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University Students' Strengths Associated With An Optimal Academic And Professional Performance

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Abstract

At university level, the awareness and the use of personal strengths (defined as forms of behaviour, thoughts and emotions that are associated with optimal performance), can enhance students' learning process, and their future professional performance. However, there is little research on this topic, especially research framed within the social psychology field. The present descriptive study analyzed (a) the students' signature strengths, (b) the signature strengths for an optimal professional performance, and (c) the signature strengths related to the academic performance. Participants were 83 students enrolled in an "Applied Social Psychology" course following an ongoing assessment in the degree of Psychology (University of Barcelona). To assess the students' personal strengths, the "Values in Action" Inventory of Strengths was used (VIA-IS; Seligman, Park & Peterson, 2004). To evaluate the academic performance, a total score was calculated from the weighted average of: (1) a test, (2) two individual works, and (3) teamwork. The strengths needed for an optimal professional performance were discussed until a consensus was reached during a session conducted by the professors. The signature strengths more commonly encountered in the sample were in this order: gratitude, teamwork, fairness, perspective and kindness. The signature strengths related to the professional practice were: curiosity, social intelligence, perspective, hope and self-regulation. Finally, the strengths showing a greater relationship with the academic performance were: perseverance, teamwork, prudence, honesty and self-regulation. Overall, it should be noticed that teamwork was one of the students' signature strengths related to optimal academic performance, and perspective was one of the students' signature strengths related to optimal professional performance. However, the majority of strengths related to academic and professional domains did not coincide. This lack of relationship represents an opportunity to develop learning practices that enhance those participants' signature strengths that are more related to an optimal performance in the professional and academic fields.

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1. Introduction

Strengths have been defined in several ways, such as positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Therefore, they are understood to be natural capacities that we yearn to use, that enable authentic expression, and that energise us (Govindji & Linley, 2007). Within the last years the study of character strengths has increased dramatically because of their clear benefits for health and well-being and because they exist in degrees and can be measured as individual differences. Nevertheless, there is little research on this topic at university level, especially research framed within the social psychology field. Till date, just few studies have shown that character strengths are positively related to the self-reported academic performance of college students (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009). More specifically it has been found that the use of signature strengths (defined as the top 5 ranked VIA character strengths by Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) in novel ways along with personal meaningful goal-setting led to increase student engagement and hope (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011). However, some authors have stated that “other possible areas for future investigation include whether character strengths can predict actual academic performance, based on objective data rather than self-report” (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2009, p. 66).

The present descriptive study pretends to fulfil such gap analyzing (a) the students’ signature strengths, (b) the signature strengths for an optimal professional performance, and (c) the signature strengths related to the academic performance. Therefore, we could stress that one question guided our research. Although part of the definition of character strengths is that they contribute to accomplish achievements in a better way, do some strengths show a stronger link to performance than others?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Participants were 83 undergraduate students (80% females, 20% males), with a mean age of 21.2 years (*SD*: 1.8 years). They were enrolled on an “Applied Social Psychology” course following an on-going assessment in the degree of Psychology at University of Barcelona, Spain.

2.2. Instruments

Character strengths. The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2004) was used to measure character strengths (<http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx>). The VIA has 240 items representing 24 character strengths, distributed between six virtue categories: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity and Love, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence, which are listed in table 1 (for detailed descriptions, see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For this administration of the VIA, each item was answered on a five-point *Likert* scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree with a midpoint of 3 = Neutral/Undecided. Sample items include “I find the world a very interesting place”, which gauges curiosity, and “I always let bygone be bygone”, which gauges forgiveness. The reduced and validated version of the VIA in Spanish was finally used.

Academic performance. Student’s performance was measured by the composition of the different scores obtained in two individual essays, one team project and one multiple choice examination.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in the study within the course and they did not receive any incentive or remuneration. Participants followed the written instructions in the Values in Action (VIA) inventory. Immediately upon completion of the VIA, participants were provided a 5-6 page feedback report summarizing their scores on each dimension and providing in-depth descriptions of the VIA character strengths on which they scored most

highly. In order to agree upon the most relevant strengths for professional performance, students rated individually all 24 strengths. Then, in small groups they achieved consensus regarding the most important ones. Finally, with the whole group, the consensus was achieved again with the support of the professor.

2.4. Data analysis

Once the data was collected, the students' strengths were extracted and ordered from the means of the 24 items included in the questionnaire VIA. The Spearman's correlation of each strength with the academic total score was also examined and the five strengths with higher correlation were selected. In addition, we examined the five strengths related to professional performance according to the students' consensus.

Table 1. VIA Classification of Character Strengths (adapted from Seligman *et al.*, 2005)

<p>Wisdom: Cognitive strengths involving acquisition and use of knowledge. <i>Creativity:</i> Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things. <i>Curiosity:</i> Exploring, discovering, taking an interest in all ongoing experience, <i>Open-mindedness (Judgment):</i> Examining things from all sides, thinking things through. <i>Love of learning:</i> Mastering skills or topics, adding systematically to bodies of knowledge. <i>Perspective:</i> Providing wise counsel to others.</p> <p>Courage: Emotional strengths that exercise the will to accomplish goals in the face of obstacles. <i>Bravery:</i> Acting on convictions without shrinking from threat or difficulty. <i>Persistence:</i> Finishing what gets started, continuing in the face of obstacles. <i>Integrity:</i> Acting according to personal values, taking responsibility for one's self and actions. <i>Vitality:</i> Approaching life with energy and excitement.</p> <p>Humanity: Interpersonal strengths that involves tending and befriending others. <i>Love:</i> Valuing and fostering close reciprocal relationships with others. <i>Kindness:</i> Helping others, doing good deeds and favours. <i>Social Intelligence:</i> Understanding motives and feelings of self and others, fitting in socially.</p> <p>Justice: Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life. <i>Citizenship (Team work):</i> Working well as a member of a group, doing one's share, being loyal. <i>Fairness:</i> Giving everyone a fair chance, treating people equally according to a sense of justice. <i>Leadership:</i> Organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.</p> <p>Temperance: Strengths that protect against excess. <i>Forgiveness and mercy:</i> Forgiving those who have done wrong, giving second chances. <i>Humility and modesty:</i> Letting accomplishments speak for themselves, not seeking limelight. <i>Prudence:</i> Being careful, refraining from saying or doing what would later be regretted. <i>Self-regulation:</i> Being disciplined, controlling appetites and emotions.</p> <p>Transcendence: Strengths of connection to the larger universe that provide meaning. <i>Appreciation of beauty and excellence:</i> Awe for excellence in art, nature, all domains of life. <i>Gratitude:</i> Being thankful for the good things that happen. <i>Hope:</i> Expecting the best and believing one can work to achieve it. <i>Humour:</i> Seeing the light side, bringing smiles and laughter. <i>Spirituality:</i> Having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.</p>
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3. Results

First, focusing on students' strengths, the virtue of justice was the most prevalent with two strengths (teamwork in second position and fairness in third position). However, gratitude that represents transcendence was the strength with the highest mean. The students' signature strengths perspective and kindness (from the virtues wisdom and humanity, respectively) were the less prominent. Second, focusing on the signature strengths related to the academic performance, they were composed mainly by the virtues of courage and temperance. Perseverance and honesty were the first and fourth strengths, and prudence and self-regulation the third and fifth strengths, respectively. And third, the strengths more associated with professional performance came from the virtue of wisdom, with curiosity and perspective in the first and third place respectively. The 'professional' signature strengths were completed with social intelligence (humanity), hope (transcendence) and self-regulation (temperance). Overall, it should be noticed that teamwork was one of the students' signature strengths related to optimal academic performance, and perspective was one of the students' signature strengths related to optimal professional performance. However, it is worth to mention that the signature strengths related to academic and professional domains did not coincide except for self-regulation.

Table 2. Ranking of students' strengths, and strengths related to academic and professional performance

Students' strengths		Strengths related to academic performance		Strengths related to professional performance	
Strengths	Virtue	Strengths	Virtue	Strengths	Virtue
1 Gratitude	Transcendence	Perseverance	Courage	Curiosity	Wisdom
2 Teamwork	Justice	Teamwork	Justice	Social intelligence	Humanity
3 Fairness	Justice	Prudence	Temperance	Perspective	Wisdom
4 Perspective	Justice	Honesty	Courage	Hope	Transcendence
5 Kindness	Wisdom	Self-regulation	Temperance	Self-regulation	Temperance
	Humanity				

4. Discussion

With regard to the students' strengths, the present results are quite similar to the ones obtained by Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2006) who found that the most prevalent character strengths in human beings in descending order are kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude and judgment. Moreover, when focusing on the strengths related to academic performance, Park and Peterson (2009) also found that perseverance predicts academic achievement for university students. Finally, in relation to the professional performance, this study shows similarities to the once conducted by Avey, Luthans, Hannah, Sweetman, and Peterson (2012), who found that the virtue of wisdom was related to higher performance on a creative task and negatively related to stress.

It has been suggested that the VIA could be used as a way to help students identify their signature strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). With this knowledge, students could then begin to capitalize and build upon their signature strengths. In this line of thought, as Govindji and Linley (2007) pointed out, it is more important to use your strengths rather than simply to know what they are. Therefore, future studies should invest in interventions (i.e., strengths coaching) that are designed to help students understand their strengths better, as well as using them more, in order to achieve a range of positive implications. Moreover, since some studies have found gender differences between strengths (Linley *et al.*, 2007), future studies should take such issue into account.

There are many different kinds of activities and interventions that can be developed to increase positive psychological outcomes based on character strengths (Seligman *et al.*, 2005). If, for example, one considers a strategy of identifying students' signature strengths, and developing procedures to increase positive actions and experiences, there should always be several different approaches available for any given student. Moreover, for any individual character strength there should be multiple types of interventions, which increase the opportunities for identifying and tailoring procedures that best fit the student's needs, resources, constraints, and personal preferences.

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