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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DOMINANT CHARACTER STRENGTHS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND BUSINESS GRADUATE STUDENTS

BY

ERIKA M. MULHEARN

B.A., Communications, Regis College, 2000

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Counseling

May, 2009

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, and to God. Thank you for your endless encouragement and support. Your love, and His, make everything possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest thanks and appreciation to Dr. Todd DeMitchell, Dr. Janet Thompson, Dr. Joseph Saxe and Dr. Anita Tucker of my thesis committee.

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ABSTRACT

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DOMINANT CHARACTER STRENGTHS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND BUSINESS GRADUATE STUDENTS

By

Erika M. Mulhearn

University of New Hampshire, May, 2009

This exploratory study used the Brief Strengths Survey self-report instrument (Peterson & Park, 2008), based on the Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths (Seligman & Peterson, 2004), to determine the dominant character strengths of graduate mental health and social work students (n = 56) as compared to those of MBA students (n = 65) in order to explore the relationship between personality characteristics and career choice. A gender analysis was conducted in order to determine whether dominant character strengths were also related to gender rather than discipline alone. Mental health students had higher scores on the strengths of Kindness/ Generosity, Playfulness/Humor, Social Skills/Social Intelligence, Appreciation of Beauty/Awe, Religiousness/Spirituality and Love/Attachment, and MBA student had higher scores on Perseverance/Persistence/ Industriousness. Among mental health students, there were no significant differences on dominant character strengths between males and females. On the strengths of Appreciation of Beauty/Awe and Gratitude/Thankfulness, females as a group, regardless of discipline, had higher scores than males of either discipline.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Study

Mental health practitioners dedicate their lives to understanding human behavior and its motivations in efforts to ultimately support their clients to live healthier, more productive lives. Each year, countless clinically-oriented mental health professionals conduct research studies to gain more insight and awareness into the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of the population at large, and to understand more completely the impact of particular experiences on the human psyche. Interestingly, however, very few such studies have focused on the clinicians, themselves. Why do these professionals do what they do? Are they inherently more altruistic in nature than the rest of the population? Or are they, perhaps, fulfilling their own deep-seated and unresolved "need to be needed" by assuming a professional helper role? What are the common denominators among master's level mental health practitioners in the fields of counseling and social work?

Existing research suggests that mental health practitioners are more likely to have encountered some common negative childhood experiences than professionals in other disciplines. In a national study comparing the childhood experiences of 5000 professionals from a variety of fields including accountants, artists, chemists, engineers, mental health professionals, microbiologists and statisticians, Elliot & Guy (1993) discovered higher rates of physical abuse, sexual abuse, parental alcoholism and parental mental illness among mental health professionals. Two more recent studies indicated that

incidents of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and parentification were more prevalent among clinical psychology students than students of other disciplines (Nikcevic, 2007; DiCaccavo, 2002). While adverse childhood experiences appear to be more common among Mental Health professionals… are there other more fundamental commonalties, such as personality?

For decades, researchers have explored the relationship between personality and career choice. Cattell (1949) and Holland (1985) developed two of the most popular personality questionnaires (the 16 PF and Vocational Preference Inventory, respectively) that are still used today to support individuals in identifying careers best suited to their personalities. Much of the existing data, however, are focused on personality traits and self-efficacy in career decisions (Wang, 2006), or on evaluating happiness and fulfillment in a chosen profession (Park, 2004), but not on the possible influence of personality on the decision to pursue one field over another. There is currently little research on the personality characteristics of mental health professionals, or how their personality characteristics compare to professionals from other disciplines. The proposed study aims to address this lack in current research, using a new personality assessment instrument to assess this area.

Growing interest in Positive Psychology over recent years, in conjunction with the contributions of psychologists Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman and Dr. Christopher Peterson of the University of Pennsylvania, resulted in the development of a personality questionnaire, or character strength classification system, known as the Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths. Seligman and Peterson developed a 224-question self-report instrument (2004) designed to measure 24 character strengths they determined to

be integral to each human personality, and categorized them under six virtues (Table 1). In 2008, Peterson collaborated with Dr. Nansook Park to develop a shorter version of this survey, resulting in the 24-question Brief Strengths Survey. While several studies have used both the 224-question VIA Signature Strengths Survey and the 24-question Brief Strengths Survey in their studies to identify character strength patterns related to age, gender and overall psychological wellbeing (Linley, 2006; Park, 2006; Park, 2004), none have used the instruments to explore the relationship between character strengths and career choice, or more specifically, the dominant character strengths among mental health professionals.

Table 1

Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

Virtue	**Character Strength**
Wisdom and Knowledge	Creativity & Ingenuity
	Curiosity & Interest
	Critical Thinking, Open-Mindedness & Good Judgment
	Love of Learning
	Perspective & Wisdom
Courage	Bravery & Courage
	Perseverance, Persistence & Industriousness
	Honesty & Authenticity
	Zest & Enthusiasm
Humanity	Love & Attachment
	Kindness & Generosity
	Social Intelligence & Social Skills
Justice	Teamwork
	Fairness
	Leadership
Temperance	Forgiveness & Mercy
	Modesty & Humility
	Prudence, Discretion & Caution
	Self-Control & Self-Regulation
Transcendence	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence or Awe
	Gratitude & Thankfulness
	Hope & Optimism
	Playfulness & Humor
	Religiousness, Spirituality and Sense of Meaning or Purpose

Adapted from Table 1.1 in Peterson and Seligman (2004), pp. 29-30.

In the current study, the Brief Strengths Survey was administered to graduate students in Mental Health (including: Master in Arts in Counseling (MA), Master in Education in Counseling (M.Ed.) and Master in Social Work (MSW) students) and Master in Business Administration (MBA) students. The aim of this exploratory study was to identify the dominant personality characteristics, or character strengths as designated by Seligman and Peterson, among graduate students pursuing careers in clinical mental health counseling and social work, compared to the predominant personality characteristics of graduate business students. In addition, the influence of

gender was explored to determine whether this independent variable had a relationship in addition to career choice on character strengths. It was hypothesized that mental health students would present higher scores on the character strengths of Love/Attachment, Kindness/Generosity, Social Skills/Social Intelligence, Forgiveness/Mercy, Gratitude /Thankfulness and Hope/Optimism and MBA students would present higher scores in Critical Thinking, Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership and Prudence/Discretion/Caution. Business students were chosen as the comparison sample out of convenience, and because the business world's traditional focus on monetary measures of occupational success (Khurana & Gintis, 2008) versus the emotional and psychological measures of occupational success utilized by clinicians (Hoyt, 2005; Owen, 1993) implies differences in values and career motivation likely to result in contrasting dominant character strengths. Through this contrast, it was believed that insight into the influence of character strengths on career choice would best be achieved.

Specific research questions investigated in the study were:

1. Which character strengths are most dominant among aspiring clinicians as a group?
2. How do the dominant character strengths of mental health students compare to and differ from those of MBA students?
3. Do character strengths vary amongst mental health and MBA students of different genders, or do they remain constant among the group regardless of this variable?

Limitations

The limitations of this study include a reliance on self report, resulting in an undefined level of social desirability bias. There is a small sample size which was not chosen randomly, which limits the generalizability of these findings beyond the groups surveyed. It is unclear if the classes chosen to participate are representative of the larger population of MBA and MH students. In addition, the measure used has not been tested thoroughly for reliability and validity with a student population.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

So often, therapists are asked, "How can you sit and listen to people's problems all day? I'd go crazy!" This sentiment may or may not be representative of the general population's perspective but, nonetheless, evokes the question: What attracts people to the field of mental health? Previous research into this subject has explored the potential influence of family of origin and parenting style on an individual's decision to enter the field of mental health (DiCaccavo, 2002), as well as the prevalence of traumatic and/or abusive childhood experiences among this professional population (Nikcevic, 2007). Other researchers have explored the personality characteristics common to professionals in a particular discipline, including mental health, but the most current measures of personality were not used. For example, in a United Kingdom based study, Manktelow and Lewis (2005) used the Five Factor Model (FFM) to compare the personalities of successful and unsuccessful postgraduate Social Work students. The FFM is a personality test based on the research of psychologists such as Cattell and Eysenck that gained recognition in the 1980's, which categorizes personality into five dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (Ewen, 2003). In 2003, Nole, Michaels and Levas used Cattell's 16PF (an instrument developed in 1949 and last revised in 1993) to explore the personality differences among undergraduate business students specializing in accounting, information management and marketing. This researcher was able to locate only one study focused on Mental Health professionals that

incorporated Seligman's character strengths into its methodology, and in that study, the Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths was not used in its entirety, but instead sampled to target specific hypotheses of the authors (Stahl & Hill, 2008).

Several studies have suggested that some personality traits are more commonly associated with particular career choices. Noel, Michaels & Levas (2003) found that accounting majors were "significantly more reserved, prone to use concrete thinking...restrained, persistent, timid, practical and tense in their personal interactions" (p. 156) than marketing or information management majors, and that marketing students were more "easygoing, creative, enthusiastic, imaginative" and extroverted (p. 156) than their accounting and information management counterparts. Murphy and Halgin (1995) explored the professional motivations of social psychologists as compared to psychotherapists. While they determined that psychotherapists differ in their "desire to help people" versus social psychologists' "desire to change society" (p. 424), this study did not identify any specific personality factors that may have influenced the career choices of these professionals, nor did it clarify the career motivations of the Mental Health professional from any other professional.

Wang, Jome, Haase and Bruch (2006) researched the relationship between personality, career decision-making self-efficacy and career choice commitment using the Five Factor Model. In this study, the authors focused specifically on the traits of neuroticism and extraversion, and were surprised to discover unanticipated racial implications in their results. For white students, levels of neuroticism were not related to career self-efficacy, but for minority students, "the higher their neuroticism, the less efficacious they were for making career decisions and the less progress they made in their

career choice commitment" (p. 327). Regarding the influence of extraversion on career decision making self-efficacy, as was expected, the authors discovered a positive relationship, "such that the more gregarious and energetic students tended to be more self-efficacious in making career decisions" (p. 327). Unfortunately, this study did not identify the specific career pursuits of these students, instead focusing on self-efficacy in relation to career motivation in a more general sense, and as a result, offered no insight into the influence of personality on specific career choices.

In her 2002 study, DiCaccavo compared the experiences of parentification and parental bonding of counseling psychology and art students, hypothesizing that counseling psychology students would report less parental care, more parental control and parentification than their art-oriented counterparts. She also explored the participants "self-efficacy toward helping others" via a questionnaire of the same name, which measured "a person's perceived helping capacities... [and] cognitions about... perceived personal resources and abilities to provide competent assistance to relieve another's suffering" (p. 466-467). The results of the study supported DiCaccavo's original hypothesis; that counseling psychology students perceived themselves to have more competence at helping others than art students. The author, however, also called attention to the fact that prior academic training may have had as much, if not more, to do with counseling psychology students' perception of themselves as helpful than any preexisting personality trait or natural tendency toward helpfulness.

In a similar vein, Stahl and Hill (2008) focused their study on comparing multiple measures of "natural helping ability" among undergraduate psychology students. The authors utilized the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), among other instruments, in

their research, although it is important to note that the measure was not used in its entirety. The researchers selected specific questions from the instrument that they felt were most directly applicable to the scope and purpose of their study. Disappointingly, the specific outcomes of the VIA-IS were not discussed in the results, apparently overshadowed by the more relevant results of specifically focused instruments such as the Natural Helper Measure (NHM). Stahl & Hill did conclude that "people who thought of themselves as having a helpful personality, as using nurturant or engaging helping styles, and as not using avoidant or distancing helping styles, also thought of themselves as natural helpers" (p. 296). The study is interesting in its implications about innate helping abilities, but does little to identify or clarify the personality characteristics related to the pursuit of the helping professions.

Despite its being significantly under-utilized in research related to career choice and motivation, several researchers have incorporated the VIA-IS into their studies, including, of course, the authors themselves. In 2004, Park, Peterson & Seligman used the VIA-IS in conjunction with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) in their research to identify which character strengths are most often affiliated with life satisfaction. Through a sample of over 5000 online participants, the character strengths of hope, zest, gratitude, love and curiosity were determined to be most "substantially related to life satisfaction" (p. 603). Linley (2007) used the VIA-IS in his study to compare the character strengths of 17,000 United Kingdom participants on the basis of age and gender. His research revealed that open-mindedness was consistently the strongest character strength for men ages 18-54, whereas for women in the same age range, the most dominant character strength fluctuated between kindness, open-mindedness and

fairness. However, after the age of 55, the dominant character strength for both genders was curiosity. In his conclusion, the author states, "overall, there were arguably more similarities than differences between genders, so gender differences in character strengths should not be overstated" (p. 349).

There is a considerable amount of research available on the subjects of personality and career choice motivation. Of those studies focused specifically on mental health professionals, many explore the influence of adverse childhood experiences on career choice, while others compare on the dominant personality traits of clinicians in varying specialties in efforts to determine career motivation. Unfortunately, very few of these studies provide insight into the differences between the personality traits of mental health professionals and professionals from other disciplines, and many of the studies do not utilize the most current measures of personality. This study was designed to address these absences in the current literature by comparing the dominant character strengths of mental health and business students using the VIA-IS.

CHAPTER III

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 121 graduate students enrolled at the University of New Hampshire; 56 mental health students comprised of 10 MA in Counseling students, 16 MEd in Counseling students, 30 MSW students and 65 MBA students. There were 45 females and 11 males in the Mental Health sample, with ages ranging from 22 to 55 and a mean age of 26 ($sd = 9.3$). In the MBA sample, there were 23 females and 42 males, with ages ranging from 23 to 53 and a mean age of 32 ($sd = 6.5$). Participation in the survey was voluntary, and the students were not compensated for their participation, either monetarily or with academic credit.

Materials

The instrument used in the study was the Brief Strengths Test, a 24-question self-report survey adapted from the VIA Inventory of Strengths scale with 124 questions (Peterson & Park, 2008) (see Appendix B). The test uses a Likert scale response format with a range of 0-10 (0 = never, 10 = always) to evaluate the frequency with which participants perceive themselves to have exercised individual character strengths within the past four weeks, and is scored at face value. This brief measure correlates moderately with the full scale VIA Inventory of Strengths (*cron. alpha* = .50). To date it has not been tested for construct or criterion related validity. Demographic information was also collected on age, gender and current field of study.

Procedure

Data were collected over the course of multiple weeks beginning in February and ending in April of 2009. This researcher contacted individual professors in the Counseling, Social Work and Business departments via email to inform them about the study, and request permission to attend their classes to distribute the short, self-administered questionnaire. These professors were chosen according to the courses they taught, so as to get a broad representation of the coursework thus allowing a better cross section of students to be surveyed. When survey administration sessions were coordinated, this researcher orally informed students that participation was entirely voluntary, that the study was anonymous and confidential, and that there would be no penalty for not participating. Passive consent was also achieved through a cover letter attached to the front of each survey (Appendix A). Per the verbal instructions given by this researcher at the time of distribution, students placed the completed surveys in a manila envelope provided by this researcher while both the researcher and professors were not in the room, to ensure confidentiality. Students who elected not to participate, or discontinued participation, also returned their surveys to the manila envelope per the researcher's verbal instructions. Surveys took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Comparison by Discipline

In order to get a sense of the differences in character strengths between the mental health (MH) and MBA students, the range of scores were collapsed into gradients of low (0-3), medium (4-7) and high (8-10) and compared by discipline (see Appendix C). Over 83% of MH students scored high on the character strengths of Social Skills/Social Intelligence and Playfulness/Humor versus 61.5% and 63.1% of MBA students, respectively. Nearly 59% of MH students scored high on Appreciation of Beauty/Awe and Zest/Enthusiasm, compared to 41.5% of MBA students, and over 76% of MH students scored high on Perspective/Wisdom versus 61.5% of MBA students. MH students scored 10% higher than MBA students on Critical Thinking/Open-Mindedness/ Good Judgment, Kindness/Generosity, Forgiveness/Mercy, Love/Attachment and Religiousness/Spirituality than MBA students. MBA student scores were distinguished by one notable finding, 13% more MBA students reported high scores on Perseverance/ Persistence/Industriousness than MH students.

Comparisons of the MH and MBA students who reported low levels of character strengths were also interesting. More than 10% of MH students scored low on Bravery/Courage and Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness (compared to less than 5% of MBA students), and nearly 11% of MBA students scored low on Forgiveness/ Mercy (compared to 3.6% of MH students). The character strength with the most scores

in the low category was Religiousness/Spirituality, with 14.3% of MH students and 30.8% of MBA students.

In order to see if these differences described previously were actually statistically significant between groups, independent sample t-tests were run comparing the means of each character strength by discipline (see Figures 1 & 2, Appendix D). Due to the fact that multiple t-tests were run, a Bonferroni correction was applied setting the alpha level at .01 for all statistical analyses. There were six statistically significant differences between the groups. Interestingly, MH students had the higher mean scores on all six character strengths. On Kindness/Generosity ($t = 3.613, p = <.001$) the MH student mean was 8.36 ($sd = 1.1$) compared to an MBA student mean of 7.49 ($sd = 1.4$). The MH student mean was 8.88 ($sd = 1.1$) on Playfulness/Humor ($t = 3.351, p = .001$), versus an MBA student mean of 7.82 ($sd = 2.0$). On the strength of Social Skills/Social Intelligence ($t = 3.458, p = .001$), the MH student mean was 8.57 ($sd = 1.2$) compared to a MBA student mean was 7.63 ($sd = 1.6$). The MH student mean was 7.79 ($sd = 1.5$) on Appreciation of Beauty/Awe ($t = 3.029, p = .003$) versus a MBA student mean of 6.74 ($sd = 2.1$). On Religiousness/Spirituality ($t = 2.449, p = .016$), MH students had a mean of 6.52 ($sd = 2.5$) and the MBA student mean was 5.28 ($sd = 2.9$). On the strength of Love/Attachment ($t = 2.402, p = .018$), the MH student mean was 8.50 ($sd = 1.6$) compared to the MBA students mean of 7.68 ($sd = 2.0$).

The mean score differences between the disciplines were approaching significance on the character strengths of Gratitude/Thankfulness ($t = 1.959, p = .053$), Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness ($t = -1.833, p = .069$), Perspective/Wisdom

($t = 1.815$, $p = .072$) and Forgiveness/Mercy ($t = 1.784$, $p = .077$). MH students had a mean of 8.50 ($sd = 1.5$) on Gratitude/Thankfulness compared to an MBA student mean of 7.92 ($sd = 1.6$). On Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness, MBA students had a mean of 7.65 ($sd = 2.1$) compared to a MH mean of 6.93 ($sd = 2.1$). On Perspective/Wisdom, MH students had a mean of 8.18 ($sd = 1.7$) compared to an MBA mean of 7.60 ($sd = 1.7$). MH students had a higher mean of 7.02 ($sd = 1.7$) on Forgiveness/Mercy and MBA students had a mean of 6.35 ($sd = 2.2$). MH students had higher mean scores on all of these character strengths, with the exception of Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness. All of the character strengths that had at least a 10% difference when compared by percentages proved to be statistically different.

Comparison by Gender

In order to explore if gender is related to dominant character strengths, either exclusive from or in addition to discipline, the original sample ($n = 121$) was broken down into considerably smaller sub-samples of male and female MH and MBA students. It is important to note that there were only 11 MH males which can limit the power of the analysis. If gender does not play a role, there will be no significant differences between genders within disciplines.

Independent sample t-tests were run comparing the means of each character strength by discipline and gender in order to compare differences of statistical significance (see Appendix E). Among MH students, there were no statistically significant differences between the genders, suggesting that dominant character strengths are related to discipline, and not gender. Among MBA students, the only statistically significant difference between the genders was on the character strength of Appreciation

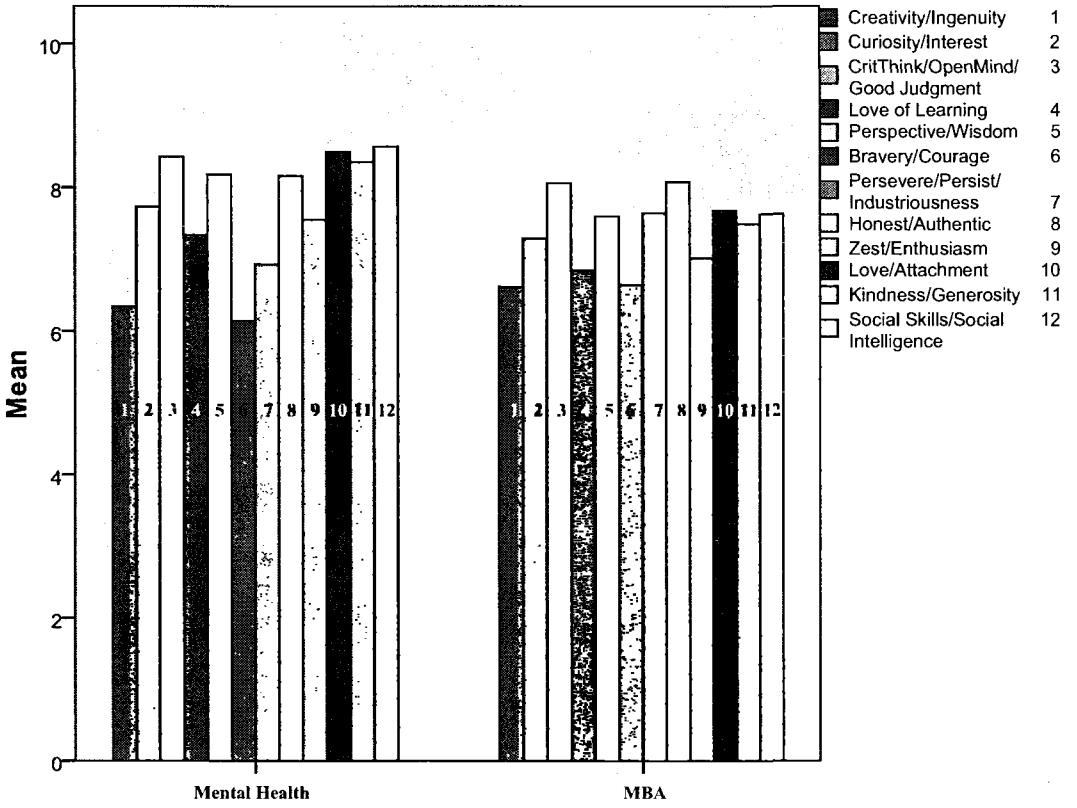
of Beauty/Awe ($t = 2.238, p = .029$). Female MBA students had a higher mean of 7.52 ($sd = 1.9$) than male MBA students ($M = 6.31, sd = 2.2$). On the discipline analysis, Appreciation of Beauty/Awe ($t = 3.029, p = .003$) also had statistical significance, with a higher MH mean of 7.79 compared to an MBA mean of 6.74. However, when analyzed by gender, females as a group (MH $M = 7.87$, MBA $M = 7.52$) had higher mean scores than males as a group (MH $M = 7.45$, MBA $M = 6.31$) on Appreciation of Beauty/Awe. These results suggest that gender may be a stronger factor in the dominance of this strength than discipline.

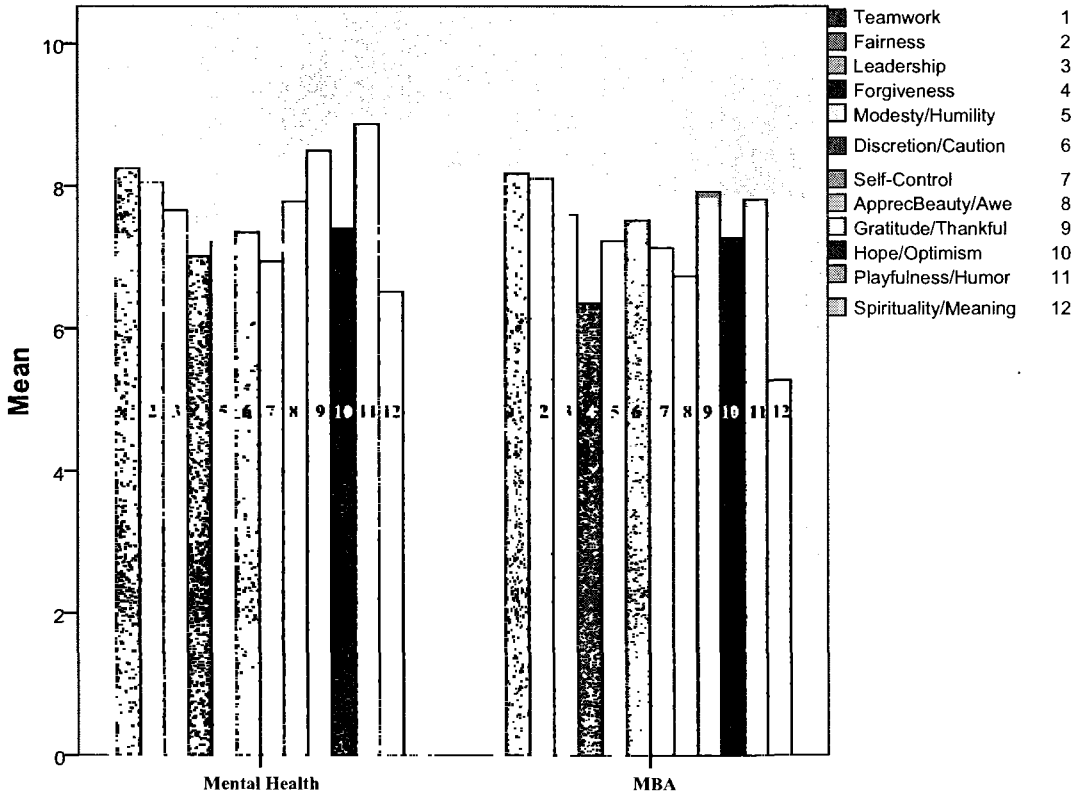
Differences between genders were approaching statistical significance among MBA students in on the strengths of Kindness/Generosity ($t = 1.970, p = .053$), Gratitude/Thankfulness ($t = 1.830, p = .072$) and Perseverance/Persistence/ Industriousness ($t = 1.832, p = .072$). On Kindness/Generosity, female MBA students had a mean of 7.96 ($sd = 1.1$) compared to a male mean of 7.24 ($sd = 1.5$). This strength was also of statistical significance on the discipline analysis ($t = 3.613, p = <.001$), where MH students as a group had a higher mean of 8.36 ($sd = 1.1$) compared to a MBA mean of 7.63 ($sd = 1.6$). While female MBA students scored higher on this strength than male MBA students, female MBA scores were not as high as MH female ($M = 8.42, sd = 1.7$) or male ($M = 8.09, sd = 1.0$) scores. On Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness, female MBA students had a mean score of 8.30 ($sd = 1.5$) compared to a male MBA mean of 7.29 ($sd = 2.4$). MBA students of both genders had higher mean scores on this strength than MH female ($M = 6.92, sd = 2.1$) or male ($M = 6.91, sd = 1.9$) students. Hence, although there were gender differences among male and female MBA students on

Kindness/Generosity and Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness, these finding still suggest that dominant character strengths are more related to discipline than gender.

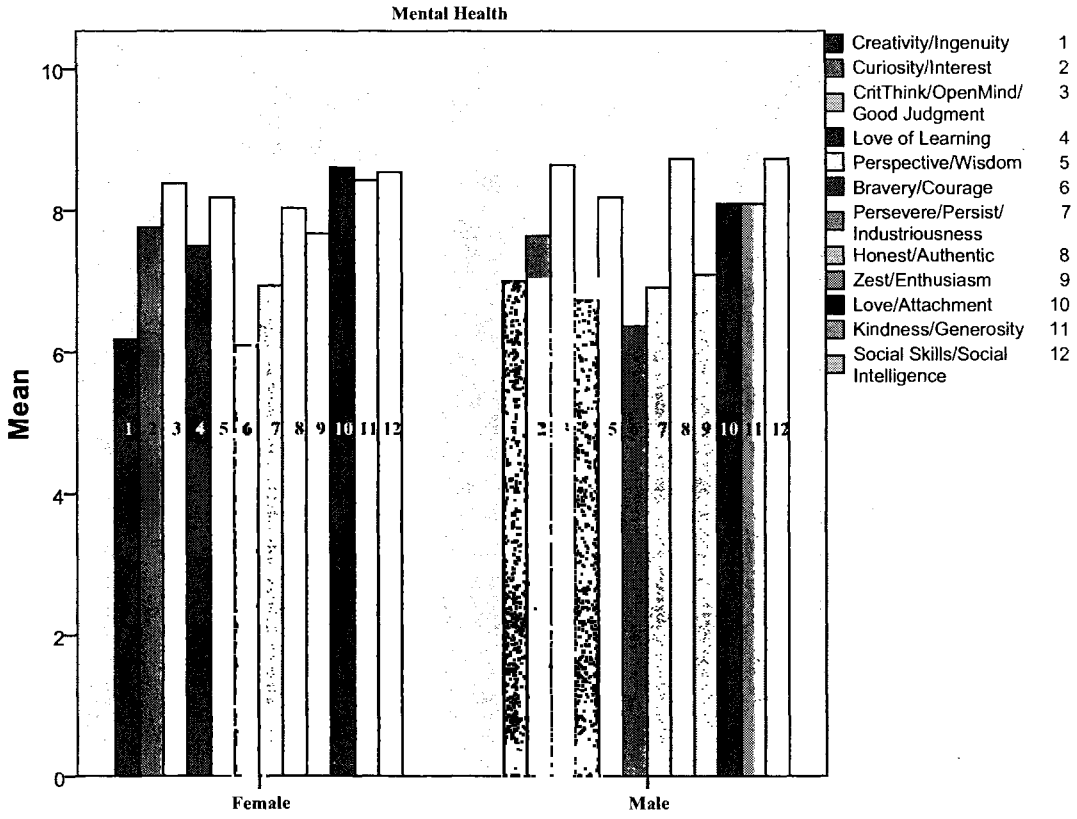
On Gratitude/ Thankfulness, female MBA students had a mean of 8.27 ($sd = 1.3$) compared to a male MBA mean of 7.64 ($sd = 1.8$). This strength was approaching significance on the discipline analysis ($t = 1.959, p = .053$), where MH students had a higher mean of 8.50 ($sd = 1.5$) than MBA students ($M = 7.92, sd = 1.6$). Notably, MH females ($M = 8.56, sd = 1.6$) and MBA females ($M = 8.43, sd = 1.4$) had higher mean scores than males of either discipline (MH $M = 8.27, sd = 1.3$; MBA $M = 7.64, sd = 1.8$), suggesting that dominance of this character strength is more related to gender than discipline.

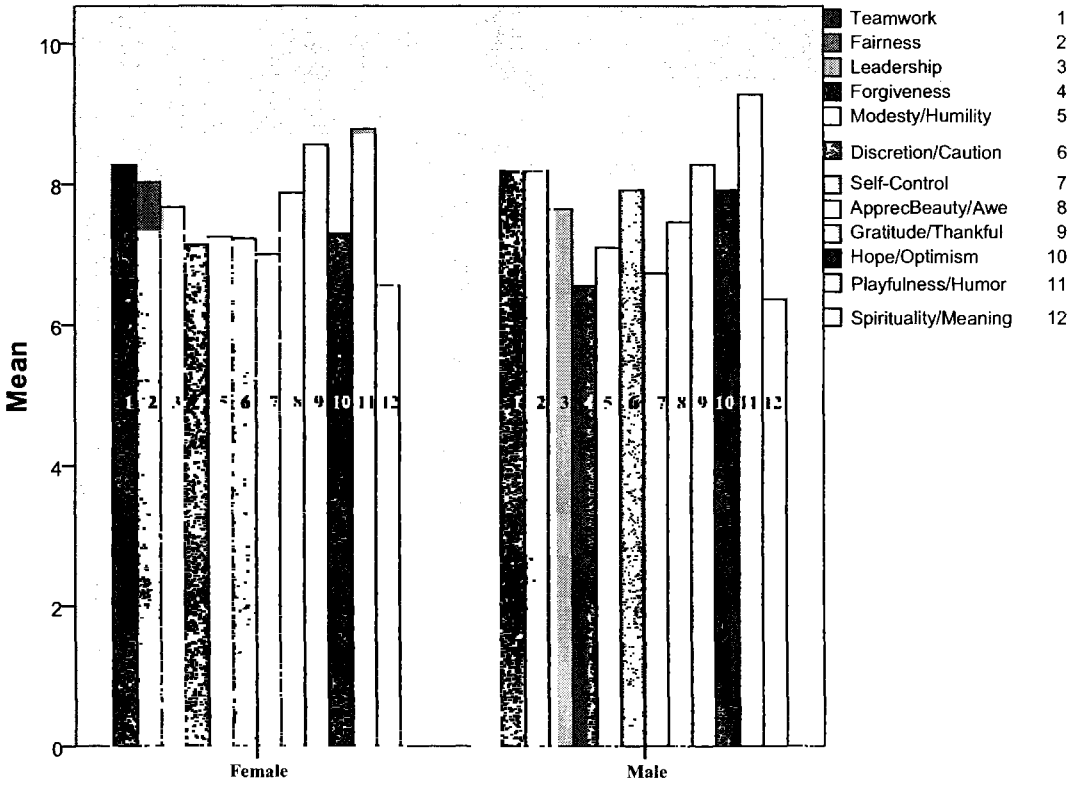
Figures 1 & 2: Character Strength Comparison by Degree



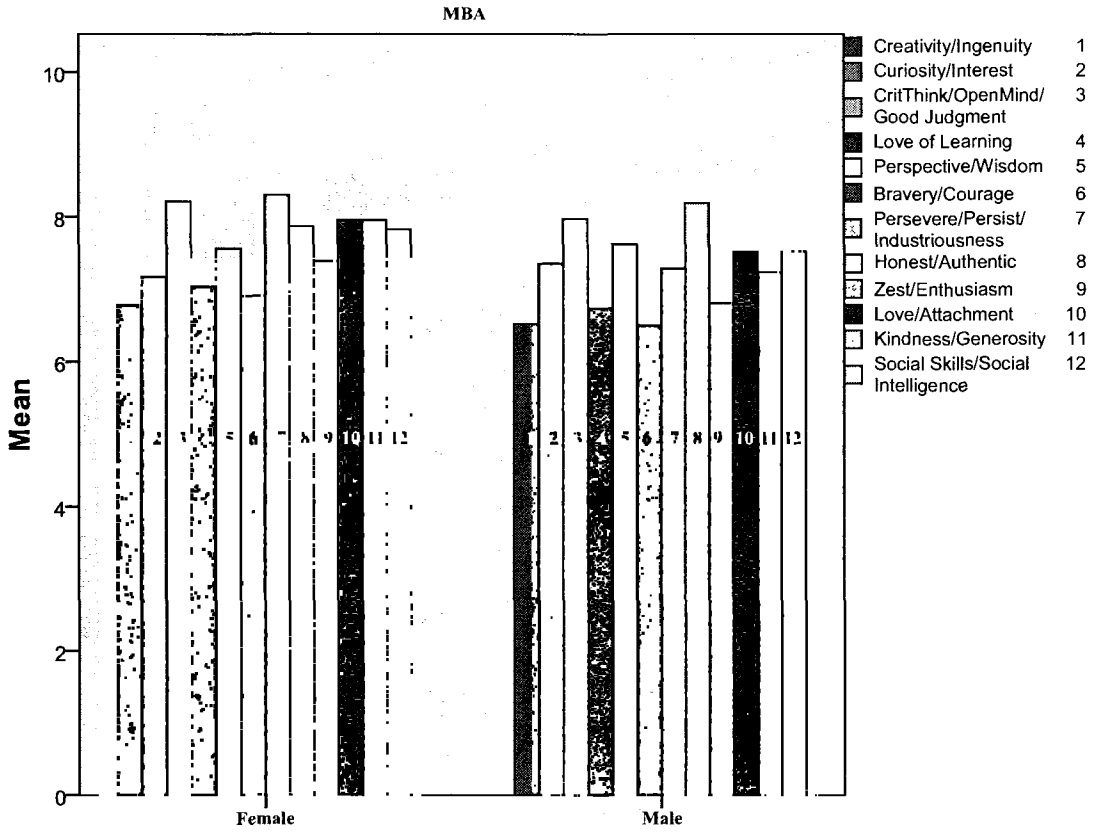


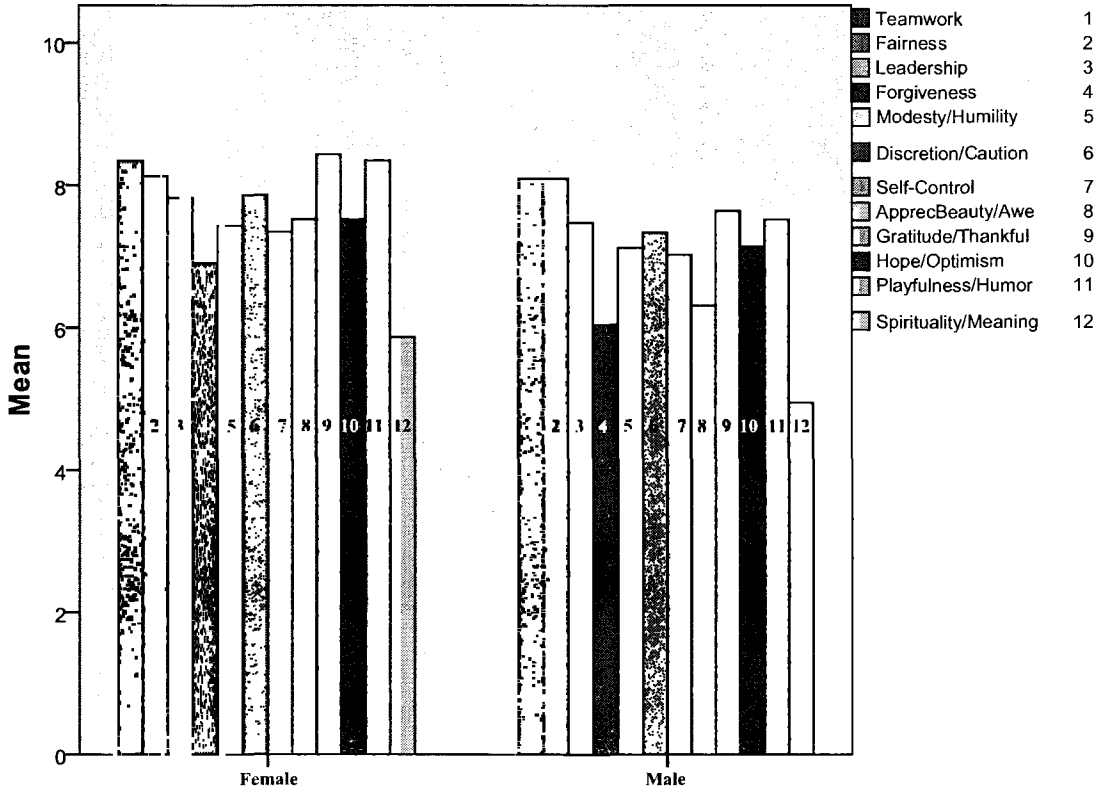
Figures 3 & 4: Character Strength Comparison by Gender - MH





Figures 5 & 6: Character Strength Comparison by Gender - MBA





CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interpretation of Findings

The original intent of this study was to identify the dominant character strengths of graduate mental health students as compared to the dominant character strengths of graduate MBA students, and identify any themes indicative of career motivation for each group. Additionally, the study aimed to assess the influence of gender on dominant character strengths among the groups.

In the discipline analysis, the mean differences on six character strengths showed statistical significance: Kindness/Generosity, Playfulness/Humor, Social Skills/Social Intelligence, Appreciation of Beauty/Awe, Religiousness/Spirituality and Love/ Attachment. MH students had higher mean scores than MBA students on all of these strengths, suggesting that these strengths are more common to MH students than MBA students. It could be inferred that individuals with these dominant character strengths are more likely to enter the field of mental health than the field of business. However, a more in depth study with a larger sample would be required to make this statement with any level of certainty.

The results support the original hypothesis about MH students as a group, with the exception of Forgiveness/Mercy and Hope/Optimism. While MH students did have higher mean scores ($M = 7.02$, $sd = 1.7$) than MBA students ($M = 6.35$, $sd = 2.2$) on Forgiveness/Mercy, the differences were only approaching statistical significance ($t =$

1.784, $p = .077$). Similarly, MH students did have a higher mean on Hope/Optimism than MBA students (MH $M = 7.41$, $sd = 1.6$; MBA $M = 7.28$, $sd = 1.7$), but the results were not of statistical significance ($t = .432$, $p = .666$). As a result, it is unclear if these differences are due more to chance or if there are real differences between the groups.

MBA students had higher mean scores than MH students on the strengths of Prudence/Discretion/Caution and Fairness, which this researcher originally hypothesized to be dominant among this group. However, MBA students also had higher mean scores on Bravery/Courage, Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness, Creativity/Ingenuity, Critical Thinking/Open-Mindedness/Good Judgment, Self-Control/Self-Regulation and Modesty/Humility than MH students, which was not hypothesized at the start of the study. Of these strengths, differences in the mean scores between the MH and MBA students approached statistical significance on only Perseverance/Persistence/ Industriousness ($t = -1.833$, $p = .069$), suggesting this strength to be more dominant to MBA students than MH students. The lack of statistical significance on the other strengths prevents any inferences being made about them.

Gender was included in the analysis in order to assess the possible influence of this variable on dominant character strengths among the disciplines. Among MH students, there were no statistically significant differences between males and females, which strongly suggests that discipline is more related to dominant character strengths than gender. Among MBA students, one mean difference had statistical significance: females had higher mean scores on Appreciation of Beauty/Awe ($t = 2.238$, $p = .029$) than males of their discipline. Notably, when compared to the MH group, female MH and MBA students had higher mean scores than male MH or MBA students on the strength of

Appreciation of Beauty/Awe. This result was echoed on the strength of Gratitude/ Thankfulness, where females, regardless of discipline, had higher mean scores than males of either discipline. These results suggest that, while discipline is related to dominant character strengths more often than gender, gender is related to the dominance of a small, but significant, number of strengths.

In summary, the results of this study strongly suggest that the character strengths of Kindness/Generosity, Playfulness/Humor, Social Skills/Social Intelligence, Appreciation of Beauty/Awe, Religiousness/Spirituality and Love/Attachment are dominant among mental health students, and Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness is more dominant among business students. Additionally, the data supports the posit that dominant character strengths are more related to discipline than gender, though gender is a stronger factor on a few, select strengths.

Recommendations for Future Study

The results of this study provide strong preliminary data about the relationship between character strengths and the mental health professional. In future studies, it is recommended that a larger sample of students is gathered in order to ensure sufficient sub-sample sizes for variable comparisons, and that attention be paid to equal gender representation within the discipline groups. Additionally, it would be interesting to incorporate more discipline comparison groups into the analysis, serving to further clarify the dominant character strengths in mental health professionals.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Student Cover Letter – Informed Consent

Dear Student,

I am a Graduate Student at the University of New Hampshire conducting a study on the relationship between personality characteristics and career choice. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Refusal to participate in this research study will result in no negative consequences for you. If you begin to participate in the research, you may at any time, for any reason, discontinue your participation without penalty.

This survey is anonymous and confidential. You will not be identified individually in any way as a result of your participation in this research. All surveys will be locked in a file until all data are tabulated, and then will be destroyed.

Your completion of the attached survey implies your consent to the above. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact me via email at emulhearn77@yahoo.com. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Julie Simpson in the UNH Office of Sponsored Research at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu to discuss them.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Erika M. Mulhearn
Masters Candidate – Counseling
University of New Hampshire

APPENDIX B

Survey Instrument

Age _____

Gender

☐ Male ☐ Female

What degree are you pursuing? (i.e. MA in English Literature)

_____

Think about how you have acted in the actual situations described below **during the past month (four weeks)**. Please answer only in terms of what YOU actually did. Please read each statement carefully. Write a number between 0 and 10 next to each statement according to how often you acted in the way described.

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10
Never Always

1. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to do something that was novel or innovative. How often did you use CREATIVITY or INGENUITY in these situations? _____

2. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to explore something new or to do something different. How often did you show CURIOSITY or INTEREST in these situations? _____

3. Think of actual situations in which you had a complex and important decision to make. How often did you use CRITICAL THINKING, OPEN-MINDEDNESS, or GOOD JUDGMENT in these situations? _____

4. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to learn more about some topic. How often did you show LOVE OF LEARNING in these situations? _____

5. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to offer advice to another person who needed it. How often did you use PERSPECTIVE or WISDOM in these situations? _____

6. Think of actual situations in which you experienced fear, threat, embarrassment, or discomfort. How often did you use BRAVERY or COURAGE in these situations? _____

7. Think of actual situations in which you faced a difficult and time-consuming task. How often did you use PERSEVERANCE, PERSISTENCE, or INDUSTRIOUSNESS in these situations? _____

8. Think of actual situations in which it was possible for you to lie, cheat or mislead. How often did you show HONESTY or AUTHENTICITY in these situations? _____

9. Think of your everyday life. How often did you feel and show ZEST or ENTHUSIASM when it was possible to do so? _____

10. Think of your everyday life. How often did you express your LOVE or ATTACHMENT to others (friends, family members) and accept LOVE from others when it was possible to do so? _____

11. Think of your everyday life. How often did you show KINDNESS or GENEROSITY to others when it was possible to do so? _____

12. Think of actual situations in which you needed to understand what other people need or want, and how to respond to them accordingly. How often did you use SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE or SOCIAL SKILLS in these situations? _____

13. Think of actual situations in which you were a member of a group that needed your help and loyalty. How often did you show TEAMWORK in these situations? _____

14. Think of actual situations in which you had some power or influence over two or more other people. How often did you use FAIRNESS in these situations? _____

15. Think of actual situations in which you were a member of a group that needed direction. How often did you use LEADERSHIP in these situations? _____

16. Think of actual situations in which someone hurt you. How often did you show FORGIVENESS or MERCY in these situations? _____

17. Think of your everyday life. How often did you show MODESTY or HUMILITY when it was possible to do so? _____

18. Think of actual situations in which you were tempted to do something that you might later regret. How often did you use PRUDENCE, DISCRETION, or CAUTION in these situations? _____

19. Think of actual situations in which you experienced desires, impulses, or emotions that you wished to control. How often did you use SELF-CONTROL or SELF-REGULATION in these situations? _____

20. Think of your everyday life. How often did you feel or show APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY AND EXCELLENCE or AWE when it was possible to do so? _____

21. Think of actual situations in which someone else helped or benefited you. How often did you feel and express GRATITUDE and THANKFULNESS? _____

22. Think of actual situations in which you experienced failure or a setback. How often did you show HOPE or OPTIMISM in these situations? _____

23. Think of your everyday life. How often did you use PLAYFULNESS or HUMOR when it was possible to do so? _____

24. Think of your everyday life. How often did you experience RELIGIOUSNESS, SPIRITUALITY, or SENSE OF MEANING AND PURPOSE when it was possible to do so? _____

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APPENDIX C

Table 2

Descriptives of Character Strengths by Discipline and Level

Character Strength				
		Low (0-3)	Med (4-7)	High (8-10)
Creativity and Ingenuity				
	Mental Health	14.3%	51.8%	33.9%
	MBA	9.2%	50.8%	40.0%
Curiosity and Interest				
	Mental Health	0.0%	41.1%	58.9%
	MBA	6.2%	40.0%	53.8%
Critical Thinking, Open-Mindedness and Good Judgment	Mental Health	0.0%	17.9%	82.1%
	MBA	1.5%	29.2%	69.2%
Love of Learning				
	Mental Health	1.8%	48.2%	50.0%
	MBA	7.7%	49.2%	43.1%
Perspective and Wisdom				
	Mental Health	1.8%	21.4%	76.8%
	MBA	1.5%	36.9%	61.5%
Bravery and Courage				
	Mental Health	10.6%	64.3%	25.0%
	MBA	4.6%	63.1%	32.3%
Perseverance, Persistence and Industriousness	Mental Health	10.7%	41.1%	48.2%
	MBA	4.6%	33.8%	61.5%
Honesty and Authenticity				
	Mental Health	5.4%	19.6%	75.0%
	MBA	3.1%	26.2%	70.8%
Zest and Enthusiasm				
	Mental Health	1.8%	39.3%	58.9%
	MBA	7.7%	50.8%	41.5%
Love and Attachment				
	Mental Health	1.8%	23.2%	75.0%
	MBA	3.1%	32.3%	64.6%
Kindness and Generosity				
	Mental Health	0.0%	30.4%	69.6%
	MBA	1.5%	40.0%	58.5%
Social Intelligence and Social Skills				
	Mental Health	0.0%	16.9%	83.9%
	MBA	1.5%	36.9%	61.5%
Teamwork				
	Mental Health	1.8%	21.4%	76.8%
	MBA	1.5%	26.2%	72.3%

Table 2 (continued)

Character Strength				
		Low (0-3)	Med (4-7)	High (8-10)
Fairness				
	Mental Health	1.8%	26.8%	71.4%
	MBA	4.6%	24.6%	70.8%
Leadership				
	Mental Health	3.6%	37.5%	58.9%
	MBA	4.6%	29.2%	66.2%
Forgiveness and Mercy				
	Mental Health	3.6%	53.6%	42.9%
	MBA	10.8%	56.9%	32.3%
Modesty and Humility				
	Mental Health	3.6%	37.5%	58.9%
	MBA	3.1%	47.7%	49.2%
Prudence, Discretion and Caution				
	Mental Health	5.4%	42.9%	51.8%
	MBA	1.5%	40.0%	58.5%
Self-Control and Self-Regulation				
	Mental Health	8.9%	46.4%	44.6%
	MBA	4.6%	43.1%	52.3%
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence or Awe	Mental Health	0.0%	41.1%	58.9%
	MBA	9.2%	49.2%	41.5%
Gratitude and Thankfulness				
	Mental Health	1.8%	21.4%	76.8%
	MBA	0.0%	30.8%	69.2%
Hope and Optimism				
	Mental Health	3.6%	46.4%	50.0%
	MBA	1.5%	44.6%	53.8%
Playfulness and Humor				
	Mental Health	0.0%	12.5%	87.5%
	MBA	4.6%	32.3%	63.1%
Religiousness, Spirituality and Sense of Meaning or Purpose	Mental Health	14.3%	46.4%	39.3%
	MBA	30.8%	40.0%	29.2%

APPENDIX D

Table 3

Statistical Analysis of Character Strengths by Discipline

Character Strength		Mean	sd	t	p
Creativity and Ingenuity				-.698	.079
	Mental Health	6.34	2.3		
	MBA	6.62	1.9		
Curiosity and Interest				1.325	.039
	Mental Health	7.73	1.4		
	MBA	7.29	2.0		
Critical Thinking, Open-Mindedness				1.437	.167
and Good Judgment	Mental Health	8.43	1.1		
	MBA	8.06	1.6		
Love of Learning				1.371	.937
	Mental Health	7.34	1.8		
	MBA	6.85	2.0		
Perspective and Wisdom				1.815	.330
	Mental Health	8.18	1.7		
	MBA	7.60	1.7		
Bravery and Courage				-1.417	.534
	Mental Health	6.14	2.0		
	MBA	6.65	1.8		
Perseverance, Persistence and				-1.833	.906
Industriousness	Mental Health	6.93	2.1		
	MBA	7.65	2.1		
Honesty and Authenticity				.218	.529
	Mental Health	8.16	2.0		
	MBA	8.08	2.1		
Zest and Enthusiasm				1.537	.357
	Mental Health	7.55	1.7		
	MBA	7.02	2.0		
Love and Attachment				2.402	.108
	Mental Health	8.50	1.6		
	MBA	7.68	2.0		
Kindness and Generosity				3.613	.308
	Mental Health	8.36	1.1		
	MBA	7.49	1.4		
Social Intelligence and Social Skills				3.458	.017
	Mental Health	8.57	1.2		
	MBA	7.63	1.6		
Teamwork				.236	.816
	Mental Health	8.25	1.4		
	MBA	8.18	1.5		

Table 3 (continued)

Character Strength		Mean	sd	t	p
Fairness				-.169	.232
	Mental Health	8.05	1.5		
	MBA	8.11	1.8		
Leadership				.180	.100
	Mental Health	7.66	1.6		
	MBA	7.60	1.9		
Forgiveness and Mercy				1.784	.087
	Mental Health	7.02	1.7		
	MBA	6.35	2.2		
Modesty and Humility				-.050	.306
	Mental Health	7.21	1.6		
	MBA	7.23	1.9		
Prudence, Discretion and Caution				-.502	.740
	Mental Health	7.36	1.8		
	MBA	7.52	1.8		
Self-Control and Self-Regulation				-.507	.786
	Mental Health	6.95	2.1		
	MBA	7.14	2.0		
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence or Awe				3.029	.019
	Mental Health	7.79	1.5		
	MBA	6.74	2.1		
Gratitude and Thankfulness				1.959	.812
	Mental Health	8.50	1.5		
	MBA	7.92	1.6		
Hope and Optimism				.432	.399
	Mental Health	7.41	1.6		
	MBA	7.28	1.7		
Playfulness and Humor				3.351	.000
	Mental Health	8.88	1.1		
	MBA	7.82	2.0		
Religiousness, Spirituality and Sense of Meaning or Purpose				2.449	.115
	Mental Health	6.52	2.5		
	MBA	5.28	2.9		

APPENDIX E

Table 4

Statistical Analysis of Character Strengths by Discipline and Gender

	MH		MBA			
Character Strength	**Mean**	**sd**	**Mean**	**sd**	**t**	**p**
Creativity and Ingenuity						
Females	6.18	2.4	6.78	1.7	-1.074	0.15
Males	7.00	2.2	6.52	2.1	.656	.816
Curiosity and Interest						
Females	7.76	1.5	7.17	1.9	1.339	.249
Males	7.64	1.1	7.36	2.2	.412	.097
Critical Thinking, Open-Mindedness and Good Judgment						
Females	8.38	1.2	8.22	1.2	.529	.671
Males	8.64	.924	7.98	1.8	1.178	.251
Love of Learning						
Females	7.49	1.8	7.04	1.8	.969	.632
Males	6.73	2.1	6.74	2.2	-.015	.887
Perspective and Wisdom						
Females	8.18	1.9	7.57	1.6	1.345	.943
Males	8.18	1.3	7.62	1.8	.951	.097
Bravery and Courage						
Females	6.09	2.1	6.91	1.7	-1.609	.172
Males	6.36	1.5	6.50	1.9	-.211	.433
Perseverance, Persistence and Industriousness Females	6.93	2.1	8.30	1.5	-2.707	.112
Males	6.91	1.9	7.29	2.4	-.478	.311
Honesty and Authenticity						
Females	8.02	2.2	7.87	2.4	.267	.674
Males	8.73	1.2	8.19	2.1	.811	.091
Zest and Enthusiasm						
Females	7.67	1.7	7.39	1.5	.663	.952
Males	7.09	1.8	6.81	2.3	.370	.490
Love and Attachment						
Females	8.60	1.6	7.96	1.9	1.450	.259
Males	8.09	1.8	7.52	2.1	.811	.745
Kindness and Generosity						
Females	8.42	1.7	7.96	1.1	1.574	.213
Males	8.09	1.0	7.24	1.5	1.726	.192
Social Intelligence and Social Skills						
Females	8.53	1.3	7.83	1.6	1.962	.095
Males	8.73	1.0	7.52	1.7	2.203	.128

Table 4 (continued)

	MH		MBA			
Character Strength	**Mean**	**sd**	**Mean**	**sd**	**t**	**p**
Teamwork						
Females	8.27	1.5	8.35	1.0	-.233	.266
Males	8.18	1.4	8.10	1.8	.148	.585
Fairness						
Females	8.02	1.7	8.13	1.7	-.248	.700
Males	8.18	.982	8.10	1.9	.139	.181
Leadership						
Females	7.67	1.8	7.83	1.8	-.349	.663
Males	7.64	1.2	7.48	2.1	.241	.050
Forgiveness and Mercy						
Females	7.13	1.7	6.91	1.7	.495	.548
Males	6.55	1.8	6.05	2.5	.624	.343
Modesty and Humility						
Females	7.24	1.7	7.43	1.3	-.471	.398
Males	7.09	1.3	7.12	2.2	-.040	.205
Prudence, Discretion and Caution						
Females	7.22	1.9	7.87	1.5	-1.457	.409
Males	7.91	1.5	7.33	1.9	.894	.259
Self-Control and Self-Regulation						
Females	7.00	2.0	7.35	1.7	-.696	.736
Males	6.73	2.3	7.02	2.2	-.388	.736
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence or Awe						
Females	7.87	1.5	7.52	1.9	.808	.140
Males	7.45	1.8	6.31	2.2	1.621	.558
Gratitude and Thankfulness						
Females	8.56	1.6	8.43	1.4	.314	.703
Males	8.27	1.3	7.64	1.8	1.078	.404
Hope and Optimism						
Females	7.29	1.6	7.52	1.3	-.589	.509
Males	7.91	1.4	7.14	1.9	1.204	.319
Hope and Optimism						
Females	7.29	1.6	7.52	1.3	-.589	.509
Males	7.91	1.4	7.14	1.9	1.204	.319
Religiousness, Spirituality, Sense of Meaning, Purpose						
Females	6.56	2.4	5.87	2.7	1.069	.881
Males	6.36	3.2	4.95	3.1	1.341	.772

APPENDIX F

University *of* New Hampshire

Research Conduct and Compliance Services, Office of Sponsored Research
Service Building, 51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585
Fax: 603-862-3564

10-Sep-2008

Mulhearn, Erika
Education-Counseling, Morrill Hall
120 Fisherville Rd.
Concord, NH 03303

IRB #: 4367
Study: Character Strengths and Career Choice: A Comparative Study
Approval Date: 03-Sep-2008

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects.* (This document is also available at http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Exempt Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
DeMitchell, Todd