



# Stability of Moral Traits (Justice and Humanity) in Emerging Adults: A Longitudinal Analysis

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## Introduction

- Emerging adulthood is a developmental time period characterized by identity formation, focus on the self, and wide-ranging opportunities for exploration (Arnett, 2007). It 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 (Noftle, 2015).
- Character traits are stable and universal personality characteristics that influence thinking, feeling, willing, and action (Niemi, 2013). Virtues with their associated strengths (e.g., wisdom with creativity and curiosity) are considered positive character traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
- Characteristics associated with moral traits that develop as an individual moves from adolescence to adulthood include prosocial attitudes and behavior that require helping and perspective-taking (Eisenberg et al., 2005).
- Justice-oriented perspectives and behaviors accompany these increases in prosocial behaviors, and both stabilize in adulthood in conjunction with the maturing of age-related systems in reasoning (Eisenberg et al., 2005).
- Assessments of moral traits in emerging adults indicate relative stability. Likewise, emerging adults view their own moral systems to be consistent over time (Noftle, 2015).
- We hypothesize stability in the VIA character virtues of *Humanity* (i.e., prosocial attitudes and behavior) and *Justice* (i.e., justice-oriented perspectives and behaviors) over the undergraduate years, given the relative stability of moral traits in emerging adults. *Humanity* is a virtue comprised of character strengths kindness, love, and social intelligence; and *Justice* is a virtue comprised of character strengths fairness, leadership and teamwork (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
- In contrast, we hypothesize change in selected VIA character strengths that appear to be relatively independent of moral traits (e.g., curiosity).

## Method

### Participants

Data were collected on a total of 308 undergraduate students enrolled in PSY 1200 Psychology as Vocation and PSY 4899 Senior Seminar in Psychology at Seattle Pacific University over seven consecutive quarters, including the two academic years of 2016-17 and 2017-18, and fall quarter 2018.

Longitudinal data were collected from that subset of students for which complete sets of data were available and matches could be made between VIA character strength data collected in PSY 1200 Psychology as Vocation (Time 1) and PSY 4899 Senior Seminar in Psychology (Time 2). This sample included 17 students: 2 men, 14 women, and 1 gender nonconforming; ages at Time 1 ranged from 18 – 25 ( $M = 20.1$ ,  $SD = 2.4$ ), ages at Time 2 ranged from 19 – 26 ( $M = 21.5$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ).

### Materials

Demographic questionnaire

*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. The present study reports findings from the VIA character strength data only.

## Major Findings

There was no significant difference between Justice at Time 1 and Time 2, which was congruent with our hypothesis (see Table 1).

There was no significant difference between Humanity at Time 1 and Time 2, which was also congruent with our hypothesis (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Justice and Humanity Differences Across Time 1 and Time 2*

Variable	$t_{correl}$	$df$	$p$ value	Cohen's $d$
Justice Time 1 and Justice Time 2	1.08	16	.29	.19
Humanity Time 1 and Humanity Time 2	-0.86	16	.40	.13

Noftle's (2015) research found a significant change in the six character strengths: curiosity, fairness, creativity, judgement, leadership, and perseverance. Our study did not find significant change across any of these domains; see Table 2 for differences in these selected character strengths.

**Table 2**

*Selected Character Strength Differences Across Time Point 1 and Time Point 2*

Variable	$t_{correl}$	$df$	$p$ value
Curiosity	-1.21	16	.24
Fairness	0.87	16	.39
Creativity	0.83	16	.42
Judgement	-1.14	16	.27
Leadership	0.11	16	.91
Perseverance	-1.07	16	.29

Justice at Time 1 was not a significant predictor of Humanity at Time 2. In contrast, Humanity at Time 1 was a significant predictor of Justice at Time 2; however, this relationship was in the negative direction (See Table 3)

**Table 3**

*Time 1 Predictors of Justice at Time 2*

Variable	$\beta$	$t$	$p$ value
Justice Time 1	.99	5.31	.000
Humanity Time 1	-.42	-2.45	.04

## Discussion

Any discussion of these findings must begin by acknowledging the homogeneity of our sample and the very small sample size with the commensurate low statistical power. Given the many hundreds of students in our complete sample, extracting only 17 matching pairs on the VIA character strengths survey at Times 1 and 2 was a disappointment. This reflected the complexity of the data collection process and consequent student confusion. (For example, students responded to the CVQ "locally" in Qualtrics, but they were required to go online to access the VIA through a website that used a separate system of identification and required an additional permission for its data to be used in research.)

Recognizing the limitations above, our findings did support the stability of character virtues ("moral traits" ala Noftle, 2015) *Humanity* and *Justice* in our sample of emerging adults. Contradictory to our expectations and Noftle's (2015) findings, the present study showed no significant change in character strengths of curiosity, fairness, creativity, judgement, leadership, or perseverance. These findings may reflect trait stability and/or the lack of clear time separation between the Time 1 and Time 2, particularly in our earlier samples. For example, Psychology as Vocation was not yet a prerequisite for applying to the Psychology major in 2016-17. Consequently, some students took both Psychology as Vocation and Senior Seminar in their senior year.

One particularly interesting finding was *Humanity* at Time 1 negatively predicting *Justice* at Time 2. Humanity is a virtue comprised of character strengths kindness, love, and social intelligence, while Justice is a virtue comprised of character strengths fairness, leadership and teamwork (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Justice may have been "incarnated" in our sample legalistically; that is, as impartiality (fairness), authority (leadership), and conformity (teamwork). If so, then the negative relationship with kindness, love, and social intelligence makes sense. This is consonant with Lederach's (2014, p. 90) description of the "dance" between truth, mercy, justice, and peace in reconciliation processes.