

# The Character Strengths of Adolescents of Multicultural Families in Korea

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study was to explore the Character Strengths (CS) of adolescents of multicultural families in Korea and to examine the relationship among CS, adjustment and attachment. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** Self-report questionnaires assessing character strength, school adjustment and attachment were administrated to 43 multicultural adolescents and 74 non-multicultural ones. The statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS (ver. 1.8). The top 5 CSs were selected by comparing the averages of all the twenty four CSs in the multicultural group. And independent sample t-test was conducted to compare CSs with non-multicultural group and compare CSs according to the adjustment level. **Findings:** The results showed that the top-five CSs multicultural adolescents ranked most high were love, optimism, gratitude, kindness and vitality. And most of the CS sub-factors were higher in the multicultural group than the non-multicultural group except for self-regulation, leadership and humor. The school adjustment was significantly correlated to overall CS, and the attachment with mother significantly predicted the top five CSs of multicultural adolescents. In this study, the representative character strengths of the multicultural adolescents in Korea were found out. And also the positive relationship between the character strengths and adjustment of the multicultural adolescents was proved. **Improvements/Applications:** These findings indicate that it could buffer the negative influences of risk factors on maladjustment to enhance the strengths of multicultural adolescents, not just to reduce negative aspects of them.

**Keywords:** Adolescent, Attachment, Character Strength, Multicultural Family, School Adjustment

## 1. Introduction

Korea is recently becoming a multicultural society with an increasing number of its constituents coming from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. It is reported that during the first decades of this century, the percentage of newly formed multicultural families by marriage in Korea rose to 10.5% in 2010 from 4.6% in 200<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, Korea must be prepared to accept and support various requirements as a multicultural society.

A recently growing body of research indicates that adolescents from multicultural families, native men or women with non-native spouse, have various difficulties in adapting to culturally mixed environments. They might face the daily challenges interacting with different individuals in a context of languages, habits, traditions and

values which are different from their own<sup>2</sup>. For migrant adolescents to successfully adapt to a new and strange culture in youth could lead to a successful work and study as growing.

The multicultural adolescents living in Korea have relatively more difficulties than those who live in other countries because Korea has been a sing-race nation for a long time. And Korea also has had strong conservatives because of historical tragedies such as Japanese occupation, division of nation since the 6.25 War and so on<sup>3</sup>. These cultural contexts of Korean society make people less open-minded to new stimuli such as different skin-colored people and different language.

The previous research in the realm of multicultural families has mostly focused on their maladjustment issues such as mental disorders, stigma due to difference, poor

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communication abilities, family violence, and extramarital affair and so on<sup>4,6</sup>.

However, this pathologic model of multicultural households has limitations in that it is ineffective in prevention-planning and happiness-enhancement. Positive psychology suggests 'growth model', which focuses on psychological well-being and optimal functioning beyond absence of mental disorders or maladjustment<sup>7,8</sup>. As such have supported by prior researchers<sup>9,10</sup>, protective factors have the effect that buffer the negative influences of risk factors on risk behavior and resilience.

Self-efficacy, social support, positive coping strategies and parents' monitoring were proved effective as protective factors of adjustment. It is suggested that the higher the social support and self-identity, the higher the level of empowerment was among adolescents of multicultural families<sup>10,11</sup>. Character strengths, kind of positive traits, are known to enhance happiness and optimal functioning. Despite the increasing number of multicultural families, studies have rarely been focused on investigating the strengths of character of multicultural adolescents in Korea as well as in other countries. What competencies of characteristics do the adolescents who have one native parent and the other from different nation have in Korea? And do the characteristic strengths of them have significant positive relationship with school adjustment and stable attachment?

In<sup>9</sup> suggested 6 high virtues and 24 character strengths of human-beings by the classification 'Values in Action (VIA)'. Open-mindedness, one of them, is defined as 'considering pros-and-cons of diverse point of view'. In<sup>12</sup> have proposed 'openness to the other' as a multicultural strength or virtue. It could be conceptualized as the genuine competence in globalization<sup>2,13</sup>. This positive trait represents the most explicit and informal aspect of what implies to be a person who is open culturally different individuals<sup>12</sup>. It can be assumed that adolescents, who have experienced more diverse cultures from an early age, could naturally obtain this kind of strength. They might be more comfortable with differences that exist between themselves and others in terms of race, ethnicity, languages, life styles, culture, and beliefs than adolescents with both normal native parents<sup>14,15</sup>. However, it has never been empirically examined whether the multicultural adolescents are more open-minded or not.

In this study, we designed to explore which character strengths, suggested by Peterson and Seligman, are more developed or less in multicultural adolescents in Korea.

And then we supposed to examine the first hypothesis that the CSs of multicultural adolescents would be positively related to their school adjustment, and the second hypothesis that the attachment of them would predict on their representative CSs.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Participants

The data are a subset from 117 adolescents recruited from three middle schools and one healthy family support center in Seoul, Gyeonggi Province and Chuncheong Province, Korea. 43 adolescents were recruited from multicultural families and 74 from non-multicultural families. The nations one of their parents from were Japan(17), China(10), Philippine(8), Taiwan(4), Thailand(2), and Indonesia(2).

Permissions were obtained from the principals of selected local multicultural family support center and middle schools after the purpose and process of the study was explained. Consent from parents of all the adolescent participants was obtained prior to data collection.

Adolescents were given study packets including demographic questionnaires and other measurements. All the participants completed the packets anonymously. The cover sheet of the materials indicated that participation was voluntary and that all responses would be stored and analyzed confidentially. Research assistants helped for transference if the participants of multicultural families might have difficulty in understanding Korean words. Data collection required approximately 30 minutes to complete.

### 2.2 Measures

#### 2.2.1 Korean Character Strengths Test for Adolescence (KCST-A)

This test is developed by<sup>16</sup> based on the classification of character strengths and virtues by<sup>4</sup>. Each 24 sub-factor includes 10-items and 4-likert scale. The virtue 'Wisdom' includes creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, and love of learning, wisdom; 'Humanity' includes love, kindness, and social intelligence; 'Courage' includes bravery, persistence, authenticity, and vitality; 'Temperance' includes forgiveness, self-regulation, prudence, and modesty;

'Justice' includes fairness, leadership, and citizenship; 'Transcendence' includes spirituality, gratitude, optimism, humor, appreciation of beauty and excellence.

### 2.2.2 Korean School Adjustment Scale-Short Form (KSAS-SF)

This instrument was developed by Kim et al. to measure school adjustment for school aged children and adolescents. Four sub-factors were included such as school work, psychological stability, social relationship, school life. The internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the total scale is .94. And the internal reliabilities of sub-factors of the scale are as follows: School work, .91; Psychological stability, .85; Social relationship, .92; School life, .84. .

### 2.2.3 Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment-Revised version (IPPA-R)

Adolescents' perceptions of the positive and negative affective/cognitive dimension of relationships with their parents and close friends-particularly how well these figures serve as sources of psychological security were assessed. The original version was developed by<sup>17</sup>. For the revised version, the internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) are as follows: Mother attachment, .87; Father Attachment, .89; Peer attachment, .92.



**Figure 1.** The high 5 character strengths of multicultural adolescents.

## 2.3 Data analysis

Data analyses were preceded in five steps. First, descriptive statistics for all the measurements were obtained and correlational analyses were conducted to explore the relationships among CSs, school adjustment and attachment with mother. Second, to select the representative five CSs within the multicultural group, the averages of sub-factors of CS were calculated. Third, independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare CSs between the multicultural

group and the other. Fourth, independent sample *t*-test was conducted after dividing into two groups according to the adjustment level (high adjustment-group vs. low adjustment-group). Lastly, the regression analyses were conducted to investigate whether the attachment with mother would predict the top 5 CSs.

**Table 1.** Comparing 24 sub-factors of character strength between two groups

□	Multicultural group(n=43)		Non-multicultural group(n=74)		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
overall CS	1.96□	.45□	1.62□	.39□	4.39***
creativity	1.96	.63	1.66	.62	2.48*
curiosity	2.10	.61	1.78	.56	2.90**
open-mindedness	2.11	.57	1.73	.60	3.37**
love of learning	1.87	.63	1.42	.68	3.62***
wisdom	1.91	.64	1.61	.52	2.75**
love	2.38	.50	2.01	.51	3.84***
kindness	2.26	.50	1.81	.59	4.21***
social intelligence	2.10	.62	1.71	.58	3.39**
bravery	1.75	.62	1.30	.62	3.79***
persistence	1.87	.68	1.47	.55	3.45**
authenticity	1.94	.54	1.56	.55	3.57**
vitality	2.15	.61	1.80	.56	3.12**
forgiveness	1.87	.58	1.39	.57	4.38***
modesty	1.90	.49	1.63	.52	2.79**
prudence	1.92	.59	1.58	.55	3.12**
self-regulation	1.79	.53	1.56	.64	1.95
citizenship	2.06	.56	1.70	.53	3.41**
fairness	1.92	.51	1.55	.56	3.56**
leadership	1.77	.71	1.52	.62	1.98
appreciation of beauty and excellence	1.69	.66	1.27	.59	3.60***
gratitude	2.27	.57	2.02	.54	2.35*
optimism	2.29	.55	2.05	.60	2.09**
humor	1.95	.66	1.74	.65	1.68
spirituality	1.31	.73	.96	.66	2.67**
* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001					

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 The High 5 Character Strengths (CS) of Multicultural Adolescents in Korea

The top 5 character strengths, which multicultural adolescents living in Korea ranked most high, were found out as seen in Figure 1. The sub-factor 'Love' was ranked most high ( $M=2.38$ ,  $SD=.50$ ) among twenty four sub-factors. And 'Optimism' was secondly ranked high ( $M=2.29$ ,  $SD=.55$ ). The last top character strengths were 'Gratitude' ( $M=2.27$ ,  $SD=.57$ ), 'Kindness' ( $M=2.26$ ,  $SD=.50$ ) and 'Vitality' ( $M=2.15$ ,  $SD=.61$ ).

The brief definitions of the top 5 strength are as follows. Love is being close to people that one has affective bonds. Optimism is being convinced that everything will be fine. Gratitude is feeling and expressing thankfulness. Kindness is helping people without utilitarian motives. Vitality is feeling alive and activated. Love and kindness are classified into the virtue 'Humanity', gratitude and optimism into the virtue 'Transcendence', and vitality into 'Courage'.

#### 3.2 Comparison of CSs between Multicultural and Non-Multicultural Group

Independent sample *t*-test was followed to compare the CS levels of the multicultural group with the non-multicultural group. The overall CS, total score of 24 CSs was higher in the multicultural group than in non-multicultural group ( $t=4.39$ ,  $p<.001$ ) as seen in Table 1. While twenty one sub-factors, which were most of the 24 sub-factors of KCST were higher in the multicultural group than in non-multicultural group, the averages of self-regulation, leadership and humor were not significantly different between two groups.

#### 3.3 The CSs of Multicultural Adolescents according to the Level of School-Adjustment

Correlation analysis and independent sample *t*-test were followed to analyze the CS levels of the multicultural adolescents according to the school adjustment level. The total score and each 24 sub-factor score of CST were all higher in the adjustment group than in the maladaptation group (overall CS *t*-test:  $t=8.29$ ,  $p<.001$ ). And the relationship between the school adjustment and overall CS level was also positively and strongly correlated ( $r=.55$ ,

$p<.001$ ). Self-regulation was most closely related to school adjustment ( $r=.58$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and Vitality, optimism, love, gratitude, persistence were ranked high ( $r=.51\sim.56$ ).

#### 3.4 Attachment with Mother Influencing on CSs

To test the hypothesis that the attachment with mother would influence on character strengths, regression analyses were conducted. As a result, the attachment with mother was significantly predictive of all the high-five character strengths as well as the overall CS of multicultural adolescents ( $\beta=.51$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Gratitude among 5 representative CSs was most predictive ( $\beta=.66$ ,  $p<.001$ ). And love, optimism and kindness were followed as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Regression analysis of attachment to high 5 character strengths

independent variable	dependent variable	$R^2$	$F$	$\beta$	$t$
Attachment with mother	overall CS	.26	14.66	.51	3.82***
	love	.39	25.88	.62	5.09***
	optimism	.36	23.02	.60	4.80***
	gratitude	.44	31.62	.66	5.62***
	kindness	.32	19.37	.57	4.40***
	vitality	.29	16.55	.54	4.07***
* $p<.05$ , ** $p<.01$ , *** $p<.001$					

### 4. Conclusion

This paper proposed positive psychological strengths of adolescents of multicultural families living in Korea to help for their adjustment to culturally mixed environment. The signature character strengths of the multicultural adolescents were love, optimism, gratitude, kindness and vitality. And it was proved that these CSs were positively related to their adjustment, and significantly predicted by their attachment with mother. These findings indicate that it could buffer the negative influences of risk factors on maladjustment to enhance the CSs of multicultural adolescents, not just to reduce their weak points. Moreover, it is assumed that the stable attachment with their mother might help for developing their character strengths. Love, gratitude and kindness are such good traits for adolescents to make and sustain good

interpersonal relationships<sup>9</sup>. Unless they are well aware of their own interpersonal strengths, they cannot utilize them and optimize social capacity. The psychological educations about how to find and utilize the strengths are necessary for the teachers or experts who work for multicultural adolescents.

One of the limitations of this study was the small sample size not enough to represent Korean multicultural adolescent-population. And further studies are necessary to examine the causal relations among the CSs, adjustment and attachment, even though the positive significant correlations were proved in this study.

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