Chapter 18

Young Adults' Awareness and Commitment to Use of Own Character Strengths
An Examination Among University Students in Nairobi

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INTRODUCTION

Africa in general has predominantly a young population. Demographic surveys indicate that 70 per cent of the population is aged 30 years or less (Gyimah-Brempong & Kimenyi, 2013, p. 26). Kenya is no exception to this continental trend and opportunity. In fact, in Kenyan demographics, 'youth bulge'—the phenomenon of the age group of 15 to 30 years showing a protruding graph as compared to other age groups—is recognized both as a challenge and as an opportunity (Hope, 2012). It follows then that the youthful population needs to be taken through whatever processes that can enable them become an optimum resource to themselves, their families, communities and countries. Much is being carried out in this line through formal education and professional skills development (Gyimah-Brempong & Kimenyi, 2013, p. 26). However, in the largely cohort approaches to these efforts, there is very little attention paid to personalizing developmental efforts in line

with the strengths of individuals. In most cases, as is the case in more developed parts of the world, no coordinated effort at helping students individualize their development options is inbuilt into the processes of education (Park, 2009). Individualized career guidance in secondary and tertiary institutions is rare and deficient (Gacohi, Sindabi, & Chepchieng, 2017; Wambu & Fischer, 2015).

Positive psychology offers a perspective of personal development that focuses on the strengths of the individual as a springboard for overcoming challenges, and for developing competencies, knowledge, identity and virtue (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009; Park, 2009). This chapter uses the approach of positive psychology that suggests that character development is necessary for positive personal development (Park & Peterson, 2008). Here, being consistent with positive psychology, character strengths are understood to be morally oriented, trait-like, measurable qualities of individuals that are expressed in their cognitive, affective and behavioural patterns (Park, 2009; Selvam, 2015). Humanity has traditionally recognized and propagated virtues across cultural, religious and philosophical traditions (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 33–52; Snyder & Lopez, 2007, pp. 23–50). Character strengths are perceivable in a person's interactions, be it in the family, school, work or other relationships (Choudhury & Barooah, 2016).

The relationship between virtue and happiness also has been of interest to scholars and philosophers in all ages and across cultures (Kesebir & Diener, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2008). There are those who emphasize that virtue leads to promotion of happiness, while others focus on the preventive power of virtues against what leads to unhappiness (see, e.g., Selvam, 2015). In any case, the symbiotic relationship between virtue and well-being is largely agreed upon. Character strengths are particularly evident when an individual is left feeling energized, invigorated and happy after a certain activity; it shows that in that activity, the person is engaging one or more of his or her strengths and this builds him or her up (Shaw, 2015). The benefits of cultivating character strengths extend to achievement, positive self-concept and life satisfaction (Lounsbury et al., 2009; Park, 2009). These strengths are the ingredients for displaying human goodness (Choudhury & Barooah, 2016), which come almost naturally to a

person, habitually and consistently. But this does not mean that they are static or unchanging. Character strengths are malleable; they can be developed through practise. The lack of exercise, on the contrary, can lead to their diminishment, as argued by Baumeister and colleagues in the case of self-control (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

Often, particularly in traditional societies, the emphasis in educational and counselling settings is to consider a good person as one who displays the absence of problem behaviour, pathology or destructive habits. Children are assessed in school to be of good character if they do not get into trouble, or if they present no major challenges to the teachers and parents. Few educational settings, families, schools or colleges have invested in imparting how to develop even such 'good character'. Positive psychologists have helped to sharpen awareness that character development is a process of growing in a composite of character traits that are positive in themselves and contribute to thriving of individuals (Park, 2009). There is an increasing interest in some settings on the role of strengths approach to human development accompanied by scientific studies and intervention (Park, 2009; Quinlan, 2012). This may not be the case in the developing world, and particularly in Africa, as alluded to by the gap in literature. The focus in youth development in Africa has been on life skills. Life skills are psychosocial abilities that one acquires to help deal effectively with daily challenges (Selvam, 2008). Character strengths are mental and moral habits that form the framework for individual's thoughts, motivation and behaviour. Therefore, training in character development could include, and be more fundamental to, life skills training.

Based on observation of the accompaniment processes towards personal development offered to youth in secondary schools and institutions of tertiary education in Kenya, the present study assumes that young adults are largely unaware of their character strengths. Even when they may be aware of them, they may not put much premium on these strengths as pillars of their personal development. Education systems from families to faith communities and schools have tended to focus members on overcoming their weaknesses; yet research has suggested that efforts to overcome weakness yield mediocre results while focus on cultivating strengths can lead to excellence (Shaw, 2015).

Young adulthood, which, for many, coincides with first years in college, is a particularly fertile stage for studying and cultivating character strengths (Lounsbury et al., 2009). Since the proposal of Arnett (2000) that there is a developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood, which he named 'emerging adulthood', there is a large and increasing consensus on their specific characteristics (Gibbons & Ashdown, 2006; Nelson & Barry, 2005; Swanson, 2016). The present study, while including emerging adults in the considerations of some of these characteristics, goes beyond the age limit of emerging adults (18–25 years) and uses a wider bracket (18–30 years), referring to the population of the study as, 'young adults'. This approach is much consistent with the criteria used in youth policies across Sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya, for instance, the Ministry of Youth Affairs (2007) identifies youth to be the section of the population aged 15 to 30 years. Therefore, we consider young adults to be from 18 to 30 years of age. While it is an age of turmoil for most, young adulthood is also an age of considerable optimism (Arnett, 2014). This, in our view, makes this stage particularly well suited for harnessing the power of the character strengths-based education towards self, relationships and career development.

Several studies suggest that there is a positive correlation between character strengths and academic performance among young adults in universities (Choudhury & Barooah, 2016; Lounsbury et al., 2009). Studies in China and elsewhere also demonstrate the possibility of scaffolding the development of character strengths of young adults (Duan, Ho, Tang, Li, & Zhang, 2014). These interventions necessarily involve heightening awareness of the subjects about their strengths; and the impact of such an exercise is well documented (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Kruger & Prinsloo, 2008). The current study aimed at replicating such interventions in Kenya.

Despite that authors such as Biswas-Diener (2006) and Selvam and Collicutt (2013) have demonstrated ample parallels between the character strengths of the Values in Action (VIA) and African values to which African youth should presumably be socialized, there has not been much effort yet on carrying out interventions to enhance character strengths among youth in Africa, particularly in Kenya. The present study aimed at filling this gap. Furthermore, such a study might increase the efforts put into character strengths education in Kenya.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general aim of the present study was to explore in detail, through a five-step assessment, the sampled young adults' self-perception in terms of character strengths and the potential use of the strengths in the development of the self, relationship with others, and their career prospects.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. establish the level of the young adults' awareness of their own character strengths in comparison to the results of a standardized test;
2. observe individual participant's reaction to the improved awareness of their strengths;
3. examine the association between knowledge of their own strengths and commitment to their corresponding use; and
4. explore how the new awareness of the strengths impacts a change in the way young adults may perceive the use of the strengths to promote development of the self, relationship with others, and their career prospects.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach, using interview method of data collection. Twenty young adults were sampled through a snowball process of recruitment from the Faculty of Education of Tangaza University College in Nairobi. Since the aim of the study was to explore in detail, through a five-step interview, the level of awareness of and the openness to use character strengths, a sample size of 20 was thought to be justified. The criteria for choice of the candidates for the study included the following: they were within the age range of 18 to 30; they were willing to voluntarily participate in the interview and to be able to take the online test of Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) and they were open to share the results with the researchers.

Procedure

The study was carried out over a period of one week, during which the primary researcher met personally each of the sampled participants

and explained to them the purpose of the study as well as the meaning of character strengths, using the VIA breakdown developed by positive psychologists in the last two decades (Park, 2009). The need for the explanation of the character strengths became evident when the first few participants showed no knowledge of distinction between character strengths and values, skills, talents and other characteristics. To facilitate a shared understanding and greater coherence in the work, this preliminary discussion using the VIA character strengths became invaluable.

Then the interview followed. This had five steps:

Step 1. Based on the explanation of the VIA catalogue, the young adult participants were required to spontaneously name their top four character strengths and to give an explanation on how they know they have these strengths.

Step 2. They were required to explain how they are using these strengths in their personal, family, careers and other development.

Step 3. This step involved having them take the VIA–IS inventory test online, and compare the results with their list of the top four strengths that they had mentioned spontaneously to the researcher. The VIA–IS inventory has 120 items, each of the 24 character strengths being tested by five items as per the dimensions described in the VIA catalogue of strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Step 4. At this step, they described their reaction to the results and to comment on how they felt when they compared their earlier perception of their own strengths and the outcome of the online test.

Step 5. The final step was, for the participants, to project how they will use their awareness of their strengths in the future in the development of the self, their relationships with others, especially the family, and their careers.

These steps were captured in an interview protocol that the primary researcher used throughout the process of data collection. For each participant, the whole process took about 60 to 75 minutes.

Data Handling and Analysis

The data was captured on worksheets that had open-ended questions that the participants themselves filled up during the interview as the researcher asked them the questions. The answers from the open-ended questions have been summarized or enumerated in the results section further. The reliability of the interpretations of the answers was improved by the involvement of the two researchers in the final process of summarizing.

Results

The present section reports the findings of the study, following an outline that is based on the four objectives of the study.

Young adults' awareness of their own character strengths: The respondents were required to spontaneously identify four of their top character strengths from the VIA list. All participants could do this with some relative ease. Most of these young adults could speak about their own positive qualities with fluency. They could articulate that they are good at one thing or another, mentioning a range of intellectual abilities as well as personality traits. This was an interesting and consistent experience with all the 20 participants. One of the 20, however, could not raise a fourth top strength, in spite of being given the VIA list.

To demonstrate their conviction of their strength: In Step 2 of the interview, they were required to give an illustration of how they see these strengths operating in their lives, or to explain why they think they have this strength. Most of the participants could not give the reasons in their own terms and had to resort to the definitions or explanations given in the VIA catalogue. In any case, most could identify with these definitions and explanations, even if they appeared new to them. The inability of the participants to demonstrate their strengths in their own words is perhaps more indicative of the little value placed by the young people on their character strengths. They have little day-to-day awareness of the usefulness of these strengths.

In terms of agreement between their self-perceived, four top strengths and those discovered after the online VIA inventory, 12 participants had only one strength matching among the top four in the two lists, three had two of four strengths concur, and only one had three similarities. Four had none of the strengths matching between the two lists. Taken together, it could indicate that the young adults are aware of their strengths only to a limited level. This conclusion has to be considered also together with the possibility that the participants may not be familiar with the nuances around the vocabulary used to refer to the character strengths in common parlance and in the VIA online test.

Energy and enthusiasm generated by new self-knowledge: The respondents took delight in their strengths as they discovered them particularly after the online VIA test. The most frequently reported feeling was 'good'. Only one participant reported being disappointed. Ironically, this is the one who had three concurrent strengths between their own estimation and the VIA-IS generated results. Asked how they felt about the comparison of their two lists, most reported feeling affirmed and/or 'pleasantly surprised'. Generally, the exercise generated energy and excitement for most, with one participant explicitly reporting an increase in self-appreciation.

Coherence Between Knowledge of Strengths and Their Use

Asked how they use these strengths in daily lives for the development of their own self, relationships with others and career prospects, most had rather generic descriptions of how they use their strengths. Some direct quotations from the section on how they use their strengths for self-development can shed clear light on the general perception of the participants. What follows is a collation of statements that participants made:

> My strengths help me to be a more responsible person, by always trying to be conscious of my situation and trying to be as human as possible with everyone; I use my strengths to help me be true to myself and be able to create healthy relationships with those around me; I am able to live a happy life, to accept people as they are; I do not live a fake life; I have used my strengths to make myself grow into a trustworthy person; I use my strengths to ensure I portray a good

image of myself to future generations; I have always used fairness when dealing with a group and especially if I realise there are those who are seeking favours; my strengths have helped me to achieve more skills and abilities and build me as a strong person and of what I want in life.

About how they use the strengths at present in their relationship with the family and significant others, the participants had this to say:

These strengths have helped me bring my family together; I pray for my family every day and hope for them the best in their endeavours; Having forgiveness has made me and my family and friends understand each other characters well; I make sure that people are in a good mood most of the time if not all the time; knowing my strength will help me know others also; if I lose my temper I know how to cool down; my family is happier I attend most family occasions thus showing teamwork.

About career development, the participants had the following expressions:

I feel my career is in the right path and more challenges are coming than I am ready to handle; learn and adapt to changes in my career; working on a social business idea; being courageous is making me to meet or able to handle hard issues in different places, especially at school hence am able to do it; I teach the young ones on how to be creative, particularly in developing themselves; I can express myself confidently based on my knowledge and can know if my output was understood; taking risk is a matter or enhances ones career development and unearths the potentials one has; for any career development to be a team–builder, kind and honest to grow in all dimensions being a team–player has helped me work great in organisations; since I'll be a teacher, these strengths will enable me to touch the hearts of my students for them to be transformed which is my aim in life; my strengths help in creating unity and a peaceful environment for my family members and friends

The aforementioned responses seem to be generic in scope and show certain ordinariness, thereby lacking precision and excitement about their strengths. The new discovery has not stimulated them to use these strengths in specific and distinguishing ways. One senses a need to galvanize that new enthusiasm into action plans for self–improvement and engagement.

New Self-knowledge and Prospects into Future

Though the awareness of the strengths of the students brought enthusiasm and joy, it was noted to have little impact on the way the participants projected themselves into the future. It was surprising to note that hardly any of the participants gave much energy to what they could do with the new discovery. In the interviews, it almost looked as if the discovery of the strengths was the trophy, the confirmation of their greatness. They did not see it as a springboard for more or different kinds of engagement. There was a general sense of complacency. Though the respondents are hope-filled for the future, their responses were rather generic, such as 'I think I will achieve my dreams; I will make my family proud of me, I will teach my family many things; I will build on my strengths; I will have to grow more deeply'. One exception to this was when a participant mentioned that she will engage in artistic programmes to develop her strength of creativity. Such particular focus was lacking among the other participants.

However, the complacent spirit was less visible when it came to the use of strengths for career development as compared to their concern about self and relationship with others. Evidently, the participants have a grip on the potential to use these strengths more to their career advantage. One participant said that the VIA-IS test results opened his eyes more to why he is interested in certain careers. Another, the same one who was enthused by her creative strength, reported that she will follow 'my one-time aspiration to be an author'. Three others were excited about their strengths in team work and expressed that they will use this in their career front to enhance success.

The seeming inability or lack of interest of the participants to imagine ways in which they could use newly discovered strengths may be a factor of the interview setting which may have not given enough time and, especially, not enough accompaniment to engage one's imagination. The female participant who spoke about being an author in using her strength of creativity, might have been struggling with this career option for some time as she implied in the interview. Now she found herself happily surprised to discover that she has ample resources for taking it up again. Other participants, in spite of their evident excitement, did not show concern to explore more deeply how their new awareness might impact their life plans. They behaved as if the discovery of their strengths was a reward in itself!

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study began with the aim of exploring young adults' self-assessment of character strengths and the potential use of the strengths in the development of the self, relationship with others, and their career prospects. The results have shown very mixed findings. On the one hand, the whole discourse of character strengths and their discovery excites young adults. And they also report using these strengths in their daily lives. On the other hand, the participants are not articulate enough about the use of specific character strengths, and they do not appear enthused about their use for future development.

This reality may be a product of the socialization that has not much invested in developing strengths as investments for personal progress. Strengths can appear to them as a victory against the possible negative challenges in their behaviour that they may have spent their life's energy fighting against, instead of viewing them as potential foundational pillars for great careers and relationships.

What potential might there be in a more conscious accompaniment of young adults to acknowledge and exercise own strengths in their daily lives, relationships and career developments? Young adulthood is a stage where goal and direction setting is crucial for individuals in their social milieu. It follows that taking into account one's own strengths can be a positive boost to success in achieving such goals. Expectations of young adults from family and society can be experienced as pressure. Shulman and Nurmi (2010) observe that many young adults fail to accomplish their goals because the goals are unrealistic. It may be that such goals have no connection to the strengths of the individual. There are still many who fail to accomplish their goals even though these seem quite reasonable.

Character Strengths, Goal-setting and Well-being

In the view of Shulman and Nurmi (2010), the determining factors for a sense of goal attainment includes the kind of goals set—broad and adaptive or narrow and definite. Broader goals allow for a greater sense of attainment as they offer a wider range of possible measures of achievement. Setting adaptive goals contributes to a more favourable assessment of goal attainment and therefore more sense of success. The

ability to set adaptive goals is associated with ability to mobilize inner strength (Shulman & Nurmi, 2010). Given that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of goal achievement and self-criticism is detrimental to the self-regulation necessary especially in overcoming obstacles (Shulman & Nurmi, 2010), it follows that the awareness and cultivation of character strengths is crucial for increasing self-efficacy, goal-setting, goal adaptability and, ultimately, the sense of achievement and success that in turn propels the individual to greater heights. The importance of accompaniment for young adults towards raising the profile of their character strengths, therefore, is indisputable.

In a study, reported by Park (2009), it was found that adults who were encouraged to deliberately use their signature strengths in new ways as they go forward in life became significantly happier—more satisfied with their lives—than those who were not given this guidance and encouragement. Kesebir and Diener (2014), in their survey of empirical research between virtue and happiness, tender that it is impossible to conceive of a happy life, characterized, as it might be, by better social relationships, higher productivity, more prosocial behaviour and physical health without the exercise of virtue. Diener and Seligman (2002) found that the only variable that consistently corresponded with happiness was positive social relationships. Being consistent with the African worldview (Magesa, 1998; Selvam & Collicutt, 2013), it is our view that social relationships have much to do with character strengths. Yet, as Kesebir and Diener (2014) also point out, most people are unable to make the direct link between virtue and happiness, especially in a long-term integration, though immediate gratification from the exercise of virtue is sometimes recognized.

Based on the findings of the present study, as also supported by literature, our proposal is that adults and educators need to encourage young adults, even as they experiment much with their lives at this stage (Arnett, 2000), to harness the use of their strengths in new ways. This can result in discovering surprising new resources and possibilities. This is particularly important in situations such as in Kenya where opportunities are not always easily accessible to young adults on account of 'the youth bulge', which we referred to in the introduction. It cannot be taken for granted that knowing one's signature strengths results in increasing their use and in creating opportunities for themselves. In a similar vein, in a population such as the Kenyan young adults who have been subjected

more to education towards eradication of negative traits rather than to strengthening of positive strengths, this is even more important. Experts in positive psychology encourage actionable and measurable ways of exercising one's own strengths with clear targets (Park, 2009).

Young adulthood is also an age where most people experience fresh freedom from stringent parental and teacher supervision while they are not yet encumbered by the demands of parenthood themselves. It is therefore a window period during which development of strengths, especially in college, can take priority (Lounsbury et al., 2009). In the college setting, the focus is already on the development of the students and so a very small crossover is needed to add the dimension of emphasis on own strengths to maximize students' preparedness for life and its many faces.

Facilitating Young Adults Towards Growth in Character

Lounsbury and colleagues (2009) refer to many possibilities of interventions, some of which have been empirically tested, that help people develop character strengths effectively. These can be studied and modified as necessary to devise ways of assisting Kenyan young adults. Even a once only character-strengths-based intervention has been found to have considerable impact on the well-being of young adults (Duan & Bu, 2017); this means that systematic and repeated interventions can go much further. The college setting is particularly appropriate for simple but constant interventions that can also become new habits for the participants.

Perhaps the fact of their proximity to their imminent parenthood means that it can ultimately translate into a change of culture towards positive ways of raising their own children. Creating a virtue-salient culture, mindful that virtues are effected through character strengths, is essential to increasing the possibility for young adults to flourish (Kesebir & Diener, 2014), and this is ultimately the desire of every young adult. Accordingly, there is an increasing recognition that working on the character strengths of children and young people is a necessity, not a luxury (Park, 2009), and that character strengths contribute to mental health and academic performance (Lounsbury et al., 2009). In particular, the presence of negative affect such as depression among children and youth can be given a big and effective antidote. Specific

character strengths have been found to be effective in mitigating against risky behaviour such as drug abuse and suicide ideation, while helping youth to thrive (Park & Peterson, 2008).

There is much scope for development of this and similar studies in the Kenyan context. For example, it would be beneficial to explore which strengths are supportive of specific careers, which may foster relationships and which of the strengths may correlate more strongly with identity confirmation that is a major concern in young adulthood within the African cultural setting. Of particular interest is the role that character strengths play in the achievement of psychosocial developmental targets during young adulthood; for example, in which way do specific strengths correlate with the individual person's development from a sense of isolation to intimacy and social integration?

In the areas of therapy and accompaniment, studies could be carried out exploring how far therapeutic settings for young adults are cognizant of the opportunity of cultivating character strengths during this life stage, and what approaches are in use in this setting to support clients. There is certainly much scope for and promise in the fruitful use of a strengths approach to therapy (Magyar-Moe, Rhea, Owens, & Conoley, 2015; Scheel, Davis, & Henderson, 2013), particularly with children, adolescents and young adults. In the college/university settings, exploring the particular relationship between achievement of academic goals and the priming of character strengths can be of special interest.

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