



Emerging Adult Gender Differences in Character Strengths and Sense of Calling

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Introduction

Emerging adulthood is considered a particularly important period for seeking life roles that provide a sense of purpose or meaningfulness. It is also considered a critical formative period for moral maturity in adulthood, and for personality changes that relate closely to character development (Nofle, 2015). Including a fall 2017 study in PSY 4106 Advanced Research Methods, the current research investigated relationships between and developmental changes in character and calling among SPU psychology students from their early to final years as undergraduates.

Emerging adulthood is characterized by broader and longer formal education, delayed marriage and parenthood, increased opportunities for women, changing dynamics in romantic relationships, instability, and identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; 2012).

Character traits are stable and universal personality characteristics that influence thinking, feeling, willing, and action (Niemic, 2013). Virtues with their associated strengths (e.g., wisdom with creativity and curiosity) are considered positive character traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Calling is described as a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, regarding life roles that are meaningful and other-oriented (Dik & Duffy, 2009). This model posits two overarching and overlapping aspects: presence and search. Research supports calling's association with a variety of positive career-related and general well-being variables (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Dik & Duffy, 2009), especially in college students and working adults (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008; Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Bott, 2012).

Method

Participants. Students were volunteers selected from PSY 1200 Psychology as a Vocation ($n = 176$) and PSY 4899 Senior Seminar in Psychology ($n = 132$) at Seattle Pacific University (SPU); 66 men, 236 women, and 3 gender nonconforming; ages 18 to 35 ($M = 20.7$, $SD = 2.5$).

Materials.

VIA Survey of Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

- Six Virtues: Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence
- 24 Strengths (e.g., Spirituality, Humor, Love of Learning)

Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ; Dik, Eldridge, Steger, & Duffy, 2012)

- Scales: Presence, Search
- Subscales: Transcendent Summons, Purposeful Work, Prosocial Orientation

Procedures. Informed consent materials were explained and signatures collected. Participants then provided demographic data and completed the Calling and Vocation Questionnaire in Qualtrics. Participants were then directed to the VIA Institute on Character website, where they completed the VIA Survey instrument. A debriefing was distributed at the close of the data collection session.

Table 1

Gender Differences in the Presence and Search for a Calling and the Six Character Virtues

Variable	Women		Men		<i>t</i> -Test	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Presence	3.07	0.52	2.92	0.60	-2.01	.04	.27
Search	3.27	0.42	3.03	0.56	-3.19	.00	.48
Wisdom	3.88	0.43	3.80	0.58	-0.89	.37	.17
Courage	3.89	0.40	3.77	0.56	-1.56	.12	.25
Humanity	4.19	0.42	4.02	0.51	-2.54	.01	.36
Justice	4.09	0.47	3.95	0.56	-1.92	.06	.27
Temperance	3.59	0.45	3.50	0.49	-1.35	.18	.19
Transcendence	3.93	0.51	3.77	0.57	-2.02	.04	.30

Major Findings

Gender Differences:

Independent samples *t*-tests for gender differences in the Presence and Search for a calling and the six character virtues found significant differences in Presence, Search, Humanity, and Transcendence (see Table 1).

Relationships Between Gender and Presence:

Mediated by Transcendence (see Figure 1)

- Presence: *estimate* = .17, 95% CI [.02, .33]; 51% of variance explained.

Mediated by Humanity (see Figure 2)

- Presence: *estimate* = .15, 95% CI [.03, .29]; 45% of variance explained.

PSY 4106 Advanced Research Methods (ARM) Hypotheses:

Among a number of hypotheses generated by ARM students:

1. Zest would be negatively correlated with self-regulation.

Results: $n = 275$, $r_{xy} = .42$, $p = .00$, $r^2 = .18$.

2. Teamwork would be positively correlated with forgiveness.

Results: $n = 275$, $r_{xy} = .36$, $p = .00$, $r^2 = .13$.

No findings of note were found from regressing the six character virtues on dependent variables *Presence* and *Search for Calling*.

No interpretable differences were found for age and PSY course variables.

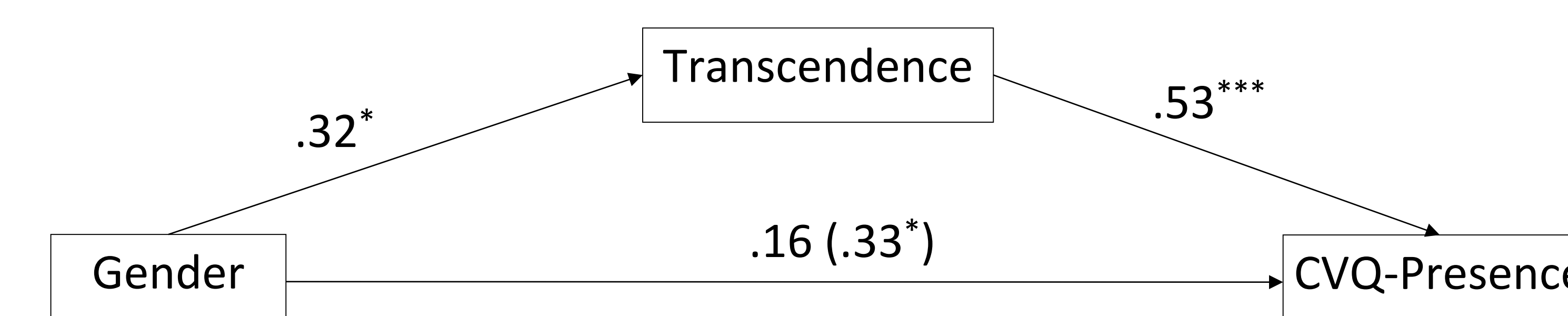


Figure 1. Gender differences in the Presence of a calling mediated by Transcendence. Pathways represent standardized coefficients.

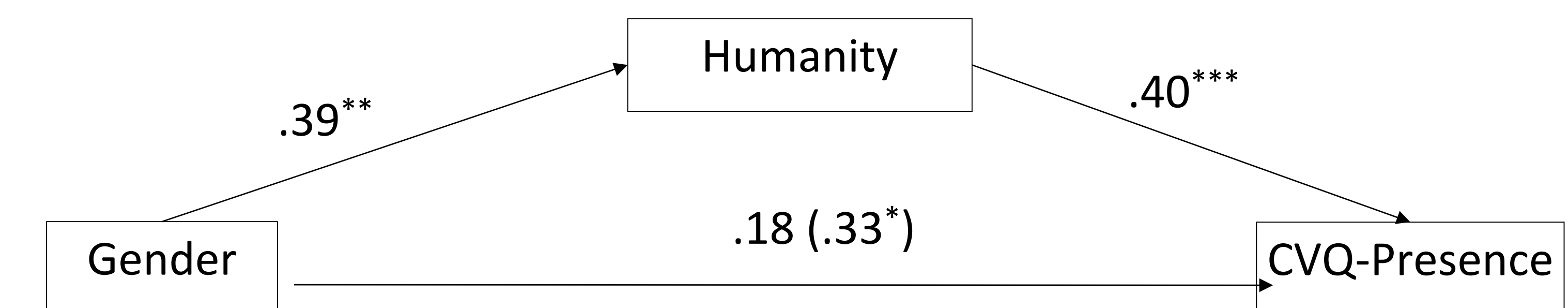


Figure 2. Gender differences in the Presence of a calling mediated by Humanity. Pathways represent standardized coefficients.

Discussion

- There were significant gender differences in both the presence and search for a calling, with women more strongly identifying with both. This confirms the findings of Dik et al. (2012), and is consonant with other research indicating that women and men interpret differently the presence and search dimensions (e.g., Littman-Ovadia, Lazar, & Ovadia, 2015; Phillips, Schreiner, Longman, & Sutton, 2011).
- No clear mediators emerged on the gender difference for CVQ-Search. In contrast, the gender difference for CVQ-Presence was mediated by character virtues *Transcendence* and *Humanity*. When virtues *Transcendence* and *Humanity* were broken down into their constituent strengths, it was clear that the strength *Spirituality* was the strongest discriminator between females and males for virtue *Transcendence* ($t = -2.64$, $p = .01$, $d = .38$) and the strength *Kindness* for virtue *Humanity* ($t = -2.47$, $p = .02$, $d = .38$). These findings are consonant with previous comparative research demonstrating that women within the Christian faith tradition tended to be higher than men in religiosity variables related to practice, belief, and experience (e.g., Schnabel, 2015); and that women are consistently higher than men on the character strength *Kindness* (e.g., Heintz, Kramm, & Ruch, 2017; Shimai et al., 2006).
- Zest and self-regulation were found to be positively correlated, contrary to what was hypothesized. Researchers have found that impulse control may be related to affective forecasting, which is the ability to predict emotional consequences (Patrick & MacInnis, 2006). It may be that individuals who have increased self-regulation scores are able to better forecast the impact of their actions. This would allow them to predict potential emotional outcomes, enabling them to make decisions that result in positive affect. This positive affect may increase the individuals zest scores..
- Higher forgiveness scores were found to be positively correlated with higher teamwork scores, which supported our hypothesis. It is likely that being higher in the forgiveness character strength would allow individuals to work more effectively in a team environment. For example, a study found that if people feel others in their team are providing opposing statements they can start to lose trust, but willingness to forgive counteracts this loss of trust (Shulte, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Kauffeld, 2014). This finding is especially relevant to our population, as most college students are expected to work in teams.
- One goal of this study was to provide developmental data for ongoing program evaluation of the Psychology Department. Unfortunately, we found insufficient discriminability in our age and PSY course data. That is, we could not determine developmental change over the period of the undergraduate years due in part to overlap in ages and insufficient time between the orienting course PSY 1200 and the capstone course PSY 4899.