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**Conference Paper**

## Character strengths and social self-efficacy among university students in North Macedonia

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*Suggested Citation:* Korubin Kjorluka, Maja (2020) : Character strengths and social self-efficacy among university students in North Macedonia, University American College Skopje, Skopje, pp. 112-120,  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4393650>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/234164>

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# CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND SOCIAL SELF-EFFICACY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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**ABSTRACT:** Positive psychology is an approach within psychology that takes seriously as a subject matter those things that make life most worth living. It calls for as much focus on strengths, as on weaknesses and as much attention to fulfilling the lives of healthy people, as to healing the wounds of the distressed. This research gives small contribution to the science of human wellbeing and happiness. It investigates the relationship between 24 character strengths and social self-efficacy among university students in North Macedonia. More concretely, the research investigates the relation between three character strengths profiles (strengths of the heart, strengths of the mind and other character strengths) and social self-efficacy. The sample consists of 239 first year university students from six faculties within the St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. The following instruments are used for the research: VIA Inventory of Strengths and Self-Efficacy Scale. Results show that there is positive correlation between character strengths and social self-efficacy, which means that as the character strengths increase, social self-efficacy increases too. The only exception is the strength love of learning. According to the results, there is no statistically significant correlation between this strength and the social self-efficacy.

**KEYWORDS:** *positive psychology, character strengths, VIA Classification of Character Strengths, social self-efficacy.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Positive psychology is aimed towards studying of three mutually connected topics: positive characteristics and qualities (the ability for love, kindness, modesty, forgiveness, gratitude, leadership, wisdom and other), the positive subjective experience (the subjective wellbeing, the quality of life satisfaction, the self-efficacy and other) and positive communities (families, democracy, freedom of speech and else). Still, these three topics are not independent and unrelated between each other. So, the positive communities (the groups and the institutions) influence on the development of the positive social relations, as well as the positive qualities of the individual. The later contribute to the development of the positive subjective experience. Therefore, it could be said that the individual lives a fulfilling life when the three spheres (the positive qualities, the positive subjective experience and the positive communities) are expressed and relatively equalized.

What the subject matter of the positive psychology is, amongst other, the character of the individual. The character is referred to all those aspects of the person which morally assess it. The good character is crucial for the psychological and social wellbeing of the individuals. It is multi-dimensional and it represents a family of positive qualities which are manifested in the thoughts, emotions and behaviour of the individual. Thus, the study of the character strengths of the individual is a key factor to acknowledging the good character.

As opposed to the psychological disorders which are well classified and described, there are very few data for the positive human qualities. The psychologists do not have any great knowledge for how to develop such qualities of the individual. For that purpose, Peterson and Seligman

have developed the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues. The classification is developed analogically on DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) and ICD (Impulse-Control Disorder) representing an attempt for creating counterbalance to what encompasses the psychological disorders. The key contribution of VIA Classification is the fact that it ensures the necessary terminology for the personal qualities of the individual, and by that it provides greater meaning to them and it ensures the proper place in the realms of the psychological science.

According to Park and Peterson, the character strengths are divided into three categories: character strengths of the brain (appreciation of beauty, creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness and love of learning), character strengths of the heart (equality, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, hope, humor, kindness, leadership, love, modesty, persistence, thoughtfulness, spirituality, teamwork and zest) and other character strengths (bravery, perspective and wisdom, self-regulation and social intelligence) (Park & Peterson, 2006; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Park, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2010).

All these strengths are important for the positive uprising and development of the individual, as well as their wellbeing. They help in the decreasing of the negative effects of stress and trauma and prevent the beginning phases of the psychological disorders (Park & Peterson, 2006). Also, they all have influence on the success at school, the leadership, tolerance and valuing differences, the ability to postpone the pleasure, kindness and altruism (Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000). The character is also connected to decreasing of problems such as: drug use, addiction to alcohol, smoking, violent behavior, depression and suicidal behavior (Park, 2004). Therefore, the research of the strengths is of utmost importance

both for the psychological science and the human being.

Another aspect, on behalf of the positive psychology interest, is the self-efficacy of the individual. Bandura defines self-efficacy as a belief in ones' own ability for organizing and conducting activities heading towards realization of the desired goals (according to McKnight, 2011). Self-efficacy represents the trust of the individual in their capability to complete the tasks which they have planned and to deal with the situation no matter what potential burdens or challenges there might be.

Self-efficacy does not represent a skill or ability. It is a belief in ones' own skills and abilities. More precisely, the individual believes that they are able to coordinate and use the skills and abilities that they possess in different situations, so as to fulfill their established goals.

The high self-efficacy has an impact on the daily activities and it influences on the experiencing of all those everyday activities. For ordinary functioning, according to Bandura, it is necessary for the individual to release the daily doubts and reconsiderations, in order to gain greater trust in their own personal capacities.

The self-efficacy influences on the aspect upon which the individual chooses the activities and the situations in their daily life. The individuals avoid those activities and situations in which they feel inefficiently ready and prepared, and choose those activities and situations where they feel adequate and qualified to handle things easily. The social beliefs and stereotypes can strengthen certain beliefs for their own capacities. These common beliefs could influence the belief of the individual in their own abilities, even when there is not safe ground for doing so. There are more fields of self-efficacy that refer to diverse situations in which they are manifested. Such are: social, ac-

ademic, teacher's self-efficacy, the technological self-efficacy and others.

The social self-efficacy is a belief of the individual in their own capability of engaging in tasks that include social interaction, and which are necessary for initiating and maintaining the interpersonal relations (Smith & Betz, 2000). The social self-efficacy is differently defined, described and measured by different researchers. They measure six fields of social self-efficacy: 1. making friends; 2. building romantic relations; 3. social assertiveness; 4. appearance on public events; 5. groups and parties and 6. giving and receiving help. Other researchers, when testing the self-efficacy direct towards the self-confidence that one individual has concerning the social skills in the realms of: personal relations, trust towards friends and trust in friends (Matsushima & Shiomi, 2003). The two groups of researchers claim that the social self-efficacy is highly attached to the feeling of shame and social anxiety.

The current research has the purpose of giving contribution to the first two topics which are of interest for the positive psychology: the positive traits or strengths and the positive subjective experience. The connection between the three categories of the character strengths are to be explored: the character strengths of the brain, the character strengths of the heart and other character strengths of the social self-efficacy. It is assumed that the increase of the character strengths in terms of the three categories increases the degree of the social self-efficacy among students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The sample of this research consists of 239 respondents, students at first academic year, attending some of the six faculties at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje: Faculty of Archi-

ecture, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Science and Mathematics, Faculty of Philology and Faculty of Forest Sciences. The test material for 8 respondents was incomplete.

The above-stated faculties are chosen so as to enable heterogeneity of the sample in terms of the scientific fields, as well as the gender presence. In the sample one faculty is encompassed from each of the six scientific fields, according to the Classification of the scientific fields, areas and disciplines of the research (2001): the field of the scientific and mathematic sciences, the field of the technical and technological sciences, the field of the medical sciences, the field of the biotechnological sciences, the field of the social sciences and the field of the humanitarian sciences.

The research was conducted during the regular hours of lectures. In order to control the relevant variable of age, the sample was taken on students from the same year of studies. All the above-men-

tioned faculties are from Skopje, and according to its size, this sample is considered as big. The instruments used in the research were: VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire (Seligman & Peterson, 2001) and The Self-Efficacy Scale (Sherer & al., 1982).

## RESULTS

The matrix of intercorrelations of the social self-efficacy and the character strengths of the brain (appreciation of beauty, creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness and love of learning) is shown on Table 1. From it, one can see that almost all character strengths of this category positively correlate with the social self-efficacy: curiosity ( $r = 0.29$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), creativity ( $r = 0.23$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), appreciation of beauty ( $r = 0.25$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and open-mindedness ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The only statistically significant correlation that has not been found, is between the character strength love of learning and social self-efficacy ( $r = 0.11$ ;  $p > 0.5$ ).

**Table 1.**  
Correlation results

Table 1. Correlation results	Social self-efficacy	Curiosity	Love of learning	Open-mindedness	Creativity	appreciation of beauty
Social Self-efficacy	1,00	0,29**	0,11	0,15*	0,23**	0,25**
Curiosity	0,29**	1,00	0,58**	0,55**	0,58**	0,56**
Love of learning	0,11	0,58**	1,00	0,55**	0,33**	0,50**
Open-mindedness	0,15*	0,55**	0,55**	1,00	0,56**	0,57**
Creativity	0,23**	0,58**	0,33**	0,56**	1,00	0,46**
appreciation of beauty	0,25**	0,56**	0,50**	0,57**	0,46**	1,00

\*\*Correlation on the level 0.01

\* Correlation on the level 0.05

The intercorrelations between the social self-efficacy and the character strengths of the heart (equality, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, hope, humor, kindness, leadership, love, modesty, persistence, thoughtfulness, spirituality, teamwork and zest) are shown in Table 2.

All the character strengths of the heart are positively connected to the social

self-efficacy. Hence, this states that the increase of: equality, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, hope, humor, kindness, leadership, love, modesty, persistence, thoughtfulness, spirituality, teamwork and zest increase the self-efficacy among respondents.

**Table 2.**

*Corelation between the character strengths of the heart (equality, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, hope, humor, kindness, leadership, love, modesty, persistence, thoughtfulness, spirituality, teamwork and zest) and social self-efficacy*

**Table 3.**

*Corelation between the other character strengths (bravery, perspective and wisdom, self-regulation and social intelligence) and social self-efficacy*

	social self-efficacy	social intelligence	perspective and wisdom	bravery	self-regulation
social self-efficacy	1,00	0,34**	0,34**	0,32**	0,13*
social intelligence	0,34**	1,00	0,62**	0,65**	0,22**
perspective and wisdom	0,34**	0,62**	1,00	0,57**	0,32**
bravery	0,32**	0,65**	0,57**	1,00	0,20**
self-regulation	0,13*	0,22**	0,32**	0,20**	1,00

\*\*Correlation on the level 0.01

\* Correlation on the level 0.05

In Table 3 the intercorrelations between the social self-efficacy and the other character strengths (bravery, perspective and wisdom, self-regulation and so-

cial intelligence) are given. According to the obtained data, the social self-efficacy is positively related with all the character strengths of this category.

	SS	persistence	honesty	kindness	love	teamwork	equality	leadership	thoughtfulness	gratitude	hope	spirituality	modesty	humor	zest	forgiveness
SS	1,00	0,20**	0,22**	0,25**	0,20**	0,25**	0,21**	0,33**	0,16*	0,24**	0,35**	0,25**	0,14*	0,37**	0,31**	0,22**
persistence	0,20**	1,00	0,65**	0,44**	0,16*	0,48**	0,42**	0,62**	0,56**	0,49**	0,59**	0,37**	0,49**	0,37**	0,57**	0,22**
honesty	0,22**	0,65**	1,00	0,68**	0,16*	0,58**	0,51**	0,57	0,58**	0,52**	0,40**	0,45**	0,55**	0,42**	0,34**	0,38**
kindness	0,25**	0,44**	0,68**	1,00	0,40**	0,62**	0,56**	0,57**	0,48**	0,62**	0,30**	0,56**	0,59**	0,53**	0,30**	0,45**
love	0,20**	0,16*	0,16*	0,40**	1,00	0,32**	0,24**	0,28**	0,09	0,32**	0,16*	0,34**	0,13	0,40**	0,28**	0,26**
teamwork	0,25**	0,48**	0,58**	0,62**	0,32**	1,00	0,62**	0,59**	0,60**	0,44**	0,28**	0,32**	0,69**	0,41**	0,38**	0,45**
equality	0,21**	0,42**	0,51**	0,56**	0,24**	0,62**	1,00	0,59**	0,55**	0,53**	0,33**	0,41**	0,58**	0,34**	0,35**	0,62**
leadership	0,33**	0,62**	0,57**	0,57**	0,28**	0,59**	0,59**	1,00	0,49**	0,62**	0,59**	0,52**	0,49**	0,54**	0,50**	0,35**
thoughtfulness	0,16*	0,16*	0,16*	0,48**	0,09	0,60**	0,55**	0,49**	1,00	0,38**	0,30**	0,28**	0,66**	0,24**	0,31**	0,43**
gratitude	0,24**	0,49**	0,52**	0,62**	0,32**	0,44**	0,53**	0,62**	0,38**	1,00	0,45**	0,68**	0,54**	0,50**	0,37**	0,42**
hope	0,35**	0,59**	0,40**	0,30**	0,16*	0,28**	0,33**	0,59**	0,30**	0,45**	1,00	0,41**	0,27**	0,49**	0,63**	0,27**
spirituality	0,25**	0,37**	0,45**	0,56**	0,34**	0,32**	0,41**	0,52**	0,28**	0,68**	0,41**	1,00	0,41**	0,43**	0,35**	0,35**
modesty	0,14*	0,49**	0,55**	0,59**	0,13	0,69**	0,58**	0,49**	0,66**	0,54**	0,27**	0,41**	1,00	0,43**	0,31**	0,51**
humor	0,37**	0,37**	0,42**	0,53**	0,40**	0,41**	0,34**	0,54**	0,24**	0,50**	0,49**	0,43**	0,43**	1,00	0,53**	0,39**
zest	0,31**	0,57**	0,34**	0,30**	0,28**	0,38**	0,35**	0,50**	0,31**	0,37**	0,63**	0,35**	0,31**	0,53**	1,00	0,34**
forgiveness	0,22**	0,22**	0,38**	0,45**	0,26**	0,45**	0,62**	0,35**	0,43**	0,42**	0,27**	0,35**	0,51**	0,39**	0,34**	1,00

\*\*Correlation on the level 0.01

\* Correlation on the level 0.05

## CONCLUSION

According to the obtained data (Table 1), most of the character strengths of the brain (appreciation of beauty, creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness and love of learning) are significant predictors of the belief of the individual in their own ability for engaging in tasks that include social interaction. It means that by the increase of these strengths, the social self-efficacy among these respondents would also increase. An exception is the character strength love of learning, where statistically some particular correlation to the social self-efficacy was not to be found. The love of learning represents gaining new skills and knowledge alongside of all of them, i.e., it is a tendency to upgrade someone's knowledge (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This strength is not most often manifested in relation to the other people, but more in relation to the subject of learning for the individual. Therefore, this is the reason for non-existence of the correlation between this strength and the social self-efficacy.

In the case of the character strengths of the heart (Table 2), the results have shown that the strengths: equality, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, hope, humor, kindness, leadership, love, modesty, persistence, thoughtfulness, spirituality, teamwork and zest are important predictors of the self-efficacy. These findings are no surprise, considering that most of these qualities are related, meaning, they manifest through the relations of the individual with others and are of great importance for establishing good and constructive relations. This means that if the individual is working on increasing such character strengths of the heart, that will positively reflect on the individual's feeling for the ability to deal with different social situations.

The results for the relationship of the other character strengths (bravery, per-

spective and wisdom, self-regulation and social intelligence) and the social self-efficacy (Table 3) have again shown that all the character strengths of this category are positively correlated to the self-efficacy. Similar to the character strengths of the heart, these strengths are as well important predictors in the belief of the individual for the ability to engage in diverse social activities.

From the above-mentioned, it could be concluded that, with the exception of the character strength love of learning, all the other strengths from the VIA Classification of the Character Strengths and Virtues by Peterson and Seligman are statistically crucially related with the social self-efficacy.

However, there are certain defaults in this type of research which use instruments based on the individuals' self-assessment. The reprimands are most often addressed to the instruments, in this case: VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire and The Self-Efficacy Scale, used for measuring the character strengths and the social self-efficacy. The validity of such instruments is hereby brought into question. Are the results under influence of the context in which the answers were given, the specific style of answering or the socially acceptable answers on the respondents' behalf? Anyway, more researches have shown that the influence of the contextual factors and the style of answers on behalf of the respondents are limited, and the instruments based on self-assessment are reliable and valid (Pavot & Diener, 1993; Schimmack, Bockenholt & Reizenzein, 2002; Eid & Diener, 2004; Schimmack & Oishi, 2005).

Another limitation of the research refers to sample of respondents. Namely, the research is conducted on first academic year students who attend on some of the faculties in Macedonia, which decreases the heterogeneity of the sample, as well as the possibility for generalising of the



findings. What could be a subject of future research is to study the connection of the character strengths and social self-efficacy in real context: in concrete working conditions, among respondents who are parents and in other context, out of the student one.

Over and above, a subject of new research could also be the relation between these two phenomena and the discovery of the factors that are related to them.

It is necessary for such research to be checked by other researchers as well,

and to be conducted on other samples, with the purpose of having results which can generalise other segment of respondents. Yet, the researches of the character strengths are only at the beginning. There are many more to come, many which shall give answers on how, by instigating the key strengths, the people will be able to influence on improving their own social self-efficacy, and by doing so, they will optimise more their functioning and living.

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