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Gender Differences in Character Strengths among College Students of Jammu

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ABSTRACT

Character strengths are a family of morally valued positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Though character strengths are considered universal, gender may have an impact on the development of some strength over others. Despite their significant impact on psychological research worldwide, few research studies have been conducted in India to find out gender differences in character strengths. Present study has investigated gender differences in 24 VIA (Values in Action) Character Strengths among college students of District Jammu (J&K), India. Sample consisted of 809 students (male= 349, female= 460) studying in government degree colleges of District Jammu, who were randomly selected to fill 120 item offline version of (VIA-IS). Results showed significant gender differences in 8 out of 24 character strengths i.e. creativity, perspective, bravery, persistence, vitality, kindness, prudence, and self-regulation.

Key Words : Character strengths, Gender differences, VIA-IS and virtues

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant contributions of positive psychology for empirically studying character is classification of strengths of character and virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). This classification of human strengths and virtues is placed at three conceptual levels starting with *virtues*, the core characteristics recognized by theologians and moral philosophers at level one, *character strengths* which are the psychological elements making up the virtues at level two and *situational themes* which are the specific habits that direct an individual to exhibit particular character strengths in particular situations at the last level (Peterson and Seligman 2004). According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), strengths are affected by different variables. One such variable that may influence strengths expression could be gender. The depiction of a nurturing, kind, loving, appreciative, excusing and reasonable individual intently takes after the conventional sex generalization credited to ladies. Similarly the depiction of somebody bold, innovative and self controlled looks like the conventional sexual orientation generalization credited to men. (Golombok and Fivush, 1994). Eagly and Wood (1999) were of the view point that the origin of behavioral differences between male and female is due to either their evolved dispositions or differences in the placement of female and in the social structure. Gender differences in character strengths are less explored in Indian context since their introduction in 2004.

Many research studies conducted outside India for ascertaining gender differences in character strengths have reported significant gender differences in the endorsement of the character strengths of by male and female. In a study on college students, Alexis Karris (2004) reported significant gender differences in 11 of the 24 character strengths *i.e.* creativity, bravery, prudence, self-regulation, kindness, love, gratitude, forgiveness, appreciation of beauty and excellence, fairness and leadership.

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Kamboj and Kakkar (2012) assessed character strengths among business management students in a college population (n=150) using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths scale (VIA-IS) and found significant gender differences for 11 of the 24 character strengths: creativity, bravery, kindness, love, gratitude, forgiveness, appreciation of beauty, prudence, fairness, leadership and self-regulation.

Singh and Choubisa (2009) found no significant differences on character strengths in males and females, except for forgiveness, which was higher in females.

Shimai *et al.* (2006) in cross-cultural comparison of strengths, of young adults of age range 18-24 from the US and Japan reported that females scored high on kindness and love while males reported more on bravery and creativity.

Alex Linley *et al.* (2007), in a study carried out in UK, found that female scored higher than male on interpersonal strengths (love, kindness and social intelligence) and male scored higher than females on creativity.

Brdar *et al.* (2011) in a study of gender differences and character strengths, carried on Croatian students found that women highly endorsed the strengths of love, gratitude, kindness and fairness, whereas men scored high on Integrity, hope, humour, gratitude and curiosity.

In a study carried on Spanish sample, Ovejero and Cardenal (2015) found that males scored significantly lower than females in kindness, creativity, love, love of learning, social intelligence, fairness, leadership and forgiveness, appreciation of beauty, gratitude and spirituality. In Israel *et al.* (2012) found that women scored higher on love, appreciation of beauty and gratitude while men scored higher on creativity.

Mann (2014) in a study of gender differences in character strengths reported that women scored higher on gratitude than men.

METHODOLOGY

Sample:

Sample comprised of 809 college students male 349 and female 460 from all the semesters/three years and from humanities, sciences, commerce pursuing academic and professional courses of government degree colleges of District Jammu having age range of 18 to 24 years. Random sampling technique was used.

Tool:

Character strengths were measured using the VIA-IS (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) 120 items self-report inventory (Littman-Ovadia and Lavy, 2015). It consists of a 5-point Likert scale to indicate whether the item is "very much like me" (5) or "not like me at all" (1). It contains 05 items on each of the 24 strengths measuring all the constructs in equivalent manner. Scores on each character strength range from 5 to 25. Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of the strength.

Procedure:

The VIA-IS inventory was distributed to the participants in the classroom during class-hours with the presentation of standardized instructions. Item were read aloud to maintain a steady pace of responses. The time taken for completion was between 30-40 minutes. Every query of the participants was satisfactorily answered by researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to find out gender differences in 24 VIA character strengths among college students of district Jammu. Based upon literature review it was hypothesized that significant gender differences will emerge in character strengths endorsement. Each character strength was tested for significant gender differences by computing t-tests.

Table 1 shows mean differences between male and female college students on the character strengths of Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Social intelligence, Fairness, Citizenship, Forgiveness, Modesty, Gratitude, Hope, Humour, Spirituality, Love, Appreciation of beauty, Love of learning, Integrity, Leadership. Male scored more than female on the character strengths of Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Social intelligence, Fairness, Citizenship, Forgiveness, Modesty, Gratitude, Hope, Humour and Spirituality whereas female scored more than male on character strengths of Love, Appreciation of beauty, Love of learning, Integrity, Leadership. These mean differences turned out to be statiscially non significant ($p>.05$).

Results of t test analysis indicated that males and female college students differed significantly on the character strength of creativity ($t= 2.66$, $p<.01$) with males (M=3.88, S.D=2.93) scoring more than females (M=3.77, S.D= 2.95).

Males (M=3.67, S.D=3.03) scored more than females (M=3.55, S.D=3.01) on the character strength

of Perspective and this difference was statistically significant at .01 level. (t=2.80, p≤.01). So, there were significant gender differences in two strengths under the virtue of Wisdom.

Statistically significant difference at .01 level of significance was observed between character strength of Bravery (t =2.93, p ≤.01) among male and female college students. Male (M=3.80, S.D= 2.98) scored better than female (M=3.68, S.D=2.86) on this strength.

Strength of Persistence was significantly greater (t=3.74, p ≤.01) among males (M=3.96, S.D=3.04) than females (M=3.80, S.D=3.24). Scores on Vitality were found to be significantly lower (*t=2.44*, p ≤0.05) among the female (*M*=3.79, *SD*= 2.81) than the male (*M*=3.87, *SD*=2.93), thus revealing statistically significant differences. Three strengths of virtue Courage i.e. Bravery, Persistence and Vitality differed significantly between male and female college students.

Character Strength endorsement of Kindness (strength of Humanity) was significantly greater (t=2.25, p≤.05) among females (M=4.19, S.D= 2.48) than among males (M=4.11, S.D= 2.62).

Prudence (strength of Temperance) was significantly (t=2.36, p<.05) higher among males (M=3.92, S.D=2.98) than females (M=3.82, S.D=3.12). Males (M=3.59, S.D=2.92) scored slightly more than females (M=3.42, S.D=2.80) on self regulation (strength of Temperance) and this difference was highly significant (t=4.11, p<.01). So, there were significant gender differences in two strengths i.e. prudence and self regulation of the virtue Temperance. College male and female students did not significantly differ even on single character strength under virtue of Justice and Transcendence.

As hypothesized significant gender differences were observed in 8 out of 24 character strengths i.e. Creativity, Perspective, Bravery, Persistence, Vitality, Kindness, Prudence and Self-regulation. College male and females did not significantly differ even on single character strength under virtue of Justice and Transcendence.

In the present study male scored significantly higher than female on creativity. Generally, specialists, innovators and other creative individuals have been men. Most likely cultural practices confining open doors to female and biases against women played a major role in this. Several studies conducted using VIA-IS in previous years have suggested that creativity differs significantly between men and women (Kamboj and Kakkar 2012; Karris, 2004; Linely, 2007; Ovadia and Lavy 2012). Alex Linley *et al.* (2007) in a study carried out in UK found that men scored higher than women on creativity. In a study on college students, Alexis Karris (2004**)** also had reported that male scored higher than female on creativity. Gender differences in creativity can be clarified by a combination of various factors, for example, sex differences in access to training and resources, since males have generally controlled women's entry to numerous fields and furthermore restricted their creative achievement. Men also control the guidelines by which an achievement is declared as creative (Baer, 1999, 2005).

Female scored significantly higher than male on the character strength of Kindness. Many previous studies have found similar results (Brdar and Rijavec, 2011, Linely, 2007; Ovadia and Lavy, 2012; Ovejero and Cardenal, 2011). These similar results underline the universal higher endorsement of Kindness strength in females.

Eagly and Crowley (1986) reported a very small tendency for men to provide help more readily than do women. Soutschek *et al.* (2017) at the University of Zurich have found that male and female brains react differently to "prosocial" and selfish behaviour. When a woman exhibits some form of kindness, it triggers a greater reward signal than it does in men, whose reward system is stimulated more by selfish behaviour. Gender differences in kindness that were observed in the study could best be attributed to the different cultural expectations placed on male and female.

Stastically significant high scores of male college students on Bravery in the present study are in conformity to the results of many previous studies (Karris, 2004; Shimai *et al.,* 2006). These differences in bravery can be attributed to different sociocultural and child rearing practices. It is a common observation that newborn children are dealt with differently from birth. Guardians give more physical incitement to male child than female child (Laflamme *et al.*, 2002; Landerholm and Scriven, 1981; Power and Park, 1982). Males are raised with courageous stories of dauntlessness, both military-related (e.g., Armymen, warriors) and anecdotal (e.g., Superman, Spiderman). Male outdoor freedom and child rearing practices may be responsible for their more vitality.

Research till date has not found any consistent gender effects on measures of vitality, vigor, or energy (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson and Seligman (2006) in cross-cultural

comparison of strengths, found that young adults age range 18-24 from the US and Japan females scored high on kindness and love while males reported more on bravery and creativity. Results of above cited study support the results of the present study with the exception of love only where female scored non-significantly higher than male college students.

The males in the present study have been found to be more prudent as compared to females. Prudence means avoiding undue risks by being careful and restrained about ones behaviours. Stereotype of a female represents more restrained and inhibitory aspects of prudence. In a study by Karris (2007) on college students, female scored more than male on the strength of prudence. If prudence is understood in terms of conscientiousness, test norms suggest that there is no mean difference between men and women (Costa and McCrae, 1992). These differences in results might point towards the cultural differences.

Male college students have scored significaty higher than females on the strength of self regulation. Alex Karris (2007) reported similar results on the strength of self regulation on a college sample. Bjorklund and Kipp (1996) provide an evolutionary framework predicting that there is a female advantage in inhibition and self-regulation due to differing selection pressures placed on males and females. Vulnerability and dependability of female is also responsible for them to exercise more self regulation.

Table 1 : Mean, SD, t-value and p values of male and female on 24 character strengths, N=809

Virtues and VIA- Character strengths	Male=349		Female=460		t value	P value
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
Wisdom						
Creativity	3.88	2.93	3.77	2.95	2.66	.008 **
Curiosity	3.96	3.02	3.89	2.65	1.78	.075
Open mindedness	3.80	2.68	3.73	2.69	1.93	.054
Love of Learning	3.41	3.22	3.42	3.12	.24	.810
Perspective	3.67	3.03	3.55	3.01	2.80	.005 **
Courage						
Bravery	3.80	2.98	3.68	2.85	2.93	.004**
Persistence	3.96	3.04	3.80	3.25	3.74	.000**
Integrity	4.27	2.67	4.33	2.47	1.70	.089
Vitality	3.87	2.93	3.79	2.81	2.44	.015 *
Humanity						
Love	3.90	3.62	3.95	3.19	1.00	.314
Kindness	4.11	2.62	4.19	2.48	2.25	.024*
Social Intelligence	3.90	2.88	3.88	2.78	.66	.509
JUSTICE						
citizenship	3.95	3.13	3.94	2.99	.25	.802
Fairness	4.01	2.88	4.00	2.89	.22	.824
Leadership	3.90	3.16	3.97	2.80	1.58	.114
Temperance						
Forgiveness	3.57	2.76	3.56	2.96	.07	.942
Humility	3.61	2.87	3.58	2.84	.94	.346
Prudence	3.92	2.98	3.82	3.13	2.36	.018*
Self regulation	3.59	2.92	3.42	2.80	4.11	.000**
Transcendence						
Appreciation of beauty	3.86	2.70	3.87	2.57	.22	.825
Gratitude	3.76	3.07	3.74	2.84	.48	.634
Hope	3.98	2.84	3.90	2.95	1.75	.081
Humor	3.87	3.06	3.80	3.05	1.61	.108
Spirituality	4.04	2.98	4.03	2.67	.18	.857

*p<0.05; **P<0.01

Contrasting results in the present study may be attributed to the changing sex roles in modern times.

Female are reported to be better than males at appreciation of beauty and excellence (noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence and/or skilled performance in many domains of life), love (warmth, genuineness, liking, close relationship) and kindness (helpful, generous, supportive, caring, compassionate). The gender differences in character strengths, found in the present study, may point towards the fact that character strengths develops throughout life and that behaviors and attitudes nurtured early on manifest into salient character traits by young adulthood.

Present research supports the gender similarity hypothesis (Hyde, 2005). In fact, male and female are more similar than different. There is universality among human beings in that these morally valued positive traits are found in all of us. The generalizability of the findings are limited because the sample consisted of college students from government degree colleges from Jammu district only. Further, like other confounding variables, gender may operate in association with other variables and this requires further examination. The data being cross-sectional, limited the causal inference. Despite these shortcomings, the present study provides insight regarding the college youth, revealing the gender differences in character strengths endorsement. Future research should take a representative sample consisting of diverse population and age groups including participants from professional colleges. Future research may throw light on the formation of character strengths by using the VIA-IS scale longitudinally.

Implications:

Findings of the present study have several implications. Discovering gender differences in character strengths is to discover the causes, development, changes and consequences of the noteworthy gender differences existing in character strengths. In case of significant gender differences, causes and conditions responsible for these differences can be further investigated. Strength based positive interventions can be designed as per the needs of the gender as their effectiveness may vary with gender. It will also give a knowledge about the need for control of gender in statistical analysis to avoid biases.

Conclusion:

In the present study, significant gender differences were observed in only 8 out of 24 character strengths. College male and females did not significantly differ on even single character strength under virtue of Justice and Transcendence. Male and female have more commonalities than we expect. Changing gender roles are making both the sexes more similar than they were previously.

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