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A Study of Prominent Character Strengths and Their Relationship with Well Being Among Business Management Students

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*, ** GGSD College, Sector 32C, Chandigarh

ABSTRACT

The current study measured character strengths among business management students in a college population (n=150) using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths scale (VIA-IS); and tested the relationship between character strengths and various measures of well-being. Significant gender differences were found for 11 of the 24 character strengths: kindness/generosity, intimacy, gratitude, forgiveness, appreciation of beauty and excellence, prudence, equity/fairness, leadership, creativity, valor, and self-regulation. Analyses of the relationship between character strengths and measures of well-being revealed a number of significant associations, especially with Well-being and life satisfaction. Implications of the major findings and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords : Character Strengths, Satisfaction with life, Well-being

Classical assumptions of the benefits of character strengths have existed for thousands of years. For example, it has been assumed by many religions and cultures that forgiveness is a source of mental and physical health (McCullough, 2000). Other character strengths, such as kindness and personal intelligence (self-knowledge), are elevated to an even higher significance (Plato, 1966; Singer, 1997). Basic assumptions of the benefits of human strengths such as forgiveness, humility, hope, kindness, and fairness, along with others, are so widespread that recent youth development initiatives have incorporated character building into their programs, expecting desirable outcomes such as school achievement, community involvement, leadership, and good interpersonal relations (Larson, 2000; Park, 2004; Steen, Kachorek, & Peterson, 2003).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) contended that a multitude of positive outcomes result from high levels of character strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) also contended that exercising character strengths is likely to be associated with a number of positive outcomes, including Well-being, self-acceptance, reverence for life, competence, efficacy, mastery, mental health, physical health, rich and supportive networks, respect for and by others, satisfying work, material sufficiency, and healthy communities and families.

Only by measuring the character strengths in conjunction with one another can one discern their relative importance, especially in predicting outcomes. Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004 related character strengths with Satisfaction with Life on a sample of 5000 adult participants

Also, the character strengths of love (Pennebaker, 1990), hope/optimism (Seligman, 1991), spirituality (Myers, 2000), gratitude (Emmons & Shelton, 2002), and forgiveness (Harrison & Thoresen, 2005) have been empirically and positively linked to good physical health. In addition to good physical health, character strengths may be related to reduced risk of psychological disorders. Research has shown that spirituality (Friedrich, Cohen, & Weltturner, 1988) and hope (Snyder, 1994) predict less depression, and gratitude interventions (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) may directly reduce self-reported depressive symptomatology. There are empirical data that other outcomes, such as academic achievement, may also be associated with character strengths. Academic achieve-

ment has been significantly and positively linked to the character strength, hope, (Snyder et al, 2002) In summary, there is some evidence that character strengths are associated with life satisfaction, physical health, mental health, and academic performance.

The present study had two aims. The first aim was to assess the 24 character strengths as classified in the values in action inventory among business management students. The second aim of this study was to measure the extent to which character strengths were statistically related to a battery of indicators of well-being, including satisfaction with life, Well-being, Spiritual quotient, physical health, and academic achievement.

Data on character strengths and measures of well-being were assessed via self-report questionnaires administered to 150 participants during a single collection time. Study participants included a total of 150 final year business management undergraduate students at Goswami Ganesh Dutta Sanatan Dharam College, Chandigarh. Fifty-two percent of participants were male (N = 78) and 48% were female (N = 72). For measuring the said constructs in the study - Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) developed by Peterson & Seligman for character strengths. Academic achievement was measured using the university scores attained by students in the past two years of their course work.

To examine the most and least endorsed character strengths, the means and standard deviations for each of the 24 character strengths were calculated. Each character strength was then tested for significant gender differences by computing t-tests. The second set of analyses tested whether predicted character strengths would be statistically related to a battery of outcome measures, including satisfaction with life, Well-being, spiritual-quotient, physical health and academic achievement. To test these hypotheses, a series of multiple regression analyses was performed, where each dependent variable of interest (e.g., Spiritual quotient, Well-being, satisfaction with life, academic achievement, etc.) was independently regressed on the 24 character strengths.

To calculate the effect of the 24 character strengths, as a whole, on the dependent variables of interest (e.g., SLWS), we calculated the values of R². This told us the percentage of variance predicted in the dependent variable by the 24 char-

acter strengths, simultaneously.

RESULTS

Overall, participants favorably endorsed the character strengths. Females showed a mean endorsement of 3.67 on the 24 character strengths. This indicates a trend for women to endorse the character strengths as "like me." Males showed a mean endorsement of 3.64, also indicating endorsement of the character strengths as "like me." When examining male and female participants together, participants most endorsed the character strengths Humor/playfulness ($M=4.06$, $s.d. = .52$), Love/intimacy ($M=4.01$, $s.d. = .56$), Kindness/generosity ($M=4.00$, $s.d. = .47$), Integrity/honesty ($M=3.96$, $s.d. = .45$), and Social intelligence ($M=3.89$, $s.d. = .50$). Participants least endorsed Modesty/humility ($M=3.30$, $s.d. = .54$), Self-regulation ($M=3.26$, $s.d. = .55$), Spirituality ($M=3.21$, $s.d. = .86$), Love of learning ($M=3.20$, $s.d. = .60$), Prudence/caution ($M=3.16$, $s.d. = .63$). The means and standard deviations for the 24 character strengths by gender are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Significant gender differences were found for 11 of the 24 character strengths. Females scored significantly higher than males on Kindness/generosity ($t=-7.88$, $p<.0001$), Love/intimacy ($t=-5.389$, $p<.0001$), Gratitude ($t=-5.05$, $p<.0001$), Forgiveness/mercy ($t=-4.30$, $p<.0001$), Appreciation of beauty and excellence ($t=-4.00$, $p<.0001$), Prudence/caution ($t=-3.61$, $p<.0001$), Equity/fairness ($t=-3.44$, $p<.001$), and Leadership ($t=-3.13$, $p<.01$). Males scored significantly higher on Creativity ($t=7.42$, $p<.0001$), Valor ($t=5.35$, $p<.0001$), and Self-regulation ($t=3.74$, $p<.0001$).

Table 2 about here

Multiple regression analyses were performed, where each dependent variable of interest was independently regressed on the 24 character strengths and gender, simultaneously. Table 2 presents the overall effect sizes (R^2) and the standardized regression coefficients from these analyses. Gender was controlled for because of the many gender differences found on the various measures. The most striking finding was the character strengths' relationship to satisfaction with life, subjective Well-being, Spiritual quotient spiritual quotient; academic achievement variables had the next highest relationship with the character strengths. There was little relationship between the character strengths and physical health.

DISCUSSION

Primary findings demonstrated that college participants, as a whole, endorsed the 24 character strengths. Endorsement of the character strengths did not vary by demographic information, but did vary by gender. Significant gender differences were found for 11 of the 24 character strengths. When testing the relationship between character strengths and various measures of well-being, we found many significant associations, with a general trend toward the character strengths having stronger associations with positive measures of well-being (e.g., satisfaction with life, subjective Well-being) than measures of academic performance

First, results showed that college males and females indicated that each of the 24 character strengths was more or less like them. When combining data from male and female participants, students most endorsed the character strengths Humor/playfulness, Love/intimacy, Kindness/generosity, Integrity/honesty, and Social intelligence (stated in rank order starting with the most endorsed character strength), and least endorsed the character strengths Prudence/caution, Love of learning, Spirituality, Self-regulation, and Modesty/humility (listed in rank order starting with the least endorsed character strength). Future studies are encouraged to measure character strengths in college students from schools/colleges that vary in geographic location, caliber, and other important factors.

Hypotheses concerning the relationship between character strengths and various measures of well-being were mostly

supported. Most striking were the many positive associations with life satisfaction, Well-being, Consistent with findings by Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) on an adult, internet sample, satisfaction with life (SWLS) in this college sample was significantly and positively related to Love/intimacy, Hope/optimism, Gratitude, and Zest/enthusiasm. In other words, participants with high levels of Love/intimacy, Hope/optimism, Gratitude or Zest/enthusiasm were most likely to report high levels of satisfaction with life. Surprisingly, satisfaction with life was significantly and negatively related to Spirituality. In other words, there was a trend for participants who were higher in Spirituality to be less satisfied with their lives. This relationship was not expected and is inconsistent with Park, Peterson, and Seligman's findings. It is not known why spirituality is negatively related to life satisfaction among this college population, especially since other research suggests that spirituality is a strong predictor of Well-being (Cloninger, 2004; Piedmont, 1999). One possibility is that spirituality, in general, is positively related to Well-being and well-being, but that during the college years and for college aged participants, it is more of a hindrance. It is not unlikely that students who have strong levels of faith and/or spirituality find themselves in an uncomfortable situation in college, where they are surrounded and tempted by many vices that are in conflict with their beliefs. Further research, and perhaps a collection of qualitative data, would give clarity to this finding.

Subjective Well-being (SHS), which is a related construct to satisfaction with life, was significantly predicted by five character strengths. It shared in common with life satisfaction a significant and positive relationship with Hope/optimism and Zest/enthusiasm. Hence, participants who were high in Hope/optimism (e.g., expecting the best in the future; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about) or high in Zest/enthusiasm (e.g., approaching life with excitement and energy; living life as an adventure; not doing things half-heartedly) were most likely to report Well-being. Similarly, Well-being had a significant and positive relationship with Humor/playfulness (e.g., liking to laugh and tease; seeing the light side; bringing smiles to other people), and Curiosity/interest (e.g., taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; exploring and discovering). It is also notable that Spirituality demonstrated a negative relationship with Well-being, just as it had a negative relationship with life satisfaction. Again, spirituality may not contribute to Well-being because of the uniqueness of this college sample and the nature of a college environment.

Subjective Well-being was significantly and negatively related to Industry/perseverance (e.g., finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles). In other words, the more one tries, the less likely they are to be happy. This is perplexing, especially considering how hard work usually leads to success and a sense of fulfillment.

Spiritual Quotient, which measures one's level of spiritual intelligence and ability to approach life with vitality, was expected to have the same predictors as Well-being and satisfaction with life, but instead showed just one significant and common association. Spiritual Quotient, like subjective Well-being, was significantly and positively related to the character strength, Curiosity/interest. This finding suggests that above all other character strengths, it is one's curiosity, one's interest in the world and excitement for learning and experiencing new things, that predict's one's Spiritual Quotient. Most striking about the relationship between character and Spiritual quotient is the finding that the character strengths, as a set, were more predictive of Spiritual quotient than any other dependent variable, including satisfaction with life and Well-being. Though Curiosity/interest was its only significant predictor, it is noteworthy that six other character strengths were approaching significance and were at or below a significance level of .01. These character strengths included Perspective, Kindness/ generosity, Citizenship/teamwork, Self-regulation, Modesty/humility, and Forgiveness/mercy.

Physical health, as measured by the SF-36, was not predicted by any character strengths. First, because students are a young lot and a relatively healthy sample, there may not have been enough variability in physical health responses to warrant detection of significant relationships. Future research may contribute to our understanding of this relationship by examining the relationship between the VIA-IS character strengths and physical health in a more diverse population, where there are more health problems. It is also quite possible that character simply is not related to physical health, though this seems unlikely.

Academic achievement was significantly and positively predicted by the character strength, Industry/perseverance (e.g., persistence in a course of action in spite of obstacles). The relationship between Academic achievement and Industry/perseverance is consistent with findings from Duckworth (2003) who studied middle school students. What is surpris-

ing about this analysis is that Hope/optimism did not prove to be a predictor of academic achievement, as Synder (2002) demonstrated when he regressed students' GPA's on their score on the Hope Scale.

Taken together, the most striking finding was the character strengths' relationship to life satisfaction, Well-being and Spiritual quotient. Zest/enthusiasm and Hope/optimism were among the most predictive variables for these measures of well-being. The character strengths had the next highest relationship with academic achievement, with Curiosity/interest, Love of learning, and Industry/perseverance being among the most important predictor variables. It is important to remember that these analyses tell us nothing about the direction of causality. Character may affect well-being, well-being may affect character, or some third factor may influence both. Further research, particularly using a longitudinal or experimental design, would clarify this critical question.

Table 1 -Means, Standard Deviations, and Significant p-Values for Character Strengths by Gender

VIA Character strengths	Males N=78 Mean (SD)	Females N=72 Mean (SD)	t-Value	P- Value
Wisdom and Knowledge				
Curiosity/ Interest	3.85 (0.50)	3.82 (0.52)	0.83	0.403
Love of Planning	3.16 (0.56)	3.24 (0.63)	-1.92	0.088
Judgment/ Critical Thinking	3.80 (0.48)	3.76 (0.47)	1.18	0.39
Creativity/ Originality	3.81 (0.55)	3.49 (0.64)	7.42	0
Perspective	3.79 (0.50)	3.77 (0.51)	0.64	0.521
Courage				
Valor	3.78 (0.53)	3.56 (0.61)	5.38	0
Industry/ Perseverance	3.58 (0.58)	3.52 (0.58)	1.48	0.14
Integrity/ Honesty	3.95 (0.47)	3.98 (0.44)	-1.09	0.275
Zest/ Enthusiasm	3.58 (0.55)	3.58 (0.56)	-0.01	0.994
Love				
Love/ Intimacy	3.91 (0.57)	4.12 (0.54)	-5.39	0
Kindness/ Generosity	3.88 (0.43)	4.14 (0.42)	-7.88	0
Social Intelligence/ Emotional Intelligence	3.92 (0.50)	3.86 (0.51)	1.63	0.094
Justice				
Citizenship/ Teamwork	3.75 (0.49)	3.82 (0.46)	-1.84	0.066
Equity/ Fairness	3.76 (0.55)	3.89 (0.50)	-3.44	0.001
Leadership	3.63 (0.51)	3.75 (0.52)	-3.13	0.002
Temperance				
Forgiveness/ Mercy	3.34 (0.66)	3.57 (0.61)	-4.3	0
Modesty	3.27 (0.53)	3.34 (0.54)	-1.85	0.065
Prudence/ Caution	3.08 (0.64)	3.24 (0.62)	-3.61	0
self- control/ Self- Regulation	3.34 (0.54)	3.19 (0.56)	3.74	0
Transcendence				
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	3.48 (0.69)	3.68 (0.69)	-4	0
Gratitude	3.76 (0.53)	3.95 (0.52)	-5.05	0
Hope/ Optimism	3.74 (0.63)	3.67 (0.60)	1.52	0.129
Playfulness/ Humor	4.08 (0.52)	4.03 (0.52)	1.21	0.229
Sense of Purpose/ Faith/ Religiousness	3.16 (0.89)	3.27 (0.83)	-1.83	0.067

Table 2- Standardized

Character strengths	Satisfaction with life	Subjective Well-being	Spiritual-quotient	Physical Health	Academic Achievement
Wisdom and Knowledge					
Curiosity/ Interest	0.1	0.23	0.33	-.07	-.07
Love of Planning	-.02	-.06	.07	.06	.02
Judgment/ Critical Thinking	-.00	-.01	-.01	-.05	-.08

Creativity/ Originality	-.13	-.13	.08	-.03	.06
Perspective	.04	.01	.1	.05	.1
Courage					
Valor	-.05	-.07	.03	.02	-.18
Industry/ Perseverance	-.05	-.14	.02	.06	.21
Integrity/ Honesty	.02	.03	-.02	.01	.04
Zest/ Enthusiasm	.38	.36	.08	.08	-.11
Love					

Love/ Intimacy	.14	.10	-.02	-.03	.08
Kindness/ Generosity	-.01	.06	.12	.00	-.06
Social Intelligence/ Emotional Intelligence	-.05	-.04	.05	-.03	-.04
Justice					
Citizenship/ Teamwork	-.04	.03	.1	.08	.13
Equity/ Fairness	-.05	-.02	.08	.01	-.04
Leadership	.00	-.08	-.03	-.05	.07
Temperance					
Forgiveness/ Mercy	.04	.10	.08	.11	.10
Modesty	.07	.02	-.09	-.09	-.01
Prudence/ Caution	-.03	-.09	-.06	-.08	.10
self- control/ Self- Regulation	.07	.10	.11	-.07	-.21
Transcendence					
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	-.10	-.04	-.00	.05	.08
Gratitude	.24	.10	-.04	-.08	.03
Hope/ Optimism	.27	.29	-.05	-.07	-.14
Playfulness/ Humor	-.05	.15	.08	-.02	.00
Sense of Purpose/ Faith/ Religiousness	-.14	-.08	-.02	.03	.08
R ²	.43	.56	.60	.04	.25

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