

Perceptions of adolescents among teachers and social workers in the context of training programs in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article explores whether professionals working with young people hold a negative view on adolescents in Hong Kong. Data were collected from 1112 participants from 23 workshops in a 3-day training program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong. In the workshop, there was a group activity inviting the participants to describe the characteristics of contemporary young people in Hong Kong. The findings showed that positive comments about adolescents were only half of the negative comments. The common themes that emerged from the negative comments included: “problematic self-conceptions”, “do not have long-term life goals”, “irresponsible”, “materialistic”, and “calculative”. The common themes that emerged from the positive comments included: “good at learning new things”, “energetic”, and “creative”. The themes apparently reflected sociocultural characteristics of the contemporary Hong Kong Society.

Keywords: Project P.A.T.H.S.; qualitative evaluation; training program.

Introduction

In the beginning of the 20th century, psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924) coined the phrase “storm and stress”, using it to describe adolescence. This period, according to Hall,

is characterized by a teenager's conflict with parents, mood disruptions, and engagement in risky behaviors, it is a psychological turmoil midway between childhood and adulthood (1, 2). Based on this premise, adolescence means non-adult, essentially it represents “deficit” or “incomplete”. This “deficit” approach seems to become the keynote of adults' perception of youth. Empirical studies commonly point out that this deficit approach to understanding youth is held by the helping professionals and teaching professionals. Most of these studies use scale-based questionnaires to measure the beliefs or presumptions about adolescence held by different social clusters (such as parents, teachers, and adolescents) and compare the results from those clusters. The findings generally indicate that the helping professionals (such as teachers or counselors) tend to describe adolescents in less favorable terms than adolescents describe themselves (3–8). There are theoretical discussions suggesting that this deficit approach to understanding adolescence is structurally sustained by treatment regimes relating to the education and clinical domains, because it helps conceal problematic economic and social conditions (7, 9–12). In addition, a review of developmental psychology shows that the deficit approach has dominated the study of adolescents in the past few decades (13–16).

Despite that much research suggests that a “deficit” approach to understanding youth is generally held by the helping professionals, it is still questionable whether this is a universal feature across different institutional settings and cultural contexts. On a closer scrutiny, we can see that most of the existing empirical studies about helping professionals' perceptions of youth are indeed “teachers' perceptions of youth in Western countries”. Search results from academic databases could briefly illustrate this biased profile. A search was conducted using database PsycINFO (17) in July 2010, aiming to look up titles that were related to helping professionals' perceptions of young people. The search covered article titles that presented a combination of certain key components, including: (a) wordings related to helping professionals (such as social workers, teachers, therapists, counselors), (b) wordings related to perceptions (such as conceptions, perceptions, beliefs), and (c) wordings related to young people (such as youth, young, or adolescent). Search results showed 159 peer-reviewed journal articles, 48 of them were identified by the researcher as relevant to the study concerned. Among this set of selected journal articles, 83% (40/48) of them were related to school teachers' perceptions and most of them were from Western countries. The same search was conducted on the same day using database ERIC (18). Search results showed 65 peer-reviewed journal articles, 22 of them were identified by the researcher as relevant to the study concerned. Among this set of selected journal articles, 82% (18/22) of them were

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related to school teachers' perceptions and most of them were from Western countries. Using the same search code, the database Social Work Abstracts (19) showed only 18 published works, 8 of them were identified by the researcher as relevant to the study concerned. All the articles were from Western countries. Although these search results do not comprehensively cover all published works in this area (at least non-refereed articles, reports, and book chapters were not included), they do consistently show that existing empirical studies do not evenly cover all institutional settings and sociocultural contexts. It is rather clear that most of them are about school teachers' (instead of other helping professionals') perceptions of youth in Western countries.

Unfortunately, research in non-Western regions, such as Hong Kong or Mainland China, has not yet adequately addressed the issue of youth service professionals' stereotypical perception of youth. Frontline youth workers in Hong Kong generally do not tend to research into their own professional practice. This is partly reflected by the research studies conducted by some of the most research-active youth work organizations in the region. These include Breakthrough Ltd. (20), The Youth Research Center of the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (21), The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong (22), and the Commission on Youth of the Home Affairs Bureau (23). In July 2010, the websites of these selected organizations altogether indicated 328 research reports published during 1993–2009. Among these published items, 7 of them concerned parents' opinions, 6 of them concerned public opinions, 10 of them presented statistics and trends, 105 of them were analyses of youth issues, and 200 of them presented youth opinions. Yet none of them was about professionals' view of young people. This simple literature search definitely cannot comprehensively cover all the studies done by local youth work agencies, but it does suggest that frontline youth work organizations generally do not see that "professional reflection" deserves a high priority in their research agenda.

There are some postgraduate dissertations written by experienced social workers which are concerned with youth workers' perception of youth. For example, Chan (24) reported that although there was a deficit approach to understanding youth development presented by the official youth service documents, youth workers' verbal accounts indeed presented a more diverse range of concepts informing their need assessments. Shiu (25) argued that research studies about young people's deviant behaviors increasingly presented a deficit approach that focused on individual faults, and that this might risk concealing problematic social conditions in which the young people were situated. However, many of these studies are small-scale case studies lacking research rigor.

As there is a lack of representative studies concerning youth service professionals' perceptions of youth in non-Western regions, this article presents a study concerning Chinese youth service professionals' perception of Chinese youth in contemporary Hong Kong society. It is expected to contribute to the discussions in the local youth work context as well as in a broader academic context concerning how young people are perceived by helping professionals in positive youth development programs. The workshops for the program implementers

of the Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programs) in Hong Kong can provide us with a sizable dataset contributing to the discussion. In contrast to the traditional preventive and remedial approaches to youth work which focus on young people's failures and problems, the positive youth development approach perceives young people as "assets", highlighting the promotion of social, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being (26).

The Project P.A.T.H.S. is a school-based program aiming to promote positive and holistic youth development in Hong Kong which is financially supported by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust. The program has been implemented in more than 250 secondary schools in Hong Kong since the 2005–2006 school year (27). The Project P.A.T.H.S. is a two-tier program designed for junior secondary school students (Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 students). The Tier 1 Program is a program for all students based on a set of positive youth development constructs (13, 28), and the Tier 2 Program is for students having more psychosocial needs. The Tier 1 Program consists of 40 units (totaling 20 teaching hours) for each grade in each school year. The details of this school-based curriculum are described elsewhere (29). The Project P.A.T.H.S. has consistently emphasized the importance of systematic training for program implementers since its inception. The potential participants of the Project P.A.T.H.S. training programs are secondary school teachers and social workers. Details of the training program are described elsewhere (30).

A series of training workshops for social workers and teachers were conducted during October 2005 to August 2006 in Hong Kong. The participants in the workshops were asked to participate in a group exercise inviting them to describe three attributes of Chinese adolescents in contemporary Hong Kong society. These data, therefore, usefully help present Chinese youth service professionals' perceptions of Chinese adolescents in contemporary Hong Kong society. The following questions were addressed in this study: Do the youth service professionals generally hold a negative view on adolescents? What negative attributes of adolescents are perceived? What positive attributes of adolescents are perceived? What special features can be identified from these perceptions?

Methods

Impressions of "contemporary adolescents" noted by a total number of 1112 social workers and teachers were collected from 23 training workshops held during October 2005 to August 2006 in Hong Kong.

There were several steps in the data organization and analysis process. First, the unit of analysis was a "meaningful unit" instead of a sentence. For example, a sentence noting adolescents are "rebellious and smart" would be broken down into two meaningful units, namely, "rebellious" and "smart". These "meaningful units" were further classified and coded based on two major attributes, namely "the nature of the comment" and "the mode of expectation reflected by the comments".

Second, the nature of the comment was identified with reference to four possible categories: (a) positive – meaningful units showed some directional indicators such as strong, good, high, having, etc.,

or implied a positive sense based on a general value judgment in the Hong Kong context, e.g., trendy, smart; (b) negative – meaningful units showed some directional indicators such as weak, bad, low, lacking, etc., or implied a negative sense based on a general value judgment in the Hong Kong context, e.g., irresponsible, calculative; (c) neutral – meaningful units noted a condition without a direction; and (d) undecided – meaningful units that the researchers did not understand or those obviously implied a judgment but the researchers were not sure whether it was positive or negative.

Third, the domain of the comment was identified with reference to two possible categories. The first category was “focus on personal qualities” such as a meaningful unit saying “youth people lack social skills” (a negative comment) or a meaningful unit saying “youth people are sociable” (a positive comment) indicates that the commentator holds some expectations concerning the personal qualities of an individual. The second category was “focus on social conditions” such as a meaningful unit saying “youth people having many opportunities to develop their potentials” (a positive comment) or a meaningful unit saying “youth people lack opportunities to develop their potentials” (a negative comment) indicates that the commentator holds some expectations concerning the conditions of the social environment.

Fourth, the numbers of meaningful units associated with these attributes were compared and cross-tabulated, serving to reveal any special features that might be worth noting. Moreover, the contents of different sets of meaningful units were further analyzed, aiming to explore any emerging themes or special features that might be worth noting. Word frequency analysis was used to identify those most frequently appeared vocabularies. These frequent vocabularies were further interpreted, combined, and selected by the researchers, and significant common themes were then induced.

Results

Data were collected from 1112 participants (798 teachers and 314 social workers) in 23 Project P.A.T.H.S. training workshops held in 2005–2006. There was a group activity inviting participants to note down their impressions on “contemporary adolescents” and 1327 meaningful units were derived from participants’ responses in that activity. Inter-rater reliability tests for the coding of “the nature of comments” and the coding of “the mode of judgment reflected by the comments” were performed. A second rater randomly selected 50 items rated by the first rater to see how far the selected items were coherently rated by different raters. It was noted that the coding of “nature of the comment” (i.e., positive/negative) had 90% inter-rater reliability and inter-rater reliability of the coding of “the domain of the comment” (i.e., personal qualities/social conditions) was 94%.

Several observations were derived from the data. First, negative responses obviously outnumbered positive responses. Among all the meaningful units ($n=1327$), 54% of them were classified as negative, only 30% of them were classified as positive, and the rest of them were neutral or undecided (Table 1). In other words, positive comments were only half of the negative comments, most of the participants tended to use negative terms in their descriptions of adolescents.

Second, participants held negative views on “social conditions” as well as on “personal qualities” related to young people. Because we asked the workshop participants to give their views about adolescents, it was expected that meaningful units reflecting judgments focusing on personal qualities should be more than meaningful units reflected judgments focusing on social conditions. Almost 95% of the meaningful units reflecting judgments focusing on personal qualities and only approximately 3% of them reflected judgments focusing on social conditions (Table 1). It is worth noting that among the meaningful units concerning the personal qualities of adolescents ($n=1255$), more than 54% of them were negative and only 31% were positive, and among the meaningful units concerning social conditions affecting adolescents ($n=43$), 60% of them were negative and only 14% of them were positive (Table 1). That is, compared with the “personal qualities” category, there was even a higher proportion of negative items and a much lower proportion of positive items in the “social conditions” category. These figures show that teachers and social workers did not only tend to have negative comments on individuals, but also on social conditions affecting adolescent development.

Third, as shown in Table 2, “family” was the most prominent theme that emerged from the meaningful units concerning negative social conditions noted by the workshop participants. Among the meaningful units concerning negative social conditions ($n=26$), 42% of them mentioned the negative influence from young people’s families. For example, “parental care is inadequate”, “parents having long working hours”, “parents themselves do not have long-term goals”, “overprotected by parents”, etc.

Fourth, among all the meaningful units that addressed positive social conditions ($n=6$), 67% of them were related to materialistic support. For example, “good materialistic support from family”, “the society has become more resourceful compared with previous generations”, etc. (Table 2).

Fifth, common themes about negative personal qualities were identified. Among the meaningful units concerning negative personal qualities ($n=680$), 15% of them noted

Table 1 Domains of comments and nature of comments.

Domains of comments	Nature of comments				Row total
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Undecided	
Personal qualities ($n=1255$)	54%	6%	31%	9%	100%
Social conditions ($n=43$)	60%	12%	14%	14%	100%
Undecided ($n=29$)	24%	21%	10%	45%	100%
Total ($n=1327$)	54%	6%	30%	10%	100%

Table 2 Common themes in respective sets of meaningful units.

Negative	Positive
<p>Personal qualities</p> <p>In the set of meaningful units noting negative personal qualities (n=680), the following themes were identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Problematic self-concept (15%) – Lack long-term goals (10%) – Irresponsible/lack commitment (5%) – Easily affected by external factors (4%) – Materialistic (3%) – Calculative (2%) <p>Social conditions</p> <p>In the set of meaningful units noting negative social conditions (n=26), the following themes were identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Family (42%) 	<p>In the set of meaningful units noting positive personal qualities (n=384), the following themes were identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Smart and flexible (23%) – Creative (14%) – Energetic (11%) – Information technology literate (3%) – Trendy (2%) <p>In the set of meaningful units noting positive social conditions (n=6), the following themes were identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Adequate materialistic support (67%)

“problematic self-concept” (this includes meaningful units such as “self-centered”, “self-arrogance”, “inadequate self-confidence”), 10% of them noted a “lack of long-term goals” (this includes meaningful units such as “lacking life goals”, “no direction”, “short-sighted”). There were other less significant but themes worth noting such as “irresponsible/lack commitment” (5%), “easily affected by external factors” (4%), “materialistic” (3%), and “calculative” (2%) (Table 2).

Finally, common themes about positive personal qualities were identified. Among the meaningful units concerning positive personal qualities (n=384), 23% of them suggested that young people were “smart and flexible” (this includes meaningful units such as “flexible”, “smart”, “learn fast”, “willing to try”), 14% of them explicitly noted that young people are creative (this includes meaningful units such as “creative”, “innovative”), 11% of them implied that young people are energetic (this includes meaningful units such as “energetic”, “active”, “vibrant”). There were other less significant but themes worth noting such as “information technology literate” (3%) and “trendy” (2%) (Table 2).

Discussion

The basic question addressed by this study was how teachers and social workers perceived contemporary young people in Hong Kong. The findings revealed that there was a dominant deficit-oriented representation of youth supported by the youth service professionals. This observation is generally in agreement with the previous empirical studies (3–8) and is in line with the previous theoretical discussions (7, 9–11).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that youth service professionals in the study held negative views on “social conditions” as well as on “personal qualities”. Moreover, compared with the “personal qualities” category, there was even a higher proportion of negative items and a much lower proportion of positive items in the “social conditions” category. This implies that teachers and social workers in Hong

Kong do not merely have negative comments on youth, but they might have a general negative view of the society. Furthermore, those “negative attributes” noted by the workshop participants were not merely those typical “stress and storm” characteristics, but many of them were comments such as “lacking long-term life goals”, “short-sighted”, “irresponsible”, “lack commitment”, “materialistic”, and “calculative”. These observations further unfold the significance of having empirical studies in the specific sociocultural context of Hong Kong.

As noted in the introduction part of this article, most of the contemporary discussions in youth studies are from the West and they generally point to a close link between the deficit approach to understanding youth and the treatment regimes relating to the education and clinical domains. The findings of this study provide us with a more contextualized interpretation, showing that rather than some typical clinical problems (e.g., emotional unstable, low self-esteem), many of those negative comments are more relevant to personality traits associated with the competitive environment in Hong Kong (e.g., “materialistic”, “calculative”). Instead of being the root cause, institutional factors might be just an apparent cause or just one of the many causes of youth service professionals’ negative perception of youth. The present study underscores the importance of adopting an ecological understanding of adolescent developmental issues (31). Further research will be required to inform a deeper understanding.

The findings also reveal possibilities for a more positive approach to understanding youth among the helping professionals. In addition to those negative comments, teachers and social workers in the study also noted that young people are “good at learning new things”, “creative”, “energetic”, and “information technology literate”. These positive views, although they were not the majority, they were at least explicitly addressed. In other words, there are definitely some positive qualities of young people which are commonly recognized by teachers and social workers. Youth services can focus on fixing young people’s problems, but they can also focus on developing young people’s

strengths. Although these two intervention approaches are not mutually exclusive and are complementary to each other, an overwhelming emphasis on the problem side might risk obscuring the factors that help foster positive development. This observation lends further support to the rationale and significance of having positive youth development programs such as the Project P.A.T.H.S. In contrast to the traditional preventive and remedial approaches to youth work which focus on young people's failures and problems, the positive youth development approach perceives young people as "assets", highlighting the promotion of social, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being (26). Nevertheless, there is a need to further understand how the positive youth development approach exemplified by the Project P.A.T.H.S. can promote holistic development in children and adolescents (31–33).

There are some limitations of this study. First, because the activities that generated the data were group activities mixing up both teacher participants and social worker participants, therefore the analysis could not differentiate the views from the teachers and those from the social workers. Future research designs could consider addressing this factor. Second, the coding of the meaningful units relied on the researchers' subjective judgments, but this subjective influence was minimized as the study adopted an inter-rater reliability test. There are several strengths of the study that are worth noting. First, a respectable sample size was used in the study. Second, most of the empirical studies concerning youth service professionals' perceptions of youth are from the West, this paper presents a pioneer study on Chinese youth work professionals' perceptions of Chinese adolescents in contemporary Hong Kong society. It is supposed that the findings can benefit the youth work discipline in Hong Kong as well as contribute to the discussion in a broader academic context.

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