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Beyond Adversities: Character Strengths of Filipino Senior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing and developing strengths in individuals contribute to making life more worth living. Human services particularly the counseling profession is not just about fixing deficiencies but should also be about nurturing the best in people. This mixed methods research provided a profile of the character strengths of senior high school students from a private university (n=294). Using the Filipino version of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), data revealed that the signature strengths of students were fairness, teamwork, appreciation of beauty and excellence, kindness and gratitude. Justice strengths such as fairness and teamwork were the topmost strengths implying that students are civic-oriented and contribute to a functional community. Transcendence strengths like appreciation of beauty and excellence and gratitude suggested that students give prime attention to beauty, and excellent performances and they are grateful for the things they have in life. Humanity strengths (kindness) imply that these strengths help the students in their interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the qualitative responses of 15 senior high school students who were referred for counseling were analyzed to explore the manifestations of character strengths in their coping strategy. Thematic analysis revealed the character strengths of appreciation of beauty, hope, perspective, love, self-regulation and religiousness/ spirituality. Implications of the findings in school counseling programs and interventions were discussed.

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Introduction

Before the World War II, psychology focused on three undertakings: providing cure to mental illnesses, promotion of a productive and fulYilling life, and the recognition and cultivation of talents. However, since then, psychology became a science mainly about healing and pathology, leaving the other two fundamental undertakings to be left out. There was a need to shift the focus of psychology from a model that emphasizes a diseased human functioning to a model that builds and nurtures what is best in people. Positive psychology insists on paying attention to character, claiming that it is essential in understanding what contributes to a psychologically good life [1].

Considering this shift in psychology, an area that gained much popularity is the study of character strengths. These are universal personality traits that are manifested in peoples' cognition (thinking), affect (feeling), volition (willing), and behavior (action). They are morally prized and are considered helpful to one's self. These positive psychological characteristics are deemed to be the foundation of human goodness and human Ylourishing (Peterson & Seligman, [2]. As originally postulated by [1], positive character traits play a vital role in the Yield of positive psychology. Good character is facilitated by pleasure, Ylow, and other positive experiences [3,4]. Character strengths are moderately genetically inYluenced, revealing that love, humor, modesty, and teamwork are most affected by environmental elements [5].

Speaking about character strengths, several studies have explored its connection to life satisfaction and other concepts of well-being [6-20] From these studies, it was identiYied that the character strengths of zest, hope, gratitude, love, and curiosity have the most frequent and highest relation to life satisfaction.

In addition, a number of studies have also explored the relationship between character strengths and academic achievement[21-23]. Although several strengths have been related to achievement, these studies reveal that the character strength of perseverance tops the list.

Notably, there are also studies that examine how character strengths are applied in the area of health and wellness. Gratitude and hope have been identiYied as top strengths related to health and wellness [24 -34].

Since positive psychology shift the focus on strengths, it is not surprising that there are studies that investigated how character strengths are used for better management of mental illness and problems, as well as how they may be used for recovery during trauma [35-48].

Over the years, studies on character strengths were mostly quantitative and Western in nature. Few studies explored character strengths using a qualitative approach. According to [49], despite published research in positive psychology here in the Philippines, there is still a need for further research to indigenize Western theoretical principles and empirical Yindings to Yit Filipino clients. This is so that principles of positive psychology can be effectively

applied in the Philippine context. Also, while there are studies in positive psychology here in the Philippines, character strengths remains an area that is largely unexplored.

Therefore, the over-all objective of this study is focused on gaining a deep, nuanced understanding of how senior high school students experience, express and apply their character strengths, with emphasis on how these strengths manifest in their lives, the role they play and the impact they have on their well-being and personal growth. Additionally, this research examined how senior high school students draw upon character strengths to cope with adversity and to explore the narratives of resilience and growth that emerge from these experiences.

In connection to this, possible contributions of this study include primarily, a deep and rich understanding of how character strengths are woven into the lives of senior high school students and how they inYluence personal growth, resilience and well-being. Furthermore, this can provide practical insights for educators, counselors and practitioners on how to nurture character strengths in educational and therapeutic settings.

Theoretical Background
This research study is anchored on Positive Psychology, that deals with the study of settings, circumstances, and processes that make the lives of people flourish and be at optimal functioning. It works on the premise that in as much as psychology has focused on weaknesses, strengths should also be highlighted. In as much as there is interest in repairing the diseased, building the best in people should also be emphasized [50-53] Aside from focusing on what is right, positive psychology grew to explore specific strengths of character that promote optimal development across the life span. These are thought to help young individuals thrive. They are linked.

to desirable consequences such as academic success, good leadership, open-mindedness, effective pleasure management, kindness, and altruism. This emphasis on strengths is based on the premise that all people possess strengths. If provided with the proper environment and resources, people's ability to change, learn, and grow can be cultivated. Through strengths, people are capable of change because they are considered as experts of their own situation. The problem is the problem, not the individual. People have the tendency to be blinded by their problems, thus, they fail to notice and appreciate strengths in them as instruments to meaningful solutions. [54].

The efforts of starting an orderly and scientific study of good character may be credited to Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson. They have been involved in a project that pioneered the identification and measurement of character strengths. Furthermore, they were able to identify the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths, which consists of 24character strengths namely: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, honesty, bravery, persistence, zest, kindness, love, social intelligence, fairness, leadership, teamwork, forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and religiousness [55]. According to character strengths are considerably unchanging. These are universal personality traits that are manifested in peoples' cognition (thinking), affect (feeling), volition (willing), and behavior (action). They are morally prized and are considered helpful to one's self. These positive psychological characteristics are deemed to be the foundation of human goodness and human flourishing.

There is growing empirical evidence that character strengths are instrumental toward a psychologically fulfilling life. These findings render significant repercussions for parents, students, helping professionals, and educators. This calls for the recognition of strengths of young people in as much as measuring their deficiencies [55].

Method
Research Design
In order to achieve the main objective of this study, a narrative inquiry approach was utilized to explore and analyze the personal narratives and stories shared by participants to gain insights into how they perceive and express their character strengths within the context of challenging life experiences. Moreover, survey was conducted to determine the top character strengths of the students.

Selection and Study Site
Through purposive sampling, the following inclusion criteria was used to recruit willing senior high school students: (1) of Yicially enrolled as a senior high school student of Saint Mary's University (2) must be 17-19 years old (3) has been referred to the guidance of Yice for counseling. A total of 15 senior high school students, 13 females and 2 males, participated in this qualitative inquiry.

Instrumentation
There were 2 instruments that was used in this study. The first part was the Values In Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) Filipino Version originally developed by Christopher. It is a 120-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess the degree to which the respondents identify with the character strengths in the VIA classification. The second part was the interview preparatory matrix developed by the researcher that included introductory, transitional and closing questions that explored participants' lived experiences.

Data Gathering Procedures and Ethical Considerations
Before the actual data gathering, the researcher obtained informed consent that contained information about the nature and purpose of the study, how the data collected will be used, risks and benefits of participation, permission to audio record the interviews and as well as assurance of confidentiality. After the informed consent forms were secured from the participants, the face-to-face individual interview proceeded. Interviews lasted for an average of 30 minutes.

Treatment of Data
The preliminary stage to the coding process was providing meaning units to verbatim statements of the participants. Key words were highlighted and initial codes were provided either by contextualizing participants' answers or coding them in vivo, that is, the verbatim statements were used as the codes. Then, a second level analysis was conducted to the meaning units to identify patterns and themes in the narratives of the participant.

Results
Data from 294 senior high school students revealed that the top 5 signature strengths are fairness (fairness), teamwork (teamwork), appreciation of beauty and excellence (appreciation of beauty and well-being), kindness (generosity), and gratitude (be grateful). When ranked according to sex, 4 out of the top 5 signature strengths are the same for both the male and the female students. These strengths were fairness (fairness), teamwork (teamwork), appreciation of beauty and excellence (appreciation of beauty and well-being), and kindness (generosity). Female students reported more gratitude (be grateful) strength, whereas male students

reported more humor (funny) strength. Appreciation of beauty and excellence (appreciation of beauty and. (hope), religiousness/spirituality spirituality), perspective perspective), self-regulation (self Regulation), and love (love) were manifestations of the character strengths in the way the participants dealt with their adversity.

Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (Valuing Kagan Dahan and Kindness)

This character strength allowed some participants to emerge from their difficulties and find meaning in the larger universe as manifested in their responses.

I mostly spent my time listening to music in such a way that you are actually ignoring the very reality right in front you, like you're in another world where you can be with yourself again wherein you can snap out of your problems and calm down.

Good thing that's happened to me is my hidden talents surfaced, like photography. I always take pictures of the environment especially in mountains, it makes me calm and also drawing. I also became an author; I have 2 stories on going.

Hope

Even though the students face challenging situations, it can be gleaned from their responses that they see light at the end of the tunnel and they expect good things will happen even if they are experiencing difficulties.

There are times that I think I cannot handle it anymore because I deal with it every day, over and over again. But I like to think that there is no problem that cannot be surpassed or every problem has a lesson, that is why I was able to handle it.
I am aware of my skills that I can do all of it but I need ample time to do it.

I just cry it out in a corner and in that moment, I think about all the problems I have and I think of them being gone.
I thought that I could deal with this problem until it was gone since I could cope up with the environment.
At that time, it was so difficult for everything to sink in that is why I thought I would try to be okay because I am not a bad person just because of that. There were a lot of "what if's" and negative thoughts but as long as possible I try very hard to be positive because I know I can surpass that.
Trying to see the bright side of that situation.

Now I control my anger by thinking of other positive stuff. I tried to think positively in all things.

Religiousness/Spirituality (Spirituality)

Another theme that emerged as manifestation of character strength is the participants' belief in the transcendent.
Praying.

I always pray to God and do things that make me happy.

Everyday I always pray and I am thankful that I have been given a chance. I got involved in the school ministry. I always go to church to be closer to God, and that was very helpful for me.

In my difficulties I thought that it was all challenge and more challenge will come more and Lord will give you the challenges because He knows that I can overcome.

Love

This character strength allows an individual to value close relationships with other people, especially those who reciprocate their feelings, too. From the qualitative responses of the participants, they were able to manage their challenging situations through seeking emotional support from the people they value and, likewise, care for and value them, too.

I just went to my friends and to other people such as my teachers to have fun with...and there are some of my friends to help me out if I needed something
I tell it to my friends so that I will know what they think and what I need to do

Sometimes I open things up to a friend or to my sister if it is not a family problem. Listen to some advice
I talked to some people specifically my friends. I tried approaching my cousin to seek help.

I tried opening up to my parents so that they become aware that what they say and do hurt me. I tried opening up to my friends too and they helped me.
At that situation of my life, I really need someone and I am so blessed and thankful because the school helped me. My friends were there to support and love me for who I really am.

The time of my difficulty, my friends are always there to motivate me and give me advice so that I will not give up. They are the ones who make me happy and protect me.

Friends' comfort.

Perspective

This character strength allows an individual to have ways of looking at situations or the world in general that helps make sense of things. The qualitative responses of the participants were inclined toward acceptance that there are situations that are out of their control. This perspective and manner of looking at things helped them in managing their difficult situation.
I learned to accept it because we can't bring back the past. I really accept the fact that there's permanent in this world Continue living...that's the cycle of my life. I'll breakdown and then after a week, back to the way it was
I accepted my situation and thought that I was doing fine dealing with it.
Acceptance of the probabilities that not everything works the way you want them to be. Accept what happened and move on.

Self-regulation

This character strength allows an individual to control what one feels and does. Although this strength is situated at the bottom of the rank, the responses of the participants manifested efforts to regulate the intense emotions brought about by their challenging situation. Some respondents found themselves pouring out their emotions.
I opened it up to them (friends and teachers) to somehow release some of my burden.
I was able to overcome it through crying and sharing it to my friends. I cry to let out the pain I feel.
I keep my mind occupied with other things. I distract myself.
I keep myself amused through my vices that became my comfort zone. I've noticed that when I'm sad or hurt, I drink to briefly forget.
By doing some things that amuse me because it makes me feel lighter and I don't think about it that much.

I always eat to forget or deal with it. Sometimes I sleep it off or eat I went on with my normal routine and attended school

I am the type of person who is not fond of sharing my problems or what. I am the type of person who is good at keeping everything to myself. I want to appear happy to other people and I do not want them to see that I am sad

I do not really like to put my problems everywhere I go because I want everything that happened in that place stays in the place where it happened. I didn't want to drag people to my personal problems so I simply fake a smile and pretend that I'm ok and be silent

Mostly, I keep it [for] myself...and I don't want to seek any attention from people around me

Discussion

As the top most strength, justice strengths such as fairness (Being able to do it) and teamwork (Let's help each other) promote functional community life and implies that senior high school students are civic-oriented. They value communion, cohesion, and solidarity. Transcendence strengths such as gratitude (Lovely) and appreciation of beauty and excellence (appreciation of grandeur and grandeur) suggest that students give prime attention to beauty and excellent performances, and they are grateful for the things they have in life. Humanity strengths such as kindness (generosity) imply that students give importance to the interpersonal relationships they have with other people. Since female students reported more gratitude strength, whereas male students reported more humor (funny) strength, implications of this in counseling may be seen when conducting gender-sensitive counseling. Working around the gratitude (funny) strength for females may be useful, whereas working around the humor (funny) strength may be useful for their male counterparts. The character strengths of appreciation of beauty and excellence (appreciation dignity and left), (hope), religiosity/spirituality (spirituality), perspective (I will look into it), self-regulation (self regulation), and love (love) promoted resilience among the participants. These allowed the participants to reinterpret their challenging situations and enabled them to recover and get back up from the setbacks they have experienced. In a strengths-based counseling approach, the client is the expert. The counselor provides opportunities for the client to gain self-awareness of inherent character strengths and how these may be used to address problems.

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