

## A PSYCHO-SOCIAL STUDY OF STUDENT ACTIVISM IN BANGLADESH

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*The study explored the phenomenon of student activism in Bangladesh as related to sex and socio-economic status (SES) differences. The study utilized multi-dimensional criterion group design. The respondents were students from under-and post-graduate classes of Rajshahi University. A total of 200 Ss equally divided into activists and non-activists participated in the study. Each category of male and female was equally subdivided into high and low SES categories. An Activism Criteria Scale was used to test the following three specific hypotheses: (1) Activist Male Ss would differ significantly from Activist Female Ss on Activism score; (2) Activist Ss from high SES would differ significantly from Activist Ss with low SES on Activism score; and (3) There would be no difference between male and female as well as high and low socio-economic status for non-activists Ss on Activism score. The findings supported the hypotheses. Important implications of the research were pointed out.*

A large number of studies have emphasized psychological, economic and social factors in unfolding the structural components of student activism in developed as well as developing countries (Adorno, Prenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Ara, 1988; Chandidas, 1975; Eysenck, 1975; Rokeach, 1960). Most of the studies have attempted to relate student activism to personality, demographic variables and gender differences and have reported an array of contradictory findings.

Heist and Somer (1965) conducted a survey on student activism in Berkeley's Free Speech Movements at the University of California. In this study certain comparisons were made on the basis of data obtained on Omnibus Personality Inventory. Three comparison groups used in the study were: (1) Arrested Members ( $N=130$ ) of Free Speech Movements; (2) Berkely Seniors ( $N=92$ )

who participated in the demonstration; and (3) Typical College Students ( $N=1385$ ) who persisted in college for four years. The results of these comparisons showed that student activists had more sensitivity and openness to ideas as compared to college students in general. The Free Speech Members also obtained the highest scores on the complexity and autonomy scales and showed greater interest in intellectual inquiry, tolerance for ambiguity, objectivity and independence of thought in comparison to other comparison groups. Austin, Panos, and Greager (1967) found that activists were more aggressive, outgoing and more inclined to perceive themselves as being characterized by leadership ability, speaking ability, self confidence, social and political liberalism, and originality. Grosser and Trezeciak (1980), on the other hand, showed relation of dogmatism to the issue of approval or disapproval of Panama Canal Treaty with American student activists and showed the issue-exposed group to exhibit suspicious attitude but not dogmatism. Issue-unexposed group, however, reflected dogmatism but not suspicious attitudes.

These studies conducted in the social context of developed countries are not exposed to the conditions which are very common to student activism in developing countries. In fact, the phenomenon of student activism in developing countries abounds in such social problems as political unrest, economic depression, social ills and unemployment problems accompanied by acute frustration in youths of these countries (Ara, 1984, 1985; Misra, 1975; Sharma, 1974). Smith, Bruner, and White (1960) also found that student activists come from advantaged families and their parents were successful in career and possessed high economic status. Again, Sharma (1974) found the ordinary students perceiving the student leader as one who tended to imitate political leaders and try to extract money from them. He also concluded that elected student leaders come from higher economic status, and belong to high caste in Indian society. In Bangladesh, Ara's (1983) investigation revealed that "right" activists belong to high parental income background as contrasted to "left" activists who had parents with low income status.

The analyses of above quoted empirical studies conducted in developed and developing social contexts make it clear that the

structural components of student activism have been diversified due to variations in social, economic and political structure of the countries concerned. Hence it is arguable that student activism in Bangladesh has its own characteristics that need extensive empirical investigation. With this end in view, the present study was conducted in socio-economic and political conditions of Bangladesh to identify specific characteristics of student activism as related to SES and male-female differences. Three specific hypotheses were formulated for this purpose. These are as follows:

- i) Activist Male Ss would differ significantly from Activist Female Ss on Activism score.
- ii) Activist Ss with high socio-economic status would differ significantly from Activist Ss with low SES on Activism score.
- iii) There would be no difference between male and female for non-activist Ss on Activism score.
- iv) There would be no difference between high and low SES for non-activist Ss on Activism score.

## METHOD

### Sample

The sample of the study constituted 200 respondents equally divided into activist and nonactivist groups. In each group, 50 Ss were male students and 50 Ss were female students. They were equally divided into high and low SES. Subjects were identified as activist and nonactivist on the basis of their association with political activities. Active participants in politics were identified as activist students. Respondents who were reluctant to be involved in active politics were regarded as nonactivist students. This

classification was done through the administration of Activism Criteria Scale (Ara, 1988). The Scale was developed for sample selection. It contained different items such as: "participate in student politics", "like to be a candidate in election", "hold a post in student union", "participate in canvassing for election", "organize student procession, strike" and "deliver lecture in the gatherings of the students aimed at influencing the students in favour of their organizations", etc. A positive answer to any one of these questions was regarded as a criterion of student activism. Negative answers to all these questions were regarded as the criteria for nonactivist students.

High and low socio-economic status of the *Ss* was determined by using a SES questionnaire (Ara, 1988). The questionnaire determined SES on the basis of parental education and income.

### **Instrument**

Activism scale was used for data collection. The scale contained 31 items. The *Ss* were asked to show their attitudinal preference on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Strong agreement was scored 5 and strong disagreement 1. The maximum possible score was  $(31 \times 5)=155$  and the minimum possible score was  $(31 \times 1)=31$ .

The students scoring above the mid point (i.e., 93), were considered as activists and those scoring below 93 were considered as non-activists.

### **Procedure**

The activism scale was administered on 200 *Ss*. The *Ss* were approached individually. They were asked to give their attitudinal preference on each item. *Ss* were properly instructed and rapport was established before data collection. As soon as the data collection was completed, coding was done and the result sheet was prepared for the analyses of data.

## RESULTS

The results of the study were computed and mean differences were obtained between different comparison groups. It was found that male activist *Ss* scored significantly higher than the female activists (see table 1).

Table 1

*Mean differences between male and female of activists and non-activists on the scores of Activism Scale (N-50 for each group).*

	Male		Female		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Activists	105.82	5.91	102.52	6.45	2.65	.05
Non-Activists	86.47	0.59	86.42	14.1	0.02	<i>n.s.</i>

However, no statistically significant mean difference was obtained between male and female *Ss* for non-activist group.

Table 2 shows mean differences of activist and non-activist groups between high and low socio-economic status. It was found that among activists, those with high socio-economic background obtained higher activism scores in comparison to the activists with low socio-economic background. Non-activist *Ss*, however, did not differ significantly between high and low SES.

Table 2

*Mean differences between high and low socio-economic status of activist and non-activist on the scores of Activism scale (n = 50 for each group).*

	High SES		Low SES		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Activists	106.84	12.77	101.5	11.60	2.17	.05
Non-Activists	87.21	13.35	85.68	11.34	0.61	<i>n.s.</i>

## DISCUSSION

The results of the present study should be considered keeping in mind the fact that participation of student community in politics is a common event in developing countries of the world including Bangladesh where student activism seems to have exerted enormous influence on changing the stream of politics to a greater extent. In recent years, Bangladesh has experienced great upheaval and student unrest resulting in the change of government. The present study was designed to explore these political activities of the students in terms of gender and SES differentiation. The results provided confirmation to all the three hypotheses of the study.

It was interesting to note that activist subjects differentiated on gender as well as SES dimension. It seems that student activism in Bangladesh is characteristically different due to gender differentiation. One probable reason for higher activism in male in comparison to female, might be that student activism is mainly dominated by the males. In recent years, females have shown interest in active politics in selected areas. However, party organization, call for strike, and other such activities are exclusively done by the male members of the student organizations.

Several theoretical explanations may be cited for this type of differential psychological functioning in male and female activists. Katz (1960), for example, distinguished between rationality motives, value expressive motives, social expressive motives and ego defensive motives and showed that relative weight of each type of motive is responsible for differential action tendency in men and women. Thus, the psychology of politics is inherently a function of motivational and attitudinal preference for specific ideological stance (see also Eysenck, 1975).

It seems that family background in terms of high education and high economic status plays a vital role in influencing student activism. Activists with low social background in terms of education and economic solvency may impose an adverse effect in student activism leading to differential effects between high and low SES of the activist in educational institutions. This might explain the results of the present study that whereas among activists, the differences

between High and Low SES are significant as regards the level of Activism, but among Non-activists, such differences do not seem to exist.

Differential attitudinal preference between activists of high and low SES may be embedded in the theoretical paradigm of repressed anxiety developed and elaborated by Murphy (1945), Hoffer (1951), and Bay (1965). According to them, individuals devoid of childhood affection may suffer from anxiety repressed in them in early childhood experiences. Persons belonging to high and low SES groups are exposed to different types of childhood experience leading to variation in ideological preference within the same group. Thus the activists, in spite of their collective identity, cannot resolve anxiety stemming from childhood experience. Such anxiety, if unresolved, may lead a person to hold differential attitudes. The non-activist subjects, on the other hand, are guided by reality demands and social demands and as such they are likely to express identical attitudinal preference on different activism dimensions.

In conclusion, it can be said that the findings of the study have revealed certain distinctive features of student activism in Bangladesh. Undoubtedly, these empirical data may provide valuable basis for further investigation in the area of politics and student activism in the country. In particular, gender variation and status differentiation should be given priority in designing such empirical studies of social as well as political - psychological nature.

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