

MYTHS IN THE ACADEME – PRE-ENROLLMENT PROFILES AND ACADEMIC EDUCATION AS KEY TO POST-GRADUATION EMPLOYMENT AND SATISFACTION

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Abstract

Academic education is considered a key to gaining employment and satisfaction. This scientific research attempts to explain the association between the demographic and pre-enrollment profiles of graduates of one academic institution, and their retrospectively reported satisfaction with their academic studies, and with their career. The study, based on a case study of the Ariel University Center of Samaria, Israel, integrates Holland's classic congruence theory and Seligman's innovative theory of positive psychology, specifically the hypothesis concerning everyday deployment of individual character strengths. Findings of the study demonstrate that deployment of character strengths was a significant predictor of graduates' work satisfaction. The interesting finding in this exploratory study is the failure of graduates' pre-enrollment admission profiles to distinguish among graduates based on their post-graduate employment status or job satisfaction. This finding is especially interesting and scientifically significant in the context of the accepted myth in the academe, according to which admission profiles are key predictors of future success.

Key words: *higher education, academic access, employment, satisfaction.*

Introduction: The Global Revolution in Higher Education

Until the end of WWII, higher education reflected the existing social order (Habighurst, 1989; Morrison, 1998) and functioned as a hothouse for cultivating members of the elite class. Since the since half of the 20th century, higher education expanded (OECD, 2003) and its target audience completely transformed, which fueled debates on the topic of “higher education for the masses,” or the “massification of higher education” (Trow, 1974). The expansion of higher education since the end of WWII has incited heated arguments on its social implications. At one extreme are advocates of the diversity approach, representing the functionalist stream, while at the opposite side are advocates of the stratification approach, representing the conflict stream. The first approach views the extension of higher education to the masses as a development that contributes to increased social equality, while according to the second stream the expansion of higher education creates a hierarchy of institutions that deliver different levels of education, corresponding to the existing class order: the center remains a center while the periphery remains a periphery (Archer et al, 2003; Dougherty, 1994). Furthermore, it is argued that inequality in higher education was perpetuated by the credential inflation produced by the expanding system of higher education (Collins, 1979; Dore, 1976), as a result of which individuals are now required to present academic credentials even for jobs that did not effectively demand academic qualifications, while competition ensued over more highly considered degrees from

prestigious institutions (Bills, 2004; van de Werfhorst and Andersen, 2005).

In Israel, the number of students has increased enormously since the establishment of the State in 1948, when 1,600 students attended the country's two institutions of higher education – the Hebrew University and the Technion. In 1990, the country had 76,000 students (Soen, 2004). While the country's population increased five-fold in this period, the population of undergraduate students in Israel increased forty-fold (Hershkovitz, 1997).

Until the 1980s, over 90% of Israel's undergraduate students attended one of the country's six universities (Shavit, Bolotin-Chachashvili, Ayalon, and Menachem, 2003). In the 1990s, the Law of Higher Education was amended and the Commission of Higher Education certified a long line of colleges to award academic degrees. The decision was accompanied by the explanation that the higher education system would comprise two strata: the first stratum would include universities, which would engage in research and award advanced degrees, and the second stratum would include colleges, which would focus on undergraduates studies and function as a means to achieve social equality and justice through access to higher education for students in peripheral regions. The amendment to the Higher Education Law caused a dramatic and rapid change in the map of higher education in Israel.

The CHE viewed the academic colleges as a tool to achieve social equality and justice (Svirsky, 1990; Svirsky and Svirsky, 1997), by opening the doors of higher education to students in peripheral regions and providing access to new population segments to whom such educational opportunities were not previously available, and indeed, the number of rejected admission requests declined from 30%-34% in the 1990s to a mere 19% in 2000 (Kimmerling, 2000). Statistics show that the proportion of students in colleges compare to the total number of students in academic institutions is steadily rising (CBS, 2004; Zadok, 1996) and today over one-half of all students in academic institutions are enrolled in colleges rather than universities.

It is also possible to infer the colleges' role as a tool for equality from the relatively high of college students who are from towns classified in the bottom SES clusters. While only 31.8% of all 2005 high school graduates in towns classified in SES clusters 1 and 2 (lowest clusters) pursued academic education within eight years, 73.6% of all high school graduates in SES clusters 9 and 10 did so. Furthermore, 38.1% of all high school graduates in cluster 1 and 2 who pursued a post-secondary education, did so at a college, compared to 27.0% who did so at a university. In the top SES clusters, the situation is different. Of all high school graduates in clusters 9 and 10, 50.3% continued to universities while only 27.4% continued to colleges (CBS, 2004).

Research Focus: Holland's P-E Fit Theory and Seligman's Positive Psychology

Holland (1985) introduced a model of occupations emphasizing the fit between the individual and the environment. In this model, which contains six categories that describe various personalities and work environments, work satisfaction, perseverance, and success are dependent on the fit between an individual's personality and his or her work environment. The tools relevant for applications involving this typology include the Dictionary of Holland's Occupational Codes (DHOC) (Holland, 1997). Holland defined six types of individuals (RIASEC – realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional). Congruence is the degree of fit between an individual's RIASEC profile and the RIASEC profile of his work environment. Numerous studies have focused on the association between congruence and work satisfaction, work stress, psychological adjustments, and self-image. A longitudinal study conducted at the University of Maryland in 1989, on a sample of 774 graduates, examined the association between congruence and work performance. The study found a weak yet statistically significant link between congruence and performance among graduates employed in business administration and technologies, but not among graduates employed in administrative jobs (Meir,

Melamed, and Sinur, 1995). More recently, an association was found between congruence and performance of administrative and senior personnel in the military (Tziner, Meir, and Segal, 2002).

Seligman (2002) introduced a model of human happiness comprised of two key elements: enjoyment and satisfaction. Enjoyment is a short-term phenomenon, involving little reasoning, has features of addiction, and therefore increasing quantities are needed over time, as its effect fades over time. Satisfaction is a more sophisticated phenomenon that includes reasoning and analysis and tends to survive over time and therefore increasing quantities are not necessarily required. Seligman also argues that enjoyment is related to the senses and emotions, while satisfaction is related to the deployment of signature character strengths and human virtues. Seligman claims that individuals currently seek more enjoyment than satisfaction, because the effect is immediate and the required effort is limited. Nonetheless, increasing enjoyment and an absence of satisfaction increases the tendency toward a sense of emptiness and depression. The remedy to depression, according to Seligman, is to identify character strengths and derive satisfaction from their deployment. In their book, "Character Strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), whose title is itself a challenge to the DSM Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Peterson and Seligman claim that work satisfaction is not a function of wages but of the ability to use character strengths and exhibit an optimistic outlook.

Problem of Research

There is broad agreement that higher education is a key resource in the acquisition of socio-economic status in modern, industrial, and post-industrial societies. Studies indicate a growing gap between income of college and university graduates and income of high school graduates (Fenwick, 2005). US college and university graduates' incomes were 48% and 100% higher than incomes of high school graduates in 1979 and 2000, respectively. Studies in Israel point to a similar trend: wages of individuals with 16 years of education or over were 171% higher than the average national wage in 1995–1997, while wages of individuals with 8 years of education dropped to 59% of the national average wage in 1997. The academic credentials awarded by academic institutions, rather than the education per se, account for most of the difference in earnings. US Census Survey data from 2000 show that twenty of the top-earning occupations demanded an academic degree (Fenwick, 2005). Students' decisions to pursue education after high school are a function of diverse factors, the most important of which is high school achievements (Baker, and Valez, 1996; Cairns, Cairns, and Neckerman, 1989; Finn and Rock, 1997; McDonough, 1997; McNeal, 1995), but include career aspirations and cognitive abilities (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000), gender (Green, 2003; Hess-Biber, 1985; Jacobs, 1995, 1999; Percell, Ctasambis, and Cookson, 1992; Swewll, Hauser, and Wolf, 1980; Street, Kimmel, and Kromley, 1996) and the family's SES (parents' education, occupation, and income) (Andres and Grayson, 2003; Astone, Constance, Nathenson, and Young, 1999; Hansen, 1997; Hossler, Shmit, and Vesper, 1999; Tinklin, 2000; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, and Williams, 2003; McDondough, 1997). It is accepted that the family imparts various types of capital to its offspring, which encourage or inhibit the pursuit of higher education. Thus, families may impart economic capital, which helps students during their studies and occasionally contributes to the choice of more expensive programs of study (Steelman and Powell, 1991); social capital, which implies attitudes, tastes, preferences, orientations, language usage and style of speech, which also have a considerable impact on the choice of higher education (Bernstein, 1975; Blau, 1995; Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977; Kohn, 1969). Studies show an association between the various types of family capital and the academic achievements of their offspring (Aschaffenburg and Mass, 1997; Dar and Resh, 1996).

Institutions of higher education in Western countries have conducted orderly, detailed tracking of information on their alumni for many years, and international agencies such as UNESCO and the OECD publish details findings of such alumni studies. Although the climate in many countries is amenable to alumni research, there is a lack of information in this area in Israel. Based on a review of the literature, no national-level study published on this topic was identified. Several institutions conduct such in-house studies, but access to such material is difficult. A study conducted in 2006 (Davidovitch and Soen, 2006) was designed to characterize the students at the Ariel University Center and its graduates, and to identify associations between students' profiles at admission, their subsequent academic achievements, and their pursuit of graduate studies. The current study expands on these efforts, and explores the associations between alumni's personal and academic background and a series of measures of satisfaction with previous academic studies and job and work satisfaction.

Methodology of Research

General Background of Research

The current study focuses on the population of alumni of various programs of the Ariel University Center, and explores the congruence between graduates' academic experience (including their satisfaction with their former studies and with their instructors' teaching), and the deployment of character strengths at work contribute to their current work satisfaction and success.

Sample of Research

In 2008, three strategies were used to contact and enroll prospective participants from among the graduates of an academic institution. The first two enrollment strategies (direct mail and telephone solicitation, and distribution of an e-mail) generated a very poor response rate: Only 30 of the 600 (5%) distributed questionnaires were returned. Finally, researchers enrolled potential participants at an alumni conference, where alumni were asked whether they are currently employed and willing to complete a questionnaire pertaining to their character strengths. Of the 120 alumni conference participants, 58 agreed to participate in the study (48.3%). Three questionnaires were not completed and therefore eliminated from the study. Thus the study sample comprised a total of 85 alumni. The third strategy was more successful as graduates who attended the conference may have been more committed to the university and therefore more willing to participate in affiliated research projects.

Participants were 85 graduates of an Israeli university who were employed at the time of the study. Of these, 94.7% had earned a bachelor's degree, and the remaining graduates (5.3%) were graduate students at the same institution at the time of the study. The vast majority (98.0%) had completed their degrees at the university in the decade between 1998 and 2008. Almost one-half of the participants (43%) graduated from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, 46% graduated from the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Natural Sciences or the School of Architecture. 42% of the participants were accepted to Ariel based on their psychometric score or Matriculation average. Participants' final grade average ranged from 50 to 96.91, with an average of 84.85 ($SD = 7.02$).

Over one half of the participants (54%) were female, almost three quarters (74%) of the participants were married, and the average age of the participants was 32.7 ($SD = 6.80$). The majority of participants (87.2%) were born in Israel, while the remainder had immigrated to Israel from various countries between 1970 and 1996. Based on participant's place of residence, 23%, 55.4%, and 21.6% of the participants were classified as belonging to low, moderate, and

high socio-economic environments, respectively. Participants were classified by their current occupation as follows: engineers, and employees in hi-tech and industry (40.5%); managerial positions (16.2%); education, welfare, and healthcare (14.9%); public sector employees (23.0%); and security-related occupations (5.4%). Career commitment: The average of this measure was 3.65 (SD = 0.87). Reliability of the measure was high ($\alpha = 0.95$). 77.9% of the participants noted that they have no regrets about entering their current occupation. Only 40.7% noted that their current job was not their ideal job.

Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected from two sources:

(a) *Demographics and academic profiles*: The Ariel University Center Michlol Database. This database contains demographic information on alumni background (gender, age, country of origin, marital status, religiosity, town of origin, and employment status) and their academic studies (degree, graduation year, faculty, final grades, and admission profile – composite psychometric score and Matriculation grade average). Town of residence information was used to classify participants into SES groups.

(b) Self-report questionnaires. Alumni completed a self-report questionnaire which subjectively measures the following:

(1) *Character strength deployments*. Participants' strengths were measured using the *VIA Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS, Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The VIA is a self-report questionnaire, assessing the endorsement of 24 character strengths. Ten items are used to evaluate each strength, resulting in a total of 240 items (e.g., "Being able to come up with new and different ideas is one of my strong points" for creativity; "I never quit a task before it is done" for persistence). Participants rated the extent to which each item describes them on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). In this study, a Hebrew version of the VIA was used. The original inventory was translated into Hebrew by two bilingual experts (psychologists with doctoral degrees) using a back-translation technique (also used in Rom and Mikulincer, 2003). Scale scores were averaged across items, yielding 24 scores for each participant, reflecting their ratings of each of the 24 strengths. Scale reliability was very high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

The questionnaire was modified for the present study to measure deployment of character strengths specifically in vocational activities. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which their current job offers them an opportunity to deploy each of the listed 24 character strengths. Items were rated from 1 (*very little*) to 5 (*very much*).

(2) *Congruence between academic field of studies and current occupation*. As recommended by Lent (2008), a specific and subjective measure was used. In this study, the measure comprised the following single item: "To what degree is your current job (position) related to the field you studied at the University?" Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*very little*) to 5 (*very much*).

(3) *Vocational Interests*. This measure was based on Holland's RIASEC model. A version of the categories were translated into Hebrew by the authors for the purpose of this study. Students reported their interests in the following six categories: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. Graduates marked the professions that attract or interest them, of a list of 14 occupations in each category.

(4) *Job Satisfaction*. This criterion variable was measured by the Short-Form Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ), which was developed by the Work Adjustment Project (Lofquist, L., & Dawis, R. (1969; Weiss, D. J., Dawis, R. V., England, G. W., & Lofquist, L. H. (1967). The Short-Form MSQ consists of 20 of the original 100 MSQ items that best represent each of the following 20 job dimensions: Ability Utilization, Achievement, Activity, Advancement, Authority, Company Policies and Practices, Compensation, Coworkers, Creativity, Independence, Moral Values, Recognition, Responsibility, Security, Social Service, Social Status, Supervision –Human Relations, Supervision–Technical, Variety, and Working conditions. Participants rate their satisfaction with each dimension, on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*). Scale reliability was very high (Cronbach's alpha = .95), and consistent with reliabilities reported in the literature.

(5) *Work success*. The measure comprised a single item: "How successful are you at your current job?" Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*very little*) to 5 (*very much*).

(6) *Career Commitment*. This criterion variable was measured by The Career Commitment Scale (Blau 1985; 1998). The scale comprises seven items that express commitment to a career or profession (e.g., "It is the ideal occupation for a life work." "I like this occupation too well to give it up."). Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not true for my career*) to 5 (*very true for my career*). The average of the seven responses served as the Career Commitment Index. Scale reliability was very high (Cronbach's alpha = .83).

(7) *Personal Well-Being*. This criterion variable was measured by the Mental Well-Being Scale of the Mental Health Inventory (MHI) (Veit and Ware, 1983); The scale was translated into Hebrew by Florian and Drori, 1990). This scale comprises 16 items relating to the intensity or frequency of respondent's feelings and evaluations during the past month (e.g., "*How much of the time, during the past month, have you felt calm and peaceful?*"). Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*none of the time*) to 5 (*all of the time*). The average of the 16 responses served as the Well-Being measure. Internal consistency was highly satisfactory (.92), and consistent with the internal consistency (.94) reported both by the questionnaire's authors and by Florian and Drori.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was designed to explore the associations between enrollment profiles, vocational interests, academic achievements, deployment of character strengths, and job satisfaction, career commitment, vocational preferences, personal well-being, and the contribution of these variables to work satisfaction.

Chi Square tests were used to examine the association between the variables, t tests for independent samples to examine contrasts, and one-way ANOVA. Where significant differences were found, Bonferonni tests were used to examine the source of the differences.

Results of Research

Job success: The majority (80.7%) of participants feel that they are successful at their current job. Only 31.3% noted that they would be more successful at work had they studied at a university or a different academic institution.

Job satisfaction: The average of this measure was $M = 3.68$ ($SD = 0.74$). Reliability

was high ($\alpha = 0.95$). Highest satisfaction was recorded for the items “I am constantly occupied in my work”, “My work offers employment stability,” “I can do things that are not against my conscience.” Lowest satisfaction was recorded for “The way the company’s policy is executed,” “My salary and the quantity of work I perform,” and “My chances for a promotion in this job.”

Professional interests: Graduates were more strongly interested in social occupations ($M = 4.03$) and investigative occupations ($M = 3.83$) and least interested in conventional ($M = 2.11$) and realistic occupations ($M = 2.69$).

Personal well-being: The average measure was 3.87 ($SD = 0.56$). Reliability was high ($\alpha=0.92$). Items which received the highest ratings included: “My everyday life is full of interesting events,” “I am happy or satisfied with my personal life,” “I feel loved and wanted,” and “I generally enjoy the things I do.” Items which received the lowest ratings included: “I feel refreshed and relaxed when I wake up in the morning,” “Life is a wonderful adventure for me,” and “I feel calm and free of any tension.”

To examine the associations between personal well-being, deployment of character strengths, job satisfaction, and job success, four step-wise regressions were performed. Alumni’s demographic variables (gender, age, marital status, religiosity, type of residence, and socio-economic status), academic background variables (faculty, final grade, satisfaction with studies), character strengths and occupational interests were used to explain personal well-being, deployment of character strengths. Personal well-being, deployment of character strengths and significance of character strengths were used to explain job satisfaction and work success. Findings are presented in the tables below.

Table 1. Regression coefficients in predicting personal well-being.

Explanatory variables	b	Beta	t
Deployment of character strengths	0.10	0.53	5.03 ***
R	0.53		
R ²	28.7%		
F(1,66)	25.34 ***		

The single variable that predicted personal well-being was the deployment of character strengths ($Beta = 0.53, p < .001$). Character strength deployment predicted 28.7% of the variance of personal well-being.

Table 2. Regression coefficients for deployment of character strengths.

Explanatory variables	b	Beta	t
Personal well-being	0.57	0.47	5.02 ***
Career commitment	0.24	0.30	3.20 **
Interest in enterprising professions	0.06	0.27	2.87 **
Interest in investigative professions	0.04-	0.21-	2.24 *
R	0.68		
R ²	46.5%		
F(4,63)	13.68 ***		

These variables predict 46.5% of the variance of character strength deployment. The variable with the greatest contribution is personal well-being ($beta = 0.47, p < .001$). Interest in enterprising professions contributes to explained variance ($beta = 0.27, p < .001$) while interest in investigative professions is inversely related to deployment of character strengths.

Table 3. Regression coefficients for job satisfaction.

Explanatory variables	b	Beta	t
Deployment of character strengths	0.71	0.68	8.04 ***
Career commitment	0.20	0.23	2.74 **
R	0.78		
R ²	61.2%		
F(2,62)	48.87 ***		

The above set of variables accounts for 61.2% of the variance in job satisfaction. The variable with the highest contribution to prediction is deployment of character strengths beta = 0.68, $p < .001$). Career commitment also contributed to the prediction (beta = 0.23, $p < .01$).

Table 4. Regression coefficients for work success.

Explanatory variables	b	Beta	t
Career commitment	0.28	0.32	2.79 **
Deployment of strengths	0.07	0.31	2.66 **
R	0.52		
R ²	27.2%		
F(2,62)	11.56 ***		

This set of variables accounts for 27.2% of the variance of work success. The two variables that contribute to the prediction are career commitment (beta = 0.32, $p < .01$) and deployment of character strengths (beta = 0.31, $p < .01$).

Discussion

In this study, an attempt was made to examine the resilience of the prevalent assumption in the academe, according to which academic achievements are the key to success in the job market and work satisfaction. The study examined the associations between the demographic data and academic background of alumni of the Ariel University Center, their satisfaction with their academic studies, current character strength deployment, and work success.

The study integrates Holland's classic occupation theory, which has been prevalent for over 30 years, with the more recent theory of positive psychology developed by Seligman, the study of which has been limited to recent years. Specifically, the study examined Holland's congruence theory (the congruence between occupational interests, field of academic education, current occupation, job satisfaction, and overall satisfaction) and the deployment of signature strengths (which has not yet been studied empirically in an occupational and academic setting), among alumni of one academic institution: The Ariel University Center of Samaria.

Findings show associations between academic studies and alumni's satisfaction with their academic studies. The majority of the alumni (80%) were satisfied with their current occupation, 41% noted that their occupation was ideal for their lives. 81% noted that they feel success in their current job. Alumni also noted a high degree of satisfaction in terms of personal well-being. They reported a sense of satisfaction and stability from their work and from the extent to which they were free to act according to their conscience. Alumni reported strongest professional interests for investigative and socially oriented professions. The most important factor in graduates' work satisfaction was the deployment of character strengths.

Deployment of character strengths was found to be a significant predictor of graduates' work satisfaction. The interesting finding is the absence of significant differences between graduates' work satisfaction and success based on their admission profiles. That is, graduates' pre-enrollment profiles do not predict differences in work satisfaction. The role of academic studies affected employment and work satisfaction, independent of graduates' pre-enrollment profiles. This finding is especially interesting in view of the myth in the academe, which views admission profiles as the primary criterion and predictor of future success. The current study highlights the role of graduates' character strength deployment as a key to success and satisfaction. The findings of this study offer an interesting perspective to be taken into account in academic decision making on admission policies.

The current study offers a theoretical contribution in expanding Holland's theory of interests, and as an exploratory study in the field of character strengths and their deployment (two constructs of positive psychology) for alumni of an academic institution. The study has a practical contribution for the field of student guidance and counseling (before, during, and after academic studies), with the aim of increasing satisfaction and self-realization. One of the goals of vocational counseling is to encourage clients to consider entering a work environment that fits his or her personality profile, rather than the academic admission profile. Work satisfaction and occupational satisfaction play an important role in productivity, perseverance, work success, and overall personal well-being.

As such, findings of the current study refute the criticism which views the expansion of higher education in its current format as an optical illusion that has no effect in creating a genuine opportunity for members of marginal social classes. Findings of this exploratory study on alumni of the Ariel University Center lead to two main conclusions: (a) Admission profiles of many alumni are such that they would have no chance at higher education were it not for the Ariel University Center; (b) These relatively poor admission profiles did not detract from their ability to pursue an academic education, fulfill their requirements, and earn a degree. The study confirms that the Ariel University Center achieved its original social goal, defined by the Commission of Higher Education in its resolutions supporting increased access to higher education. On both counts, the CHE's philosophy is justified. The Ariel University Center – and the remaining non-university institutions in Israel, it may be assumed – offer a “last chance” to populations groups who would otherwise have no chance of earning an academic degree. Nonetheless, the findings are based on a study in a single academic institution, and should be viewed as the first step in a genuine examination of the intriguing issues relating to higher education policies and the profiles of college graduates.

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