

Are There Character Strengths Associated with Adult ADHD?: Comparison of ADHD Adults and Controls on the VIA Inventory of Strengths

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Introduction

A lifetime diagnosis of ADHD is associated with many life impairments. There has been the suggestion in some trade publications that ADHD confers “gifts” on those with the diagnosis, including at least one peer-reviewed study reporting greater creativity in a sample of adults with ADHD (White & Shah, 2011). A previous study of Virtues did not reveal evidence that adults with ADHD scored higher than a non-ADHD group on a self-report inventory. The current study builds on the previous study to examine the question of whether there are specific Character Strengths that are associated with ADHD.

Purpose and Hypothesis

The purpose of this study was to provide empirically-derived answers to the question of whether a diagnosis of ADHD is associated with “gifts” when compared to a non-ADHD control group using an established self-report questionnaire of Virtues, with each Virtue comprised of a set of Character Strengths. It was hypothesized that Character Strengths characterized by intact self-control would be lower among the ADHD group when compared to control groups (Self-Regulation, Perseverance, Prudence); on the other hand, it was hypothesized that Character Strengths characterized by creativity, big picture thinking, and other qualities attributed to ADHD would be higher among the ADHD group when compared with controls (Creativity, Curiosity, Kindness).

Materials and Methods

The VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), was used as the dependent variable. Scores obtained from an online VIA survey of adults self-identified with ADHD (ADD; n=99), a control group of adults self-identified as non-ADHD (NO ADD; n=54), and the normative database for the VIA (VIA, n=479,367) were compared. Subjects were recruited from the database of an ADHD Coaching training program and from online links to the VIA survey posted on social media. Each subject was assigned a unique passcode to access the online survey and to obtain their VIA results. By completing the survey, participants consented for their de-identified VIA survey results to be used in this study.

Participants were asked whether they had ever been diagnosed with ADHD by a healthcare professional in order to create the ADD group and a NO ADD control group. The normative database for the VIA was also a comparison group, although ADHD status of these respondents is unknown. Comparisons of the ADD, NO ADD, and VIA groups were performed on the 24 VIA Character Strengths.

References

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A classification and handbook*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
 White, H. A., & Shah, P. (2011). Creative style and achievement in adults with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Personality and Individual Differences, 50*, 673–677. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2010.12.015

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Further Information

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TABLE 1. Post hoc Tukey’s Studentized Range Tests

BEAUTY				GRATITUDE				KINDNESS			
Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.			
Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%
Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits
ADD - No	0.071717	-0.215596	0.359030	No - VIA	0.172028	-0.019773	0.363829	ADD - No	0.008754	-0.202949	0.220458
ADD - VIA	0.304080	0.133373	0.474787	No - ADD	0.273064	0.034638	0.511490	ADD - VIA	0.355189	0.229406	0.480973
No - ADD	-0.071717	-0.359030	0.215596	VIA - No	-0.172028	-0.363829	0.019773	No - ADD	-0.008754	-0.220458	0.202949
No - VIA	0.232362	0.001235	0.463490	VIA - ADD	0.101036	-0.040626	0.242697	No - VIA	0.346435	0.176131	0.516739
VIA - ADD	-0.304080	-0.474787	-0.133373	ADD - No	-0.273064	-0.511490	-0.034638	VIA - ADD	-0.355189	-0.480973	-0.229406
VIA - No	-0.232362	-0.463490	-0.001235	ADD - VIA	-0.101036	-0.242697	0.040626	VIA - No	-0.346435	-0.516739	-0.176131

LOVE				HONESTY				LEADERSHIP			
Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.			
Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%
Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits
No - ADD	0.328620	0.095659	0.561580	No - ADD	0.344444	0.151173	0.537156	No - ADD	0.119529	-0.099386	0.338443
No - VIA	0.406219	0.218815	0.593623	No - VIA	0.4582718	0.3027958	0.6137479	No - VIA	0.246871	0.070767	0.422976
ADD - No	-0.328620	-0.561580	-0.095659	ADD - No	-0.344444	-0.537156	-0.151173	ADD - No	-0.119529	-0.338443	0.099386
ADD - VIA	0.077600	-0.060814	0.216013	ADD - VIA	0.1138274	-0.0010046	0.2286594	ADD - VIA	0.127343	-0.002725	0.257411
VIA - ADD	-0.406219	-0.593623	-0.218815	VIA - No	-0.4582718	-0.6137479	-0.3027958	VIA - No	-0.246871	-0.422976	-0.070767
VIA - No	-0.077600	-0.216013	0.060814	VIA - ADD	-0.1138274	-0.2286594	0.0010046	VIA - ADD	-0.127343	-0.257411	0.002725

PRUDENCE				HOPE				LEARNING			
Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.			
Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%
Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits
No - VIA	0.288757	0.093624	0.483890	No - VIA	0.279024	0.064812	0.493236	ADD - No	0.088889	-0.182408	0.360186
No - ADD	0.728956	0.486388	0.971524	No - ADD	0.560269	0.293984	0.826555	ADD - VIA	0.294994	0.133803	0.456185
VIA - No	-0.288757	-0.483890	-0.093624	VIA - No	-0.279024	-0.493236	-0.064812	No - ADD	-0.088889	-0.360186	0.182408
VIA - ADD	0.440199	0.296077	0.584321	VIA - ADD	0.281245	0.123032	0.439458	No - VIA	0.206105	-0.012138	0.424349
ADD - No	-0.728956	-0.971524	-0.486388	ADD - No	-0.560269	-0.826555	-0.293984	VIA - ADD	-0.294994	-0.456185	-0.133803
ADD - VIA	-0.440199	-0.584321	-0.296077	ADD - VIA	-0.281245	-0.439458	-0.123032	VIA - No	-0.206105	-0.424349	0.012138

CREATIVITY				HUMOR				PERSPECTIVE			
Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.			
Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%
Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits
ADD - No	0.148822	-0.122316	0.419959	ADD - No	0.112121	-0.133666	0.357908	No - VIA	0.215841	0.043736	0.387946
ADD - VIA	0.469794	0.308697	0.630890	ADD - VIA	0.307465	0.161430	0.453499	No - ADD	0.266667	0.052724	0.480610
No - ADD	-0.148822	-0.419959	0.122316	No - ADD	-0.112121	-0.357908	0.133666	VIA - No	-0.215841	-0.387946	-0.043736
No - VIA	0.320972	0.102857	0.539088	No - VIA	0.195343	-0.002379	0.393065	VIA - ADD	0.050826	-0.076288	0.177940
VIA - ADD	-0.469794	-0.630890	-0.308697	VIA - ADD	-0.307465	-0.453499	-0.161430	ADD - No	-0.266667	-0.480610	-0.052724
VIA - No	-0.320972	-0.539088	-0.102857	VIA - No	-0.195343	-0.393065	0.002379	ADD - VIA	-0.050826	-0.177940	0.076288

CURIOSITY				PERSEVERANCE				SELF-REGULATION			
Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.			
Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%
Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits
No - ADD	0.159933	-0.059859	0.379724	No - VIA	0.207121	-0.004186	0.418429	ADD - No	0.073103	-0.130790	0.276997
No - VIA	0.186485	0.009675	0.363295	No - ADD	0.982492	0.719816	1.245167	VIA - ADD	0.689265	0.538672	0.839857
ADD - No	-0.159933	-0.379724	0.059859	VIA - No	-0.207121	-0.418429	0.004186	No - VIA	-0.073103	-0.276997	0.130790
ADD - VIA	0.026552	-0.104037	0.157141	VIA - ADD	0.775370	0.619302	0.931439	No - ADD	0.616162	0.362703	0.869620
VIA - ADD	-0.186485	-0.363295	-0.009675	ADD - No	-0.982492	-1.245167	-0.719816	ADD - VIA	-0.689265	-0.839857	-0.538672
VIA - No	-0.026552	-0.157141	0.104037	ADD - VIA	-0.775370	-0.931439	-0.619302	ADD - No	-0.616162	-0.869620	-0.362703

FAIRNESS				JUDGMENT				SOCIAL IQ			
Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.			
Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%
Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits
No - ADD	0.014815	-0.192402	0.222031	No - VIA	0.268125	0.101592	0.434657	No - ADD	0.261953	0.041886	0.482019
No - VIA	0.260308	0.093614	0.427002	No - ADD	0.278114	0.071099	0.485129	No - VIA	0.457659	0.280628	0.634691
ADD - No	-0.014815	-0.222031	0.192402	VIA - No	-0.268125	-0.434657	-0.101592	ADD - No	-0.261953	-0.482019	-0.041886
ADD - VIA	0.245493	0.122375	0.368611	VIA - ADD	0.009990	-0.113008	0.132988	ADD - VIA	0.195706	0.064954	0.326459
VIA - ADD	-0.245493	-0.368611	-0.122375	ADD - No	-0.278114	-0.485129	-0.071099	VIA - No	-0.457659	-0.634691	-0.280628
VIA - No	-0.260308	-0.427002	-0.093614	ADD - VIA	-0.009990	-0.132988	0.113008	VIA - ADD	-0.195706	-0.326459	-0.064954

SPIRITUALITY				ZEST			
Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.				Comparisons significant at the 0.05 level are indicated by ***.			
Group	Difference		95%	Group	Difference		95%
Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits	Comparison	Between	Simultaneous	Confidence Limits
No - VIA	0.162067	-0.126435	0.450569	No - VIA	0.275907	0.067821	0.483992
No - ADD	0.353535	-0.005100	0.712171	No - ADD	0.432323	0.173654	0.690993
VIA - No	-0.162067	-0.450569	0.126435	VIA - No	-0.275907	-0.483992	-0.067821
VIA - ADD	0.191468	-0.021615	0.404551	VIA - ADD	0.156417	0.002728	0.310105
ADD - No	-0.353535	-0.712171	0.005100	ADD - No	-0.432323	-0.690993	-0.173654
ADD - VIA	-0.191468	-0.404551	0.021615	ADD - VIA	-0.156417	-0.310105	-0.002728

Results

One-way between subjects ANOVAs were conducted to compare scores on the 24 VIA Character Strengths for each comparison group. There was a significant effect of group on Character Strength for 20 out of 24 domains at the p < .05 level. Post hoc analyses between groups were performed on each of the 20 Character Strengths for which there were significant group effects (see Table 1).

There were no Character Strengths in which the ADD group scored significantly higher than both comparison groups. Thus, there were no Character Strengths in which adults with ADHD described themselves as being more “gifted” than both other groups. At best, there were Character Strengths in which there was no significant difference between the ADD and NO ADD groups, including Creativity, Curiosity, and Kindness. (The ADD group scored significantly higher than the VIA group on Creativity and Kindness.)

As hypothesized, the ADD group scored significantly lower than both the NO ADD and VIA groups on Character Strengths associated with intact self-control. That is, the NO ADD group scored significantly higher than the ADD group on measures of Perseverance, Prudence, and Self-Regulation, with strong effect sizes for Perseverance and Prudence (d= 1.13, .94, respectively) and a moderate effect size for Self-Regulation (d=.75). (There was no difference between NO ADD group and VIA group on Perseverance and Self-Regulation.)

Conclusions

There was no support for the hypothesis that adults with ADHD would score higher than non-ADHD adults on Character Strengths associated with “gifts” of ADHD, specifically Creativity, Curiosity, and Kindness (there were no differences compared with non-ADHD group). On the other hand, as predicted, the non-ADHD group scored significantly higher than the ADHD group on Character Strengths reflecting intact self-control skills. The finding of significantly low scores on Hope for the ADHD group is clinically relevant.

ADHD is an impairing condition that interferes with the expression and implementation of skills and competencies among diagnosed adults but these “gifts” are not necessarily associated with the clinical syndrome. In addition to any impairments stemming from the core symptoms of ADHD, the low levels of hope described by the ADHD group in this study also would interfere with efforts and attempts to develop strengths and skills.

Limits of the study include that diagnostic status relied on self-report or was not known. The VIA is not designed to necessarily assess the types of “gifts” that have been attributed to ADHD. Moreover, the VIA is a self-report scale; a possibility is that the ADHD “gifts” may have been under reported and might have been rated higher by blinded observers or by some objective assessment.