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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

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