



Brief Report

Character strengths and academic performance in law students

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ABSTRACT

We examined law student character and academic performance. Incoming students from Emory University ($N = 132$) and American University ($N = 164$) completed the Values in Action Character Strengths Inventory. Strengths were compared to a sample of U.S. lawyers ($N = 6,219$) and six other samples ($N = 135,814$). Law students demonstrated a normal range of characteristics, similar to other highly educated groups. Top strengths included judgment, curiosity, love of learning, and fairness. Strengths were positively related to undergraduate grades, but negatively related to LSAT scores and law school grades. Findings suggest a selection effect, such that character matters more for entry into law school, at least on one main admission criterion, but matters less for academic success once there.

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1. Introduction

It is commonly assumed that lawyers are pessimistic, unhappy, and more prone to destructive addictions than other occupational groups (Daicoff, 1997; O'Grady, 2006). The roots of the lawyer narrative are old and deep, and the image of the socially maladapted lawyer, at home only when engaged in courtroom confrontation, is well entrenched in the public imagination and scholarly literature (e.g., Shiltz, 1999). A stereotypical image is that these negative tendencies are implanted in law school, where otherwise bright, ambitious, and optimistic college graduates develop a host of psychosocial ills, including high rates of depression and suicidal ideation, alcohol and drug abuse, and disabling stress (Benjamin, Kazniak, Sales, & Shanfield, 1986), even while being successful in their law practice.

Early studies support this view. Law students with a pessimistic explanatory style academically outperformed optimistic students (Satterfield, Monahan, & Seligman, 1997). Seligman, Verkuil, and Kang (2002) claimed that a pervasive negative explanatory style is rewarded in law school and the profession as a whole, and is one of the reasons why lawyers are unhappy. No replications of these studies have occurred. In this paper, we revisit lawyer personalities.

We focus specifically on positive dispositions. The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths (VIA-IS) was

created to measure 24 positive characteristics: appreciation of beauty, authenticity, bravery, creativity, curiosity, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, hope, humor, kindness, leadership, capacity for love, love of learning, modesty, open-mindedness, persistence, perspective, prudence, self-regulation, social intelligence, spirituality, teamwork, and zest (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Of possible traits, these characteristics were selected for the VIA as they were seen as relatively universal, fulfilling to the individual, morally valued by individuals and societies, trait-like, distinctive, and measurable. A person's highest rank-ordered strengths are considered one's signature strengths.

Numerous studies have been conducted on character strengths, finding positive associations with physical, mental, social, occupational, and functional outcomes (c.f. Niemiec, 2013). For example, perseverance, love of learning, humor, fairness, and kindness related to better grades for college students (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009). Law students who purposely used their top strengths reported lower levels of depression and stress and increased life satisfaction (Peterson & Peterson, 2008).

In the current study, we investigated the character strengths of law students. We measured the strengths of the entering classes of two relatively selective law schools and compared their strengths to other samples. As the law school environment is extremely demanding and focuses on objective applications of the law, we expected that these high achieving law students would score higher than non-law samples in terms of conscientiousness-type strengths (e.g., prudence, perseverance, self-regulation), and lower on emotional strengths (e.g., creativity, love, spirituality). We then related the strengths to academic performance. As prior studies

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have found strengths to be positively related to functional outcomes, we expected that law students with the best academic performance would report higher levels of strengths overall, and would be particularly high on conscientiousness strengths, compared to lower achieving students.

2. Method

2.1. Measures

The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) is a 240-item self-reported measure that identifies where a person falls along 24 different strengths (10 items per strength).¹ The measure has shown acceptable reliability and test–retest reliability, with growing support for its validity across diverse samples (Peterson & Park, 2009).

2.2. Participants

2.2.1. Emory University law students

At the beginning of the fall 2010 semester, 132 incoming law students (64 females, 68 males) from Emory University completed the VIA. On average, participants were 26 years old ($SD = 2.61$, range 22–37). Students had an average undergraduate GPA of 3.53 ($SD = .23$, range = 2.53–3.97) and LSAT scores of 165.61 ($SD = 4.13$, range = 150–176). VIA scores (i.e., composite scores for each of the 24 strengths) were compiled and matched to LSAT scores and undergraduate, first, and second year law school GPA.²

2.2.2. American University law students

At the beginning of the fall 2011 semester, 164 incoming law students (101 females, 63 males) from American University completed the VIA. On average, participants were 25 years old ($SD = 4.57$, range = 19–54). VIA scores were compiled and matched to first year law school GPA (first year fall and spring semesters, $n = 153$). Undergraduate GPA, LSAT scores, and second year GPA were unavailable.

2.2.3. Comparison samples

For comparison, we included a sample of U.S. lawyers and six samples of non-lawyers. The U.S. lawyer sample was drawn from the Authentic Happiness website database. Between 2002 and 2012, 11,311 individuals completed the VIA and self-identified as lawyers. Of these, 58% were from the U.S. and 78% indicated having a graduate degree. We limited the sample to 6,219 individuals (2,553 males, 3,666 females) from the U.S. with a graduate degree. Exact age was unavailable, but the majority (61.2%) was between 24 and 44 years old.

Several studies have examined strengths in various samples, and we compiled the means and rank ordered strengths from the tables of these studies, resulting in six additional comparison samples. Matthews, Eid, Kelly, Bailey, and Peterson (2006) compared samples of West Point Cadets ($N = 103$), Norwegian Naval Academy Cadets ($N = 141$), and U.S. civilians ($N = 838$). Linley et al. (2007) examined strengths in 17,056 U.K. respondents. The largest study to date used data from the Authentic Happiness website database

¹ The VIA is freely available with registration from www.viacharacter.org and www.authentic-happiness.org. The law student samples completed the measure through the Authentic Happiness website. There is now a shorter 120-item version, which was unavailable at the time of this study.

² First year fall and spring GPA were available ($n = 132$ and 131 , respectively). For the second year, only full year GPA was available ($n = 123$). Fall, spring, and second year GPA were highly correlated ($r_s = .68$ to $.75$) but separate (i.e., spring GPA does not include fall GPA; second year GPA does not include first year fall or spring GPA).

to examine strengths across the U.S. ($N = 83,576$) and 53 other nations ($N = 34,100$) (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006).

2.3. Data analyses

For the two law schools and the seven comparison samples, we rank ordered the strengths, and calculated an overall mean strengths score. We compared rank orderings, and compared the students with other samples using t -tests. We then correlated the strength scores with first year law school GPA (fall and spring) for students from both schools, and with undergraduate GPA, LSAT scores, and second year GPA for Emory students.

3. Results

3.1. Law student strengths

Table 1 summarizes mean values and rank ordered strengths for the Emory and American law students. On average, strengths were comparable across the two samples (overall mean strengths: $t(294) = 0.76$, $p = .45$). Scores were also similar for specific strengths, except American students were higher in citizenship/teamwork ($t(294) = 2.06$, $p = .04$). For both samples, four of the top five strengths were judgment, curiosity, love of learning, and fairness, and the lowest strengths were spirituality, appreciation of beauty, self-regulation, modesty, and forgiveness. Capacity for love ranked fourth for Emory students, and kindness ranked fourth for American students.

Males and females were similar across the two samples (see Supplemental Table S1). Emory women scored higher than Emory men in appreciation of beauty, capacity for love, and spirituality, and lower in creativity. American women scored higher than American men in curiosity, gratitude, and kindness, and lower in creativity.

3.2. Law students versus other samples

Table 1 also summarizes mean values and rank ordered strengths for the seven comparison samples. For overall mean strengths, U.S. lawyers were slightly lower than American students ($t(6,381) = 2.76$, $p = .006$) and were not significantly different than Emory students ($t(6,349) = 1.52$, $p = .06$). Judgment, curiosity, fairness, and love of learning were among the lawyers' top strengths, and spirituality and modesty were the lawyers' lowest strengths. Students scored higher than lawyers on citizenship/teamwork, hope, humor, perseverance, self-regulation, and zest, and lower in spirituality (see Supplemental Table S1).

For overall mean strengths, law students were significantly higher than the other comparison samples, except West Point Cadets ($t_{\text{Emory-Cadets}(233)} = -3.01$, $p = .003$; $t_{\text{American-Cadets}(265)} = -2.36$, $p = .02$). Across samples, modesty and spirituality were two of the lowest strengths, and self-control was low except in the two military samples. Love of learning, which ranked third for Emory students and fifth for American students, was 21st for Royal Navy Recruits, West Point Cadets, and U.S. civilians, and 15th for the 53 countries. Appreciation of beauty, one of the lowest strengths for law students, was ranked much higher in the general population samples.

3.3. Character strengths and academic performance

The pattern of correlations between strengths and the academic outcomes, separate for men and women, is illustrated in Fig. 1 and full correlations are given in Supplemental Table S2.

Table 1
VIA strength mean values and ranks across samples.

	Emory students		American students		U.S. lawyers		UK sample		Royal naval recruits		West point cadets		U.S. civilians		53 Countries		U.S. general sample	
	#	M	#	M	#	M	#	M	#	M	#	M	#	M	#	M	#	M
Judgment, open-mindedness	1	4.28	1	4.20	1	4.23	1	3.93	10	3.69	9	3.99	5	3.88	5	3.91	1	3.96
Curiosity, interest in the world	2	4.03	2	4.13	2	4.08	3	3.87	2	3.85	5	4.02	6	3.86	8	3.86	2	3.95
Love of learning	3	4.00	5	4.00	3	4.06	4	3.84	21	3.23	21	3.54	21	3.49	15	3.67	4	3.94
Capacity to love and be loved	4	3.97	10	3.91	6	3.88	7	3.70	7	3.76	11	3.97	3	3.98	6	3.87	9	3.78
Fairness, equity, justice	4	3.97	3	4.03	4	3.96	2	3.91	5	3.78	9	3.99	8	3.85	2	3.98	2	3.95
Humor, playfulness	6	3.95	8	3.95	10	3.79	9	3.66	5	3.78	7	4.00	2	4.00	6	3.87	14	3.66
Perspective, wisdom	7	3.93	7	3.97	8	3.87	13	3.62	12	3.66	14	3.93	9	3.82	11	3.74	11	3.73
Kindness, generosity	8	3.92	4	4.02	9	3.86	5	3.82	2	3.85	7	4.00	1	4.06	1	3.99	6	3.84
Gratitude	9	3.91	10	3.91	6	3.88	14	3.57	19	3.43	12	3.95	6	3.86	4	3.94	10	3.74
Honesty, authenticity, genuine	9	3.91	6	3.99	5	3.95	6	3.78	1	3.89	1	4.12	3	3.98	2	3.98	5	3.85
Industry, perseverance	11	3.88	12	3.85	12	3.73	18	3.41	7	3.76	2	4.09	17	3.64	19	3.59	18	3.52
Hope, optimism	12	3.85	12	3.85	19	3.57	20	3.34	4	3.82	3	4.05	12	3.76	18	3.61	18	3.52
Social intelligence	12	3.85	9	3.92	10	3.79	11	3.64	11	3.68	12	3.95	10	3.81	11	3.74	13	3.67
Zest, enthusiasm, energy	14	3.75	16	3.75	21	3.52	19	3.37	14	3.60	19	3.64	18	3.60	21	3.48	20	3.51
Citizenship, teamwork, loyalty	15	3.71	14	3.83	16	3.62	17	3.52	9	3.74	5	4.02	11	3.78	14	3.68	16	3.59
Leadership	15	3.71	14	3.83	14	3.68	10	3.65	16	3.54	16	3.86	13	3.73	13	3.71	12	3.68
Creativity, originality	17	3.69	18	3.65	13	3.72	8	3.69	15	3.56	18	3.77	14	3.70	10	3.75	8	3.79
Caution, prudence, discretion	18	3.68	19	3.59	19	3.57	21	3.30	20	3.31	22	3.52	22	3.40	22	3.47	21	3.43
Bravery, valor	19	3.67	16	3.75	14	3.68	15	3.54	13	3.65	3	4.05	16	3.66	15	3.67	15	3.63
Self-control, self-regulation	20	3.51	22	3.47	22	3.33	23	3.18	16	3.54	17	3.80	24	3.31	24	3.27	23	3.31
Forgiveness, mercy	21	3.48	20	3.52	18	3.58	15	3.54	18	3.52	23	3.45	20	3.50	17	3.65	17	3.58
Appreciation of beauty	22	3.44	21	3.51	17	3.61	11	3.64	23	3.00	24	3.42	15	3.67	9	3.76	7	3.81
Modesty, humility	23	3.23	23	3.24	22	3.33	22	3.23	22	3.20	19	3.64	23	3.34	23	3.46	22	3.32
Spirituality, sense of purpose	24	3.11	24	3.11	24	3.28	24	2.87	24	2.75	15	3.89	19	3.54	20	3.55	24	3.28
<i>N</i>		132		164		6,219		17,056		141		103		838		83,576		34,100
Overall mean strengths score		3.77		3.79		3.73		3.57		3.57		3.86		3.72		3.72		3.67
Standard deviation		0.26		0.27		0.24		0.26		0.29		0.21		0.21		0.19		0.21
Minimum		3.11		3.11		3.28		2.87		2.75		3.42		3.31		3.27		3.28
Maximum		4.28		4.20		4.23		3.93		3.89		4.12		4.06		3.99		3.96

Note. # = rank order from highest to lowest.

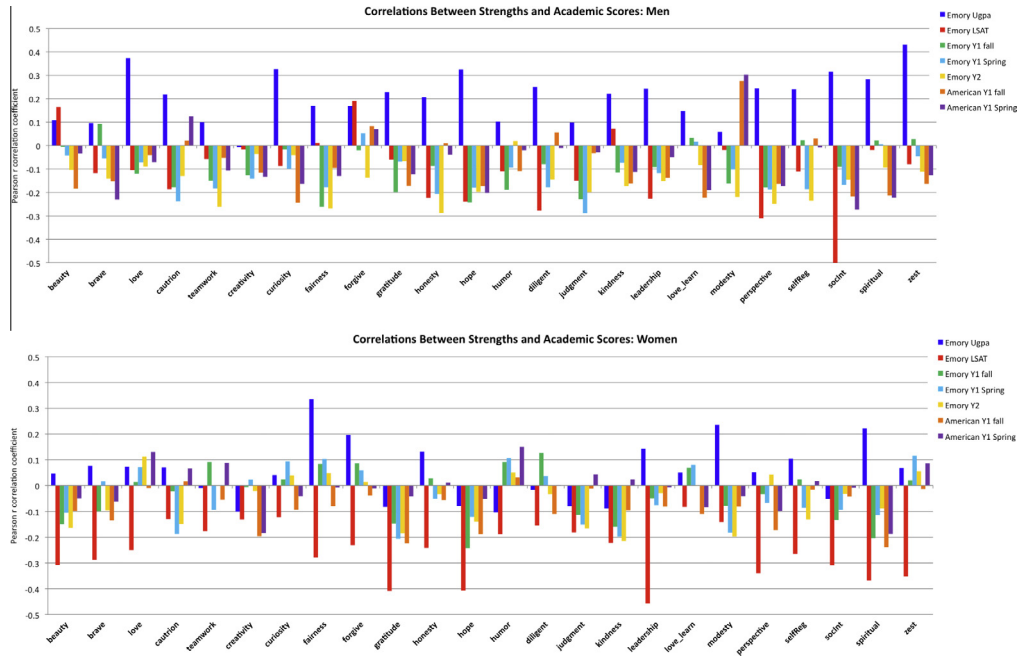


Fig. 1. Correlations (Pearson *r* correlation coefficients) between strengths and academic outcomes for Emory and American students, for men (top) and women (bottom). UGPA = undergraduate GPA, LSAT = LSAT scores, Y1 fall = year 1 fall semester law school GPA, Y1 spring = year 1 spring semester law school GPA, Y2 = year 2 law school GPA.

In the Emory sample, LSAT scores were negatively correlated with undergraduate GPA and positively correlated with law school GPA. Undergraduate GPA was positively correlated with law school GPA for women, but not for men. Only hope, perseverance, perspective, and social intelligence were related (inversely) to LSAT scores for males, whereas many of the strengths were related (inversely) to LSAT scores for females. Conversely, most of the strengths positively related to undergraduate GPA for males, whereas only fairness was related to undergraduate GPA for females. Law school GPA was significantly related (inversely) to citizenship/teamwork, fairness, honesty, hope, and judgment for males. None of the strengths were significantly related to law school GPA for females.

In the American sample, for males, modesty was related to higher GPA and social intelligence was related to lower GPA. For females, gratitude and spirituality were related to lower GPA. Other strengths were not significantly related to GPA.

3.4. Supplemental analysis: strength factors

The individual strengths create 24 different calculations, and several of these could be significant by chance alone. The original theory classified the strengths into six categories (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Various studies have examined the factor structure of the 24 strengths and find three to five factors (c.f. Shryack, Steger, Krueger, & Kallie, 2010). Most recently, using a large (>400,000 persons) U.S. sample, McGrath (2014) found five factors: social, emotional, restraint, theological, and intellectual. From the Big Five personality perspective, the social, restraint, theological, and intellectual factors relatively align with agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and intellect, respectively.

In the Emory and American samples, we calculated the five mean factor scores, and then examined correlations with the academic scores. The factors generally demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha; Emory: social $\alpha = .79$, emotional $\alpha = .68$, restraint $\alpha = .82$, theological $\alpha = .75$, intellectual $\alpha = .65$; American: social $\alpha = .84$, emotional $\alpha = .84$, restraint $\alpha = .86$, theological $\alpha = .80$, intellectual $\alpha = .72$). Results mirrored the individual

strength patterns (see Supplemental Table S3). In the Emory sample, for males, LSAT scores were negatively correlated with the emotional and restraint factors; undergraduate GPA was positively correlated with the emotional, restraint, and theological factors. The restraint factor was negatively correlated with year 1 spring GPA; the social factor was negatively correlated with year 2 GPA. For females, LSAT scores were negatively correlated with the social, emotional, restraint, and theological factors; none of the factors were correlated with undergraduate or law school GPA. In the American sample, none of the strength factors were significantly correlated with law school GPA for either males or females.

4. Discussion

In this study, we examined the character strengths of incoming law students in comparison to lawyers and other groups, and examined associations between strengths and academic performance. Overall, law students demonstrated a normal range of characteristics, similar to other intelligent, highly educated samples. The most dominant strengths for both law students and lawyers included judgment, curiosity, fairness, and love of learning. To the extent that reported character strengths were significantly related to grades, correlations were negative, for both characteristics normally associated with lawyers (critical thinking and persistence) and interpersonal characteristics.

Notably, compared to U.S. lawyers, students self-reported significantly higher levels of zest, hope, perseverance, and self-regulation. The students completed the VIA questionnaire at the beginning of their law school program. It is possible that the enthusiasm associated with the beginning of a new chapter in life influenced their self-reports. Alternatively, supporting the pessimistic view often held of lawyers (e.g., Benjamin et al., 1986), such differences could reflect positive characteristics that are lost through the challenges of law school and law practice. An important question for future research is the extent to which character changes through the course of law school training, and the implication this might have for long term social and emotional well-being.

Although many of the strengths were positively related to undergraduate GPA, they were negatively related to law school

GPA. This could be a case of Berkson's (1946) paradox (see also Srivastava, 2014). Law students are a select group. Most law schools use a combination of undergraduate GPA and LSAT scores for admission decisions. Entrance criteria typically eliminate applicants who have low grades or low LSAT scores. Although in the full population of law school applicants, undergraduate GPA and LSAT scores would be positively correlated with law school performance, within the select sample of those who actually enter law school, the relationship can change. In the Emory sample, LSAT scores and undergraduate GPA were inversely correlated, and LSAT scores were a stronger predictor than undergraduate GPA of law school GPA – as Berkson's paradox would predict. Further, LSAT scores are a better predictor of law school performance (e.g., Stilwell, Dalessandro, & Reese, 2011). It is entirely possible that a sub-group of students within our sample were admitted on the basis of superior undergraduate grades despite relatively weaker LSAT scores, and thus were at a competitive disadvantage during the first year of law school against students who excelled on the LSAT. The same effect may occur for character strengths; although strengths may be positively correlated with academic performance in the larger population (e.g., Lounsbury et al., 2009), the association may be non-existent or reversed in the select law student population, as we see in our results. This would imply that character is an important part of who enters law school, but has less value once there – at least in terms of academic performance.

Alternatively, the law school environment may work against students' character, leading to the psychosocial ills commonly observed. Given that using one's strengths relates to positive outcomes in life and at work (see Niemic, 2013), an important question for future research is the extent to which the structure of law school might prevent the use of character strengths, and the potential implications this may have for student well-being and performance.

We do believe that the two law student samples provide a decent representation of first year law students. While both schools were in the upper half of common ranking systems at the time, neither was so highly ranked as to be a statistical outlier. Like most law schools, the schools rely heavily upon a combination of LSAT scores and undergraduate grades, and have similar first year curriculum and teaching methods. Although the strengths of the correlations differed, the two schools generally showed a similar pattern of correlations for fall and spring GPA. Differences might capture characteristics of the schools themselves, or reflect different demographics of students. Unfortunately, LSAT scores and undergraduate GPA were not available for the American sample, so the full pattern of results could not be replicated.

We acknowledge that character was measured only through the VIA, which may not be the most appropriate vehicle for assessing law student personality. The VIA is a self-report instrument, with all of the limitations inherent to self-report measures. Further, although these results were longitudinal in nature and academic scores were objectively measured, GPA is a limited indicator of success. Additional markers of success, such as job placement, awards, and career success, both in law school and after graduation, may be more informative. There were also no measures of psychosocial function. Research with other personality measures and other modes of assessment will be valuable in the future to delineate true associations between character, psychosocial adjustment, and achievement.

Our study suggests that the supposed presence of a negative "lawyer personality" might be overstated. Law students from two universities reported having a strong sense of character – stronger than people in the general population. Strong character may be helpful for getting into law school – at least on one of the main criterion for admission – but make little difference in academic success once there. However, more studies are needed. There is

relatively little empirical examination of the mental and emotional well-being of law students, but anecdotal and survey evidence of law student psychosocial struggles abounds. The role that character plays in such struggle, and changes that may occur through law school training, are unknown. Given that law school is the gateway to a profession of profound importance in our society, it will be of great social utility to better understand how personality influences both academic and socioemotional trajectories over time.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2014.12.003>.

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