

# Researchers study adolescents' life aspirations in Cambodia

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Penn State undergraduate students watch as Kyler Knapp, Penn State graduate student in Human Development and Family studies, presents preliminary findings to local non-governmental organization leaders in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Credit: Pennsylvania State University

Adolescents are tasked with navigating competing priorities, including whether to marry, have children, pursue a job/career, go to college, and contribute to society. A paper recently published in *Developmental Psychology* describes one of the first studies to examine how adolescents in a developing country such as Cambodia negotiate substantially greater access to educational and professional opportunities against a backdrop of strong religious and family traditions.

Bo Cleveland, Penn State professor of human development and family studies, led the research team that developed, conducted, and analyzed a survey of students in six schools in and around Siem Reap, a city in Cambodia. Their survey of 580 students in grades 7–12 asked about their perceived likelihood of achieving various life goals across familial, educational, vocational and community-oriented domains.

"Siem Reap's unique combination of rich tradition and rapid change provided an important look at the potential implications of such rapid economic and [social change](#) during a critical developmental period for adolescents' future orientation," said Kyler Knapp, doctoral candidate in [human development](#) and [family studies](#) and the paper's first author.

The research team applied latent profile analysis to the [survey data](#) to reveal four profiles of future expectations: family focused, professional/service focused, high expectations and low expectations. The largest group was family-focused, with 31% of the sample, while the second-largest group (30%) had high expectations across all domains. The professional/service focused group comprised 27% of the sample, and 12% of the group surveyed had low expectations across all domains.

Knapp said that understanding subgroups of adolescents can be used to meet their needs more effectively. He gave the example of identifying the adolescents most likely to belong to the low expectations group so that the underlying factors contributing to their low expectations can be

addressed, possibly improving their future outlooks.

"One of the highlights from our findings is how adolescents' self-determination and sense of control over making their own decisions may underscore their expectations for their futures," Knapp said. "A strong internal locus of control may be an important characteristic of adolescents with higher future expectations in work, education, and service domains that could ultimately lead to social mobility in the long-term."

Knapp also suggested that members of the professional/service focused group may aspire to help rebuild their country in the wake of the Khmer Rouge genocide that took place roughly 40 years ago.

The research team returned to Cambodia in 2019 to present their preliminary findings to a group of non-governmental organization representatives, including representatives from the organization that sponsored the participating schools and helped to facilitate the research.

Reflecting on his experiences in Cambodia, Knapp said, "it taught me about the importance of working in partnership with key community stakeholders throughout the research process, from the study's inception and development of study measures through analysis of the data, for increasing its relevance and usefulness to the population being studied."

**More information:** Kyler S. Knapp et al, Profiles of future expectations among urban adolescents in Cambodia, *Developmental Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0001374](https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001374)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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