and interpersonal strengths in the two genders as seen in the present study. On the whole, the gender differences seen in our study seem to make intuitive sense in the background of the available literature. Differential development of strengths across genders is likely to be a by-product of differences in socialization practices, values attached to various strengths for different genders as well as the exposure to demands and situations that facilitate or restrict development of some strengths over the others. The study findings are broadly in keeping with the available literature on gender differences (e.g. Shimai et al., 2006) that have used the VIA-Inventory of Strengths. However, the sheer number of character strengths on which significant differences have been obtained

are more than that reported in other studies. These gender differences have been obtained within the homogenous young adulthood group sampled in the present study. It remains to be seen whether or not similar gender differences manifest across the entire span of adulthood years in the Indian context. It is possible that such differences are more prominent/ frequent in certain age groups rather than others.

Implications for research and practice

The measure of strengths utilized in the present study directly taps self-perception of one's strengths. To what extent this method may be responsible for throwing up more differences between genders may be examined in future studies. The nature and extent of concordances between self-perceptions and the ratings of close others may depend on a multitude of factors ranging from different kinds of biases in ratings, the nature of the particular strengths in question to the strengths spotting abilities of the raters. This forms an important aspect for further scientific inquiry. Further studies that use predominantly qualitative methodology such as interviews or experience sampling reports can throw light on the flexible and synergetic usage of strengths and their manifestations in our culture. For example, the manner in which strengths may be used in various combinations as well as facilitators and barriers in their manifestation in daily life can be explored.

The findings have implications for development of universal approaches to mental health promotion in institutes of higher education in India. Colleges and workplaces have the potential to be developed as spaces with systems and processes in place which actively facilitate discovery, applications and appreciation of unique strengths of the youth.

In the context of counseling, discovery of strengths can be an important step for enhancing psychological wellbeing. Encouraging clients to solicit feedback from significant others through a strengths-lens (e.g. one's best self in action as observed by others) can sharpen one's self-awareness. Reflections on one's strengths profile (along with a balanced focus on weaknesses) can help in developing an understanding as to how these are being applied

in daily life and the need for changes if any in the manner of use and flexibility in usage. Further studies on action portrait of character strengths can provide important leads for helping individuals discover missed opportunities for applying their strengths and expanding the range of activities and behaviors related to their realized as well as unrealized strengths.

Limitations

The study relied on a measure that was developed indigenously. Though it has satisfactory psychometric properties, a few limitations need to be taken in account while drawing inferences. In this measure, each strength is captured through a single vignette and the measure covers the 24 character strengths that form part of the VIA taxonomy. There has been some critique of VIA taxonomy. Though proposed as a universally applicable system, it may have neglected certain character strengths that are culture specific, especially those from Eastern cultures for e.g. selflessness and non-attachment (Bermant, Talwar & Rozin, 2011) Thus it is plausible that all the strengths relevant to the Indian culture were not assessed through the measure used in the present study. The large sample size as well as inclusion of both working and student youth notwithstanding, the extent of generalizability of study findings across Indian youth in different contexts, including youth in rural India requires examination.

Conclusion

Indian youth perceive their top strengths to be close loving relationships, gratitude and thankfulness, kindness, justice and fairness, and genuineness and honesty, while they rate themselves to be low on leadership, courage, creativity, humor and wisdom. Age differences on a few strengths and gender differences on several strengths were found even within the narrow age range of 20-35 years. The pattern of findings raises several questions for future studies about youth development in the changing fabric of contemporary Indian society.

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Acknowledgement: The authors gratefully acknowledge the funding support received by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for the project that made this study possible.

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