

CHARACTER STRENGTHS, LEARNED OPTIMISM, AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was twofold: First, it explored the predictive relationship of character strength and learned optimism with social competence among university students. Second, it investigated the role of various demographic factors (e.g. gender and income levels) in relation to character strengths, social competence and learned optimism. The sample (N = 300) consisted of university students with age range of 20 to 25 years. The Brief Strength Test (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985), and Social Competence Scale (Shehzad, 2001) were used to measure character strength, learned optimism, and social competence, respectively. Results showed that character strengths and learned optimism predicted social competence. Results also revealed that women exhibited more wisdom, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence as compared to men. Findings further showed that respondents from higher income groups reflected more strength of wisdom, courage, justice, and transcendence as compared to low income group. However non-significant differences were observed along learned optimism and social competence in relation to gender and income levels. Implications of the study were also discussed.

Keywords: Character strengths, Learned optimism, Social competence, University students

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INTRODUCTION

Individual's personality is basically ones inner psychological processes that represent ones character and important aspects of one's nature and are morally valued thereby referring to character strengths (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). These positive essential aspects of our personality are not only related to our innate talents and abilities, strengths of expertise, and strengths of external resources and supports, but also provides pathway for the development of all these sort of strengths as they are important for successful functioning (Peterson & Seligman, 2001; Shoshani & Slone, 2013). These strengths help an individual to live a happy and contended life (Park et al., 2004).

Virtues are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers. The six virtues identified in value in action classification system are wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2001). Strengths in each virtue are similar in that they all engage the core virtue, but also distinct from it (Park, 2004). To be of a good character, person must have to display one or two strengths within virtue group (Carr, 2004). Twenty-four universal character strengths under six broad categories of virtues have been identified by the experts (Snyder & Lopez, 2007); which are 1) wisdom and knowledge including five strengths that is imagination, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective; 2) courage encompassing strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality; 3) humanity including strengths of love, kindness, and social intelligence; 4) justice include citizenship, fairness, and leadership strengths; 5) temperance include strengths of forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation; and 6) transcendence cover strengths of appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor and spirituality.

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004) character strengths contribute to the variety of completions that ensure the good life for the person's oneself and for others; and also enable the person to manage hardships in life. This supports the idea that character strengths lead to the desirable outcomes like social adjustment and competence that help an individual to adjust to the environment successfully. The current study also caters the predictive association between character strength and social competence. Social competence is the ability to understand and manage people and to act wisely in human relations (Law, Wong, & Song, 2004). Social competence is a multifaceted, multidimensional concept consisting of social emotional, cognitive, and

behavioral skills as well as motivational and anticipation sets needed for successful social adaptation (Shehzad, 2001).

The present study also investigated the role of learned optimism in relation to social competence. Seligman (2002) conceptualized optimism as an explanatory style rather than a broad personality trait. Optimism and pessimism are the ways in which people generally explain their life event (Seligman, 2006). Pessimists perceive and explain events as caused by some external factors, temporary in nature and believed that good things are enduring and will soon disappear and it had a specific reasons (Carr, 2004). While, individuals with an optimistic explanatory style probably describe bad events of their lives as a result of some external, temporary, and specific causes, and they make contrary explanation for positive life events (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

Numerous studies have provided evidence on the relationship of character strengths and social competence. For instance, a study found that interpersonal strengths predicted social functioning among adolescents (Baron, 2000; Shoshani & Slone, 2013). Findings also declared that strengths of humanity which include social strengths are positively correlated with interaction in school where as subjective well-being is positively and significantly related with strengths of temperance and transcendence (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). Similarly, Orpinas (2010) concluded that use of character strengths provide support in the attainment of goals and leads to greater need satisfaction which include needs for independence, relationship and competence and well-being. It also appears that well-being that result from goal progress and psychological need fulfillment may act as a cognitive and affective reinforce, which in turn lead to greater goal progress later on in life (Biswas-Diener, Gillett, Linley, & Nielsen, 2010). Later explorations (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011) inferred that the strengths-based coaching program has been associated with significant increases in the students' self-reported levels of engagement and optimism.

There is substantial evidence that optimists use different strategies to cope than do pessimists and these coping differences contribute to the positive association between optimism and better social adjustment. It has been empirically observed that greater optimism is associated with smaller increases in stress and depression and greater increases in perceived social support among college students (Brissette, Carver, & Scheier, 2002). Another empirical investigation (Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1999) undertaken inferred that higher

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optimism levels are related to greater scholastic and social competence and to creativity. Optimism is multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive determination to accomplish personal goals (agency) and the tendency to plan methods of achieving goals (pathway). Findings revealed that scores on agency were significantly positively related to scores on perceived self-worth, perceived job competence, perceived scholastic competence, perceived social acceptance and perceived creativity. In addition, scores on pathways was significantly positively related to perceived job competence, perceived romantic relationships, and perceived creativity (Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1999).

Empirical evidences have also highlighted differences on the major constructs of the study along various demographics such as gender and varying income groups. For instance, Toner, Haslam, Robinson, and Williams (2012) asserted that women reflected better strengths of humanity, transcendence, wisdom, and justice. Similarly, Hool (2011) reported that women scored higher on all the character strengths as compared to men. Brissette, Carver, and Scheier (2002) further inferred that male university students reflected better efficacy, optimism, social competence, and decreased mental distress in comparison to women. However, few studies indicated non-significant gender differences in relation to social competence (Azam, 2006; Shahzad, 2001). On the same grounds, earlier studies (Ayub, 2004; Nazir, 2003) also found non-significant difference between men and women on the construct of optimism. Similarly, Smith, Hall, and Henry (1999) also reported that gender had no significant effect on explanatory style.

Additional evidences revealed significant differences across varying income groups in relation to character strengths. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004) if we compare character strengths with Maslow's hierarchy of need they correspond to need of self-actualization which is present at the top of hierarchy needs and as explained by Maslow an individual find it difficult to reach to self-actualization unless his basic need (like hunger thirst and safety) are not fulfilled (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Similarly, income and monetary standings would play significant contribution in asserting the basic needs and corresponding strengths (Park, 2004). However, other set of studies indicated non-significant differences along different income groups on learned optimism and social competence. For instance, Segerstrom (2007) found that optimism does predict increase in economic resources but economic resources did not affect optimism. Moreover, Shipler (2004) also inferred that no difference existed between different income groups on social competence and concluded

that parent's social adjustment and their cognitive competence can overcome the obstacle of limited resources like money in the development of social competence of children. This means that families with few income resources are able to raise children with high social competence.

To sum up, it is crucial to explore how character strengths and learned optimism would influence social competence in university students. Character strengths is vital for developing personality of young adults and may facilitate to enhance other positive attributes like social competence and learned optimism (Leontopoulou & Triliva, 2012; Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011). It is beneficial to identify the strengths that are responsible for the development of these constructs thereby helping students to work to enhance their required strengths that in turn are likely to improve their social adaptation and positive thinking about the events that happen in their lives. It is also essential to study this construct with reference to university students as they are in preparatory phase to face different challenges and if they would be aware of their strengths they are likely to successfully deal with these challenges by using their character strengths.

Similarly optimistic explanatory style would be facilitative to positively explain one's life events which would enrich their motivation regarding educational performance and afterwards in interpersonal and professional life. Because when they use positive attribution style to explain any academic and interpersonal failure they face, incoming time they will try even harder instead of give up in the face of failure. It is of intense importance to explore this construct among university students as they are in state of transition and are about to enter in their professional lives. It is imperative to develop orientation about social competence among university students which may lead to better academic performance because when they have better social skills they would exhibit healthy social interaction with other fellow students and have a larger friends circle. Positive social interaction at the academic place would help them to enhance academic performance. The competent social skills, not only in academics, but also are very important to be successful in professional life where a person has to interact with individuals from different backgrounds and with diverse interaction styles. So, if a person have good interaction abilities and is able to communicate effectively with others at work place it will add one's positive evaluation because good interaction skills are considered as important part of competent employee's personality.

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Presently, most of the studies have been done in the Western culture, therefore it would be more essential to explore the pattern of these major constructs with reference to Pakistani culture. This aspect of present study would be a major contribution in the existing base of knowledge.

Major objectives of the study are as follow:

1. To determine the predictive role of learned optimism and character strengths in social competence among university students.
2. To investigate the role of various demographic factors (e.g. gender and income levels) in relation to character strengths, social competence and learned optimism.

On the basis of empirical evidences provided by previous researches following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Learned optimism and Character strengths will predict social competence.
2. Men will reflect more social competence and learned optimism as compared to women while women will exhibit more character strengths as compared to men.
3. Respondents from high income groups will reflect more character strengths, learned optimism, and social competence as compared to those belonging to middle and low income groups.

METHOD

Participants

Sample of university students ($N = 300$) was taken from different public ($n = 142$) and private ($n = 158$) universities including Quaid-i-Azam University ($n = 102$) and ARID Agriculture University ($n = 41$) from public sector, whereas Air University ($n = 52$), Bahria University ($n = 67$) and Preston University ($n = 38$) from private sector. Respondents included both men ($n = 144$) and women ($n = 156$) with age range of 20-25 years ($M = 21.55$; $SD = 1.51$) with minimum education of 14 years. Students from different disciplines are included in the sample including engineering ($n = 82$), natural and biological sciences ($n = 64$),

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administrative sciences ($n = 55$) and social sciences ($n = 61$). Some participants did not mention their discipline ($n = 38$). Three income groups were formed on the bases of monthly income that is; income group 1 (Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 30,000) ($n = 40$), income group 2 (Rs. 31,000 to Rs. 70,000) ($n = 100$) and income group 3 (Rs. 71,000 to Rs. 2,50,000) ($n = 91$). Whereas data about the economic information of ($n = 69$) participants was missing. Demographic information of the sample was acquired through demographic sheet attached with questionnaire booklet.

Measures

Brief Strength Test (BST)

The Brief Strengths Test (BST; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) was used to assess character strengths which was derived from the much longer 240-item VIA Signature Strengths Inventory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It consisted of 24 items. The BST was rated on a 5-point rating scale and response options were *never* (1), *rarely* (2), *sometimes* (3), *frequently* (4) and *always* (5). All items were positively phrased. BST consisted of 6 subscales, that is, Wisdom (no. of items = 5; $\alpha = .70$), Courage (no. of items = 4; $\alpha = .75$), Humanity (no. of items = 3; $\alpha = .76$), Justice (no. of items = 3; $\alpha = .71$), Temperance (no. of items = 4; $\alpha = .70$) and Transcendence (no. of items = 5; $\alpha = .75$) which were formed on the basis of broader categories of character strengths called virtues.

Life Orientation Test (LOT)

Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985) was used to measure learned optimism. Life Orientation Test consisted of 8 items along with 4 filler items with equal number of positively and negatively phrased items. It was 5-point rating scale with response options from *strongly disagree* (0) to *strongly agree* (4) with cut off score of 16. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale reported in earlier studies was .82 (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2002); while in present study Cronbach's alpha of .72 was achieved.

Social Competence Scale (SCS)

The Social Competence Scale was developed by Shehzad (2001) and it aimed at evaluation of social, emotional and cognitive skills and behaviors that were needed for successful social adaptation. It consisted of 22 items with five

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items to be negatively scored and to be responded on 5-point rating scale. Response options ranged from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). The Cronbach's alpha of the scale reported in earlier studies was .72 (Shehzad, 2001) whereas Cronbach's alpha of .73 was achieved on the present sample.

Procedure

For the purpose of data collection questionnaires were distributed among the participants in their universities. After taking informed consent from the participants they were asked to give their basic demographics and then instructions were given to them for completing the questionnaires. During collection of data all ethical considerations were followed and they were taken in confidence that the information provided by them will only be used for research purpose and will be kept confidential.

Statistical Analysis

Step-wise Regression analysis was used to explore the predictive role of character strengths and learned optimism for social competence. Independent sample *t*-test was used to find differences on social competence, learned optimism and character strengths across gender. ANOVA was conducted to determine group differences across varying income groups.

RESULTS

Table 1

Step-wise Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Social Competence (N=300)

| Predictors | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | β | <i>R</i> ² | ΔR^2 | <i>F</i> |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|---------|-----------------------|--------------|----------|
| Step I | | | | | | |
| Constant | 68.51 | 3.56 | | | | |
| LO | .58 | .15 | .22*** | .08 | .05 | 13.74*** |
| Step II | | | | | | |
| Constant | 46.81 | 5.00 | | | | |
| LO | .41 | .15 | .16** | | | |
| Subscales of CS | | | | | | |
| Wisdom | .10 | .22 | .03 | | | |
| Courage | .62 | .24 | .17** | | | |
| Humanity | .83 | .28 | .19** | | | |
| Justice | .61 | .30 | .14* | | | |
| Temperance | .28 | .22 | .08 | | | |
| Transcendence | .15 | .21 | .05 | | | |
| | | | | .19 | .15 | 9.23*** |

Note; LO = Learned Optimism; CS = Character Strengths

p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001

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Table 2

Gender Differences on Character Strengths, Learned Optimism, and Social Competence (N=300)

| Measures | Women (n = 156) | Men (n = 144) | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | 95% <i>CI</i> | | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
|-------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------|----------|---------------|-----------|---------------------|
| | <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | | | <i>LL</i> | <i>UL</i> | |
| SC | 81.51 9.15 | 81.50 9.20 | .01 | .98 | -2.06 | 2.10 | .00 |
| LO | 22.77 3.19 | 22.40 3.54 | .91 | .35 | -.42 | 1.15 | .11 |
| CSSubscales | | | | | | | |
| Wisdom | 18.42 2.68 | 17.53 2.99 | 2.70 | .00 | .24 | 1.54 | .42 |
| Courage | 14.61 2.37 | 14.16 2.61 | 1.54 | .12 | -.12 | 1.01 | .18 |
| Humanity | 12.03 1.96 | 11.38 2.18 | 2.68 | .00 | .17 | 1.12 | .40 |
| Justice | 12.58 1.82 | 11.98 2.18 | 2.54 | .01 | .13 | 1.05 | .39 |
| Temp | 14.82 2.42 | 14.17 2.47 | 2.30 | .02 | .09 | 1.21 | .36 |
| Trans | 19.58 2.70 | 18.65 3.10 | 2.75 | .00 | .26 | 1.59 | .38 |

Note; LO = Learned Optimism; SC = Social Competence; CS = Character Strength; Temp = Temperance; Trans= Transcendence.

Table 3

Difference between Different Income Groups on Character Strengths, Learned Optimism, and Social Competence (N=300)

| Variables | Income Group 1 (n = 40) | | Income Group 2 (n = 100) | | Income Group 3 (n = 91) | | F | SE | MD | |
|--------------|----------------------------|------|-----------------------------|------|----------------------------|------|---------|-----|-----|-------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | | i-j | (i-j) |
| SC | 83.86 | 7.86 | 81.46 | 9.61 | 82.64 | 7.92 | .81 | | | |
| LO | 22.47 | 3.54 | 22.53 | 3.04 | 23.15 | 3.46 | .85 | | | |
| CS Subscales | | | | | | | | | | |
| Humanity | 11.10 | 2.41 | 11.82 | 1.94 | 12.02 | 1.94 | 1.72 | | | |
| Temp | 14.74 | 2.49 | 14.67 | 2.54 | 14.65 | 2.07 | .10 | | | |
| Wisdom | 16.63 | 3.49 | 18.06 | 2.40 | 18.15 | 2.83 | 4.39** | .53 | 1<2 | -1.43 |
| | | | | | | | | .54 | 1<3 | -1.52 |
| Courage | 12.94 | 2.44 | 14.81 | 2.27 | 15.00 | 2.53 | 10.4*** | .46 | 1<2 | -1.86 |
| | | | | | | | | .47 | 1<3 | -2.05 |
| Justice | 11.76 | 2.41 | 12.43 | 1.93 | 12.67 | 2.07 | 2.86* | .05 | 1<3 | -.91 |
| Trans | 17.86 | 3.37 | 19.27 | 2.80 | 19.54 | 2.82 | 4.51** | .56 | 1<2 | -1.41 |
| | | | | | | | | .57 | 1<3 | -1.67 |

Note: Income Group 1 = Rs. 10,000-30,000; Income Group 2 = Rs. 31,000-70,000; Income Group 3 = Rs. 71,000-2,50,000; CS = Character Strength; SC = Social Competence; LO = Learned Optimism; Temp = Temperance; Trans = Transcendence; MD = Mean Differences; SE = Standard Error; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

Findings of the present study showed that character strengths are significant predictors of social competence (Table 1). These findings are quite in line with earlier literature, for instance, Leontopoulou and Triliva (2012) found that strength of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice and transcendence positively predicted interpersonal relationships and social competence. In addition, Biswas-

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Diener, Gillett, Linley, and Nielsen (2010) proposed that use of character strengths help in the achievement and satisfaction of need of relationship and social competence. This shows that character strengths are not culturally specific same pattern of character strengths exist in Pakistani society as in western society. Three of the character strengths (Courage, Humanity and Justice) significantly predicted the social competence (Table 1). Shoshani and Slone (2013) provide evidence that strength of humanity was significant predictor of social competence. Moreover, strength of courage predicted development and maintenance of social relationships (Shelp, 1984). In a meta analytic review of studies on organizational justice it was found that interpersonal justice predicts positive social behavior in organization these results supported the finding of present study that Justice predicts the social competence (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001); whereas strength of wisdom, temperance and transcendence were found non-significant predictors of social competence.

Results proved that learned optimism was also a significant predictor of social competence (Table 1). Empirical evidence for this finding was also presented by Brissette, Carver, and Scheier (2002) inferring that change in optimism would cause change in social competence. These findings were further supported by a study according to which higher optimism was related to high social competence (Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1999). Similarly another study also proposed that greater optimism was associated with the development of more extensive and supportive social network (Brissette, Carver, & Scheier, 2002).

Results of the study indicate that women were higher in wisdom, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence than men whereas there was non-significant difference across gender on courage (Table 2). It was reported earlier that female were higher at strengths of humanity, transcendence, wisdom, and justice (Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012). In another study (Hool, 2011), this was proved that there was difference in how the strengths were distributed across gender and it was found that women scored higher on character strengths than that of men; it supported our findings. According to the findings of this study there was no difference between men and women on social competence (Table 2). Women were equally socially competent as that of men. These findings were supported by previous researches. For instance, Orpinas (2010) and Azam (2006) reported non-significant gender differences in relation to social and academic competence.

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As suggested by the results there was non-significant difference between men and women on learned optimism (Table 3) which shows that this variable was neutral for both genders. These findings found reasonable support from prior studies. Such as Brissette, Carver, and Scheier (2002) and Baron (2000) asserted that male and female students reflected similar level of optimism and goal orientation; however, difference lies on the parameter of their cognitive abilities regarding future ambitions. Similarly, Park (2004) also narrated that non-significant gender differences on optimism among college students are contingent upon their attribution styles and internal locus of control. Moreover, Scheier, Carver, and Bridges (2002) concluded that optimism as a trait is more enduring and consistent characteristic of personality rather than being varied on the basis of gender and socioeconomic status.

Results of the present study revealed that there was a significant difference between income group 1 and 2 and income group 1 and 3 on the Character Strengths of Wisdom Courage, Justice and Transcendence. Participants from Income group 1 scored less on these strengths as compared to income group 2 and 3 whereas non-significant difference was found between participants of income group 2 and 3 on character strengths. Non-significant difference was found between the participants from these income groups on the strengths of humanity and temperance (Table 3). These findings can be best explained in the backdrop of Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs (as cited in Biswas-Diener, Gillett, Linley, and Nielsen (2010). According to this theory, the highest need of self-actualization can only be attained by achieving the basic and initial needs of safety, esteem and belongingness. In addition, income and monetary gains are essential requisites in the attainment of primary needs. This would be the reason that character strengths are dependent on the acquisition of basic needs and primary motives.

However, non-significant differences were found between the participants on learned optimism and social competence across different income groups. These findings though are inconsistent to formulated hypothesis however, are consistent to existing studies which demonstrate that participant from different income groups do not differ on learned optimism (e.g., Segerstrom, 2007). Similarly, additional literature (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2002) also offer substantial evidence regarding no difference among income groups in relation to optimism, wellbeing and social competence. It has also been found that parental coaching and cognitive abilities are important predictors of

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developing personal and social competence as well as optimism and attributional styles of explanation among adolescents (Shoshani & Slone, 2013).

Conclusion

Findings of the study helped us to know about particular character strengths and learned optimism that would facilitate in fostering positive constructs like social competence. If we want to enhance social competence of our students this could be possible by enriching the significantly related character strengths through strength coaching programs. In the same way learned optimism can be enhanced through attribution training which will help students to change their pessimistic explanatory style to optimistic explanatory style and this change is important for successful achievement of goals of life even in the presence of obstacles and failures. Character strength coaching and attribution training not only help in the improvement of social skill but will also be helpful in living more happy life by enhancing positive feeling about oneself.

There are some potential limitations inherited in present study. Small sample size in present study might restrict the generalizability of the results. Therefore, it would be encouraged to use larger samples in future studies to enhance the generalizability of results. Secondly, the present study incorporated only specific age group' however, it is important to take cross sectional sample in future studies including adolescents and older adults. This would help to know that at which stage of life training of character strength is possible and effective.

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