

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CHARACTER STRENGTHS, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, AND BELIEFS ABOUT CRIME AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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-Abstract-

Most gang-involved youth in Canada are predominantly males (94%) and between the age of 16 and 18 (Youth Gangs in Canada, 2007). However, young

adolescent girls are now increasingly seen among youth gangs (Girls, Gangs, and Sexual Exploitation in British Columbia, 2010). Within the strength-based framework for research targeting social problems such as youth violence and criminal gang activities (Tweed, Bhatt, Dooley, Spindler, Douglas, & Viljoen, 2011), a study was conducted in local high schools in British Columbia; Canada, in which 194 boys and 226 girls aged 12 to 14 participated. The results of the preliminary analyses of the data indicated several gender differences among the participants' character strengths, social connections, and cognitive beliefs pertaining to violence. Boys in comparison to girls, reported a higher level of self-esteem, and a stronger belief in violence as a way to deal with conflicts. Girls reported higher satisfaction in the area of friendship than boys. Additionally, girls reported higher levels of parental monitoring of where they were, who they were with and what they were doing. These preliminary findings suggest that prevention strategies would serve the youth well when they are derived from a targeted gendered strategies with a focus on a strength-based approach for a positive adolescent development.

Key Words: *Adolescence, Gender differences, Character Strengths, Gangs, Violence*

JEL Classification: K, K14

1. INTRODUCTION

Across the life span development of humans, adolescence has at times been viewed as a psychologically, emotionally, and biologically turbulent time (Hall, 1904; Erikson, 1963). It is also well-documented that there are distinct differences in how girls and boys navigate their developmental path. Hyde (2005) in a meta analysis of gender similarities has noted that compared to girls, boys are more aggressive, indulge more in risk-taking behavior, have higher activity level, and have more favorable attitudes about casual sexuality, and report higher self-esteem. Girls in contrast to boys have higher level of empathy, helping behavior, care, and justice. Past research has provided evidence that parents allow greater risk taking by boys than girls (Morrongiello & Hogg, 2004).

Regardless of these gendered experiences, the turbulent adolescent phase ends with certain stability for most adolescents (Arnett, 1999). However some get off track and into a path of destructive behavior. Substance abuse, crimes, sexual promiscuity, and other risk-involved acts cause a great deal of concerns to parents. Importantly, these destructive behaviors also cause concerns for the community safety, notably the adolescent involvement in criminal gangs and

associated violence. It is estimated that 80% of all serious violent adolescent offences are committed by 20% of gang members (Thornberry, Huiznga, & Loeber, 2004). In Canada, it is estimated that there are 434 youth gangs involving 7071 members, with 48% of the members being under the age of 18 (Youth gangs in Canada: What we know, 2007). In the US, this number is even more alarming. (In 2007 there were as many as 27,000 gangs with over 788,000 members (Egley, Jr. & O'Donnell, 2009). Although, male adolescents are predominant in gang membership; about 94% (Youth Gangs in Canada, 2007), there is a growing trend of female adolescents joining criminal gangs who make up to 12% of gang members in the province of British Columbia (Totten, 2009). Adolescent girls' involvement in gangs is usually through their association with male gang members. These young girls are used for sexual exploits by the gang members who may act as their pimps and may also use them for hiding illicit drugs (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009).

What factors determine an adolescent's risks of gang-involvement? Research has indicated that these risks include internal variables such as low self-esteem, substance abuse, impulsivity, school failure, psychopathic traits (Howell, 1998; Feinbert, Ridenour, & Greenberg, 2007). At the external or environmental level, research suggests low socio-economic background, family disruption, minority status, type of neighborhood, delinquent peer groups, and witnessing violence as risk factors (Le, 2008; Kelly & Caputo, 2005).

Whereas research on risk factors is extensive, research on what may protect an adolescent from gang-involvement has received relatively low attention in the literature. Variables such as optimism, hope, school success are identified as internal protective factors while the external protective factors are positive relationships with peers, family, school, and community are identified (Carvajal, Clair, & Evans, 1998; Thomas, Holzer, & Wall, 2004).

The emergence of positive psychology has stimulated research on individuals' well-being, happiness, and strengths of character (Seligman, 1996; Peterson, 2006). Although, the focus of positive psychology has largely remained on the normal and optimal human functions, a viability of applying positive psychology to social problems such as youth violence and gang involvement (Tweed et al., 2011) as well as the resilience of youth growing up or living in adverse circumstances (Ungar, 2006) are now being examined. Additionally, the role of cognitive strengths pertaining to beliefs about crimes is also being explored (Tweed & Bhatt, 2009). Accordingly, adolescents' beliefs about costs and benefits of gang have the potential as protective factors.

What remains relatively unexplored however, is the issue of gender-specific character strengths, social connections, and beliefs in crimes. Do male and female adolescents have different character strengths? Do social connections have different patterns and levels for adolescent males and females? Do adolescents' beliefs about crimes differ across gender? These are important questions since the gender of adolescents seem to be associated with gang membership; more boys than girls join gangs, and the dynamics of the role played within gangs vary across gender; girls are exploited primarily for sexual activities. If internal and external strengths may buffer an adolescent against violence and criminal gang-involvement, would they play a gender-specific protective role for vulnerable males and females?

Against this backdrop, a government funded community-involved research project in Canada is currently underway. A major goal of this project is to identify modifiable protective factors by examining the psychological, social, and cognitive strengths of high school youth. The ultimate goal of the project is to provide evidence-based tools and strategies to stakeholders and service agencies who would implement these in their practice aimed at preventing youth violence and gang involvement.

As part of the on-going dissemination of results of this study, this paper is focused on the issue of gender differences in adolescents in the domains of individual character strengths including self-esteem, levels of social connections including parental monitoring and peer support, and beliefs about crimes.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

Participants (N=421) were students from eighth grades in Canadian high schools. Following their parents' consent, 194 males and 227 females between the ages of 12-14 (M=13.1, SD=.44) were included in the study. In terms of ethnicity, 35.4% described themselves as South Asians, 14.5% as Asian-Canadians, 4.5% as East Asians, 4.3% as Canadians, 3.8% as as Aboriginal, and 14.5% did not respond. The remaining 23% participants reported mixed or multiple ethnicities. Overall, this reflected Canada's region-specific demographics.

2.2. Measures

- **VIA Strengths** (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This measure was simplified in which a list of 24 strengths were provided along with simplified definitions (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2010). Participants were asked to circle seven

strengths that best described them and put an “x” next to seven that least described them. The item selections were converted into a three-point rating scale; 1=least like me, 2=neutral, 3=most like me.

- **Modified Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale** (Rosenberg, 1965). This measure had 9 items with a four-point rating scale; Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree.
- **Beliefs Supporting Aggression Scale** (Bandura, 1973). This measure had 6 items with a four-point rating scale; Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree.
- **Parental Monitoring Scale** (Ramirez, Crano, Quist, Burgoon, Alvaro, & Grandpre, 2004). In this measure, participants were asked to indicate if there was at least a parent or a relative or a guardian at home who knew where they were, who they were with and what they were doing. Responses were coded as 0=Not at all true, 1= somewhat true, 3=very much true.
- **Healthy Kids Survey** (Constantine & Bernard, 2001). This measure included a range of external factors including having a friend about same age, a friend who cared about the participant, a friend who helped when the participant might be having a hard time, got into trouble, advised what to do that is right. Responses were coded as 0=Not at all true, 1= somewhat true, 3=very much true.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were assessed in their classrooms. Each participant received a questionnaire. A researcher read aloud each item to maintain a steady pace of responses. At the completion of the questionnaire, participants were provided with a pizza lunch, and also became eligible for a raffle of an i-pod.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1. Character strengths

Table 1 illustrates the gendered choice of top seven character strengths selected by participants. The top choice for boys was humor and the top choice for girls was love. The focus on close relationship is salient among girls, but absent among boys' choice as their strength. This may be relevant to girls recruitment into gangs by their older boyfriends and their subsequent sexual exploitation. As examined by Dorais & Corriveau (2009), girls may be lured into gangs by older men who

may seduce them into a romantic relationship only to be exploited sexually by the rest of the gang members. Curiously, the choice of love as one of their top strengths is missing from the top choice for boys. This may be partly due to the age ($M=13.1$, $SD= .44$) of the sample. Males reach puberty at a later age compared to girls, and hence love and romantic relationship may not be part of their development yet. Strengths that emerged in the top seven for both girls and boys, were humor, honesty, kindness, teamwork, thankfulness, and creativity but not in the same sequence.

Table 1: Top seven self-reported character strengths of adolescent boys and girls

	Boys	Girls
1	Humor	Love
2	Teamwork	Humor
3	Kindness	Kindness
4	Honesty	Honesty
5	Courage	Teamwork
6	Thankfulness	Creativity
7	Creativity /Fairness/ Forgiveness (these were equally selected)	Thankfulness

Another gender difference emerged in the reported self-esteem. Keeping with the past research (Hyde, 2005), the results showed that boys' self esteem rating was significantly higher ($M= 2.57$, $SD = .47$) than girls ($M =2 .44$, $SD=.54$) $t(410.4) = 2.12$, $p = <.035$. Girls' low self-esteem may bear on their vulnerability to be sexually exploited in intimate relationship that is common to gang membership.

3.2. Social connections

Girls reported having significantly stronger connections with their same age friend than boys. As Table 2 illustrates, having a friend who really cares about them was rated higher as being true by girls than by boys, $t(294.35) = 6.45$, $p = <.000$. This pattern held for girls having a friend who they could talk to about problems, $t(323.75) = 9.61$, $p = <.000$, and who helped them when they were having a hard time, $t(330.25) = 6.46$, $p = <.000$. These findings support the past research that girls are relationship oriented (e.g., Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer,

1990) and draw emotional support from friends when under stress (e.g., Taylor, 2002).

Table 2. Gender difference in close friendship:
 (Rating: 0 = Not true at all, 3 = Very true)

I have a friend about my own age who	Boys	Girls	p
	really cares about me	M = 2.22 SD = .88	M = 2.69 SD = .53
talks with me about my problems	M = 1.74 SD = .99	M = 2.57 SD = .69	<.000
helps me when I'm having a hard time	M = 2.16 SD = .87	M = 2.65 SD = .62	<.000

Parental monitoring of adolescents' whereabouts and activities also indicated significant gender differences. In comparison to boys, girls reported receiving closer supervision from parents than boys (Table 3). More girls than boys reported that their parent or a guardian or a family member were more likely to know where they were when not home, $t(346.45) = 3.46, p = .001$, who they were with, $t(365.22) = 3.17, p = .002$, and what they were doing, $t(373.98) = 2.61, p = .01$. In contrast to the popular beliefs of some parents that teenagers may resent being monitored, researchers have identified parental monitoring as a protective factor which is also linked to adolescents' high life satisfaction (Tweed, Bhatt, & Dooley, 2011).

Table 3. Gender differences in parental monitoring
 (Rating: 0 = Low monitoring, 3 = High monitoring)

When not at home, at least one of my parents, or guardian, or another adult family member knows	Boys	Girls	p
	Where I am	M = 2.63 SD = .59	M = 2.81 SD = .44
Who I am with	M = 2.43 SD = .71	M = 2.65 SD = .63	<.002
What I am doing	M = 2.38 SD = .80	M = 2.57 SD = .68	<.01

3.3. Beliefs supporting aggression

Boys and girls differed significantly in their beliefs that that it is okay to use physical aggression as a way of in dealing with difficult situations and people. A belief indicating an assumption that a stranger's intent is always malicious until

proven otherwise, would allow a justification for an aggressive act towards others; e.g., it is okay to hit someone before they hit you. Boys reported higher agreement with the beliefs supporting aggression ($M = 1.58$, $SD = .84$) than did girls ($M=1.15$, $SD = .76$, $t(387.75) = -5.36$, $p = .000$). Evidence suggests that gender differences in desistance to violence starts by the age of three (Hay, Nash, Caplan, Swartzentruber, Ishikawa, & Vespo, 2011) which may imply that there may be a biological basis. However, beliefs supportive of violence has been a strong predictor for violent acts (Slaby & Guerra, 1988; Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005) which indicates that cognitive reasoning likely plays an important role in violent behavior.

4. Conclusion

While the gender divide on several fronts such as education and professional careers has been reduced over the past few decades, some gender divides continue to remain. Notable is the gender divide on self-esteem, parental monitoring, social relations, and beliefs about violence. Adolescent girls' self esteem is lower than boys. Parents monitor their daughters' whereabouts, friends, and activities more closely than those of their sons'. Girls are more likely to find support and emotional comfort during distress from their friends than boys. Beliefs that aggression can be justified in various contexts are supported more by boys than girls. The implications of gender differences in these internal and external factors are significant for interventions and prevention of adolescent involvement in violence and criminal gangs. The present study suggests that in view of the gendered vulnerability and strengths, a targeted approach to policy, laws, and strategies are warranted to buffer male and female adolescents against the negative influences of criminal gangs. It must be noted, however that this research is in its preliminary stage and the relation between gendered self-esteem, parental monitoring, beliefs supporting aggression and behavioral outcomes, namely violence and gang involvement remain to be examined. As well, research on strength-based approaches to address social issues has emerged only recently. Hence, the evidence supporting the value of strength-based approaches to address youth violence and gang-involvement remains limited. The future research examining the specific gender-based vulnerability as well as the internal and external strengths of youth will likely provide evidence-based strategies to address the issue of youth gang-involvement.

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