What Predicts Adjustment Among Law Students? A Longitudinal Panel Study

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ABSTRACT. Although at the time of this article's publication, many anecdotes and cross-sectional studies had reported that law students experience significant distress during their 1st year, few researchers had controlled for prelaw school status (e.g., M. Garrison, B. Tomko, & I. Yip, 1996; L. Guinier, M. Fine, J. Balin, A. Bartow, & D. L. Stachel, 1994), and only a single group of researchers had explored a psychosocial factor that predicted these changes. The present authors tested 3 sets of potential predictors of adjustment: sources of stress, coping strategies, and relationship factors. The present data replicated declines in students' psychological health, physical health, and attitudes toward law over the 1st year of school. That result supports the generalizability and currency of previous studies. In contrast to other researchers, the present authors found few gender differences. Less relationship happiness, less emotional support, and use of less active coping tactics at the beginning of the year predicted poorer outcomes at the end of the year. Strain from academic pressures, lack of personal time, and social isolation were correlated with poorer outcomes.

Key words: coping, health, law students, stress

"LITERALLY HUNDREDS OF PUBLISHED ANECDOTAL" DESCRIPTIONS have indicated that law students experience high levels of anxiety and depression (Dammeyer & Nunez, 1999, p. 58). Beyond anecdotes, researchers have found that law student distress manifests itself in declines in psychological

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and physical health and in negative attitudes toward the field of law (e.g., Beck, Sales, & Benjamin, 1995–1996). Although there are no psychological differences between the general population and law students before they begin law school, psychological distress appears soon after law school begins (Benjamin, Kasznia-
ak, Sales, & Shanfield, 1986; Reifman, McIntosh, & Ellsworth, 2000). For exam-
ple, students enter law school with a depression rate equivalent to that of the gen-
eral population (10% to 20%), yet by the end of the 1st year, 30% to 50% of the
students are depressed, and the percentage climbs to 40% to 50% in late spring
of the 3rd year (Benjamin et al., 1986; Reifman et al., 2000). These findings indi-
cate that what causes the distress is something about the law school experience
rather than law students being atypical before entering law school.

Before the present research, what actually causes the distress had not been
investigated. The present study went beyond previous studies to determine spe-
cific factors in law school that predict these negative outcomes. The present data
also address two questions in the literature: whether law schools remain stress-
ful decades after the early findings were reported and whether gender differences
in stress and adjustment consistently occur.

The continuation of high rates of depression after graduation from law school
(Benjamin et al., 1986) emphasizes the significance of this problem of the psy-
chological vulnerability in the legal profession due to the stress and long hours of
the work. The depression rate among lawyers is one of the highest of any profes-
sion and approximately three and a half times that of the general population
(Eaton, Anthony, Mandel, & Garrison, 1990; Jacobius, 1996). By determining pre-
dictors of maladjustment in law school, the present study points to factors that
might cause specific individuals to remain distressed while they practice law.

The law school experience does not affect all individuals to the same degree.
Some researchers have gotten results that suggest that female law students (e.g.,
ABA, 1996; Granfield, 1992; Guinier, Fine, Balin, Bartow, & Stachel, 1994;
McIntosh, Keywell, Reifman, & Ellsworth, 1994) and female lawyers (e.g.,
Chiles, Benjamin, & Cahn, 1990; Curran, 1995; Quade, 1986) are more likely
to report depression and anxiety, are more likely to drop out of law school or
the law profession, and tend to have less favorable attitudes towards law than
male law students and male lawyers. However, some researchers have found no
such gender differences (Fischer, 1996; Teitelbaum, Lopez, & Jenkins, 1991).
The present study was designed to more rigorously examine possible gender dif-
ferences and their causes than did previous studies. Of studies investigating gen-
der differences in outcomes, only four have used baseline information obtained
before law school. Two of those four used only LSAT scores and undergraduate
grade point averages (GPAs; Garrison, Tomko, & Yip, 1996; Guinier et al.), and
one of those two (Guinier et al.) used aggregated data, preventing any analyses
of individual differences. One of the remaining two focused on changes in self-
concept (Wightman, 1996). Only one examined psychological adaptation
(McIntosh et al.).
The focus of previous work on group differences has obscured investigators’ understanding of the processes leading to outcomes that differ by gender (see Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997). The current literature only suggests that some women law students do worse than men do. It does not document what underlies any gender differences found. The present study was designed to evaluate possible causes of gender differences in adjustment in law school.

Furthermore, not all law students and not all female law students show highly negative outcomes. Variability in responses to law school emphasizes the importance of understanding what factors contribute to negative responses to legal training (Reifman et al., 2000). Just as a psychological factor (hostility) is associated with mortality rates in lawyers (Barefoot, Dodge, Peterson, Dahlstrom, & Williams, 1989), such factors are likely to play a role in the physical and psychological status of law students. The longitudinal panel design of the present study enables an examination of which physical, psychological, and attitudinal differences law school causes and a determination of what individual variables are associated with such differences. As the first researchers to focus on which factors predict maladjustment among law students, we hope to pinpoint conditions that could be changed to improve legal training and—more broadly—to better understand variables that predict adjustment to stressful situations. We examined how sources of stress, coping propensities, and social relationships might generate individual differences in adjustment to law school. These variables might vary by gender and thus might account for any gender differences.

Sources of Stress

Because stress predicts psychological (Gannon & Pardie, 1989; Reifman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1990) and physical outcomes (Brown, 1986; Horner, 1998), it is important to investigate whether individual differences in the amount or sources of stress predict these outcomes among law students. Benjamin et al. (1986) found that the daily hassles of law school relate to psychological symptomatology. We extended their work by testing whether four additional specific sources of stress that might be problematic for law students in general (e.g., Reifman et al., 2000) and for women particularly (McIntosh et al., 1994) are related to adjustment.

First, the academic environment itself is stressful (Granfield, 1992), and academic stress can predict psychological outcome (Reifman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1990). Law students report being stressed about their grades (Heins, Fahey, & Henderson, 1983; Heins, Fahey, & Leiden, 1984), the Socratic method (Beck & Burns, 1979; Reifman et al., 2000; Stover, 1989), and the competitive environment of law school (Abramson & Franklin, 1986; Beck & Burns, 1979; Granfield, 1992). Second, finding time to relax and enjoy recreational activities can be difficult during law school (Heins et al., 1983; Wightman, 1996). Pressures related to lack of time predict psychological outcome (Brody, Dempsey, & Pruchno,
1990). Third, social isolation creates a great deal of strain for law students (McIntosh et al., 1994). Fourth, discrimination might create stress. Women might be more likely than men to report gender discrimination in law school (Guinier et al., 1994; McIntosh et al., 1994; but see Fischer, 1996). Any enhanced perception of discrimination could increase women’s stress levels (Clark & Rieker, 1986; McIntosh et al.). We tested whether each of these previously reported areas of stress is actually associated with adjustment.

Coping Styles

Certain coping tactics might decrease the impact of stress on psychological (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) and physical (Feeney, 1995; James, 1997) outcomes. However, it is unclear whether specific coping styles lead to poorer psychological outcomes. For example, some researchers have reported that problem-focused coping is negatively related to depressive symptoms and emotion-focused coping is positively related to them (Kolene, Hartley, & Murdock, 1990; Lapp & Collins, 1993; Moeller, Richards, Hooker, & Ursino, 1992). Others have reported no relation or the opposite pattern (Arthur, 1998; Cobiella, Mabe, & Forehand, 1990; McQueeny, Stanton, & Sigmon, 1997). To clarify the role of coping strategies in adjusting to law school, we examined whether individual differences in coping styles predict psychological and physical outcomes in this context.

Social Relationships

A third explanation for individual differences in outcomes involves social relationships. Relationships can be both positive resources (Barnett & Marshall, 1991; Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986; Gutek, 1993; Schultz & Rau, 1985) and causes of stress (Hammelman, 1995). Thus, they might serve either as a buffer or as a risk factor for poorer psychological outcomes (see Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; Coyne & Downey, 1991) and health (Brown, 1986; James, 1997). Because relationships with family, friends, and peers are important to law students (Abbey, Dunkel-Schetter, & Brickman, 1983), relationships might be especially important to examine in understanding individual differences in adjustment.

The Present Study

The present study builds on earlier work that reported that law school caused stress and maladjustment in general and more adverse outcomes for women than for men. First, we tested a broader range of possible gender differences in outcome than did other researchers, and, unlike most researchers, controlled for earlier status. Second, we expanded the examination of gender differences to address why outcomes differ across genders. Third, we determined what distinguishes students who are more affected by law school from those who are less affected
(see ABA, 1996). We examined specifically what sources of stress, coping propensities, or relationship factors predict changes in these outcomes.

**Method**

*Procedure*

We conducted a longitudinal investigation of 1st-year law students. Wave 1 data were collected during orientation week and the first week of classes. Questionnaires were distributed to all 320 1st-year students at the University of Denver College of Law with a cover letter explaining the study. We included stamped, addressed return envelopes. Wave 1 provided baseline measures of coping; attitudes; work, school, or family conflict; health; affect; and depression.

A month before classes ended, we administered Wave 2 questionnaires using the same method. From this questionnaire, we obtained data on the measures from Wave 1 and on specific sources of stress experienced by 1st-year students.

*Participants*

In Wave 1, participants were 141 students (44% of the 1st-year class) (65% were women; 35% were men). In Wave 2, participants were 89 students (28% of the 1st-year class) (65% were women; 35% were men). Participants in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 were 56 students (18% of the 1st-year class) (70% were women; 30% were men).

Because sample sizes for the two waves differed, and the longitudinal sample was a small proportion of the population of 1st-year law students, we compared respondents who completed Wave 1 only, those who completed Wave 2 only, and those who completed both waves on all the outcome measures to determine whether individuals who completed both waves differed from individuals who completed only one. On all comparisons, individuals who completed both waves were the same as the individuals who completed only one wave (all rs < 1.70). Because 54% of the students participated in at least one wave, the similarity of the longitudinal panel to the rest of the respondents increases confidence in generalizing the findings.

*Measures*

*Physical health.* Following McIntosh et al. (1994) and Reifman, Biernat, and Lang (1991), we assessed physical health by asking students how many days during the past month they had experienced any of 20 health symptoms (e.g., cold or flu, shortness of breath) on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 5 = 15+ days). Their score was the sum of all responses to the health items divided by the number of possible symptoms (Cronbach's α = .69).
Emotional symptoms. We used three measures of emotional symptoms. For depression, we used the 20-item Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). Participants rated how often they had experienced each of the 20 symptoms of depression in the previous week, on a scale from 0 = rarely or none of the time to 3 = most or all of the time. We summed participants’ answers (Wave 1 $\alpha = .90$; Wave 2 $\alpha = .92$). A cut-off score of 16 on the CES-D was used to suggest cases of mild depression or dysphoria, and a score of 31 was used to suggest cases of severe depression (Hsu & Marshall, 1987; Ritchey, LaGory, Fitzpatrick, & Mullis, 1990).

We also assessed participants’ levels of positive and negative affect using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Participants evaluated how they generally feel for 10 positive items and 10 negative items on a scale from 1 = very slightly or not at all to 5 = extremely. Items were summed to create positive affect (Wave 1 $\alpha = .83$; Wave 2 $\alpha = .91$) and negative affect (Wave 1 $\alpha = .82$; Wave 2 $\alpha = .91$) scale scores.

Attitudes. At Wave 1, participants responded to nine items assessing their attitudes toward law school (e.g., law school will be a positive experience for me), legal practice (e.g., I feel good about becoming a lawyer), and themselves as lawyers (e.g., the field of law is where I belong). We had developed this Attitudes Toward Law Scale for the present research and evaluated it in a pilot survey of practicing lawyers. Wording was based on previous work (e.g., Homer & Schwartz, 1990; Taber et al., 1988). For each domain, participants responded to three items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ($-2 =$ strongly disagree, $2 =$ agree strongly). We averaged the nine items to create an average attitude score, with higher numbers indicating a more positive attitude ($\alpha = .78$).

At Wave 2, we expanded two of the subscales and added a subscale. Participants responded to six items assessing attitudes toward law school, three assessing attitudes toward the field of law, and eight assessing their attitudes toward themselves as lawyers. We created a scale score from these 17 items by averaging participants’ responses ($\alpha = .89$).

In addition, we asked participants whether they had considered dropping out of law school and whether they planned on being in law school in the following year. Responses were rated on the same 5-point Likert-type scale ($-2 =$ strongly disagree, $2 =$ agree strongly).

Stress. At Wave 2, participants reported the amount of stress and the frequency of stress from 53 potential stressors. We modified and extended questions that had been used by McIntosh et al. (1994). Each item states an example of stress that students might have experienced in a particular domain (e.g., Being in law school leaves me too exhausted to enjoy time with my spouse/partner). For each item, we calculated cumulative strain. Cumulative strain is a multiplicative interaction between a stressor’s frequency of occurrence and its stressfulness when it
does occur (Goplerud, 1980). Maximum strain occurs when the event is both extremely frequent and stressful.

We sorted the 53 items into four domains: academic pressures ($N = 31, \alpha = .92$), personal time ($N = 4, \alpha = .88$), social isolation ($N = 1$), and perceptions of discrimination ($N = 17, \alpha = .92$). Strain for each domain was the mean strain across items in that domain.

Coping style and cognitive appraisals. To assess what coping tactics students tend to use, at Wave 1 we asked them to indicate how they would cope with an academic problem (a professor treated you unfairly) and a relationship problem (your romantic partner thinks that you are spending too much time with your studies and feels neglected).

For each situation, participants responded to the 28-item Brief COPE (Carver, 1997), which contains 14 tactics (active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humor, religion, seeking emotional social support, seeking instrumental social support, self-distraction, denial, venting, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame), with 2 items per scale. In addition, participants responded to 7 additional items (suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, turning to God, exercising to cope, eating to cope, seeking advice from a professor, seeking advice from law school administration) that we had adapted from McIntosh et al. (1994). Because reported likelihood of use of each tactic in one hypothetical situation was significantly correlated with its pair in the other, we averaged across the two situations to create a general coping propensity variable for each tactic (e.g., active coping). The Brief COPE has 28 items assessing 14 tactics, so there are 2 items per tactic (e.g., I’ve been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I’m in and I’ve been taking action to try to make the situation better). So, we averaged participants’ responses to those 2 items.

For each situation, participants also responded to a 7-item appraisal measure (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992; e.g., How much control would you feel you have over the event?). Participants responded on a 6-point Likert-type scale ($1 = \text{not at all}, 6 = \text{extremely}$). As in the coping tactics, we averaged across the two situations to create a general score for each of the seven appraisals.

Relationships. We assessed relationship happiness by an item from the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) that has been adapted for use in populations including nonmarried couples (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988). Participants rated the level of happiness in their romantic relationship on a 7-point Likert-type scale ($1 = \text{very unhappy}, 7 = \text{perfectly happy}$).

We measured emotional support by having students indicate who their primary source of social support was and then averaging three items regarding this person (adapted from Emmons, Biernat, Tiedje, Lang, & Wortman, 1990; Wave 1 $\alpha = .61$; Wave 2 $\alpha = .67$). We also asked participants one item assessing
instrumental support (How often does this person perform extra household chores when you need to devote more time to school?). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = never/not at all, 5 = always/a great deal).

We assessed work, school, or family conflict with items measuring strain from school work interfering with time spent at home, strain from home responsibilities interfering with school-related activities, and role conflict (see Emmons et al., 1990; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991; and McIntosh et al., 1994). Participants responded to all items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Items were averaged (Wave 1 $\alpha = .83$; Wave 2 $\alpha = .89$).

Academic ability. To determine whether differences in adjustment to law school are simply reflections of basic academic ability, at Wave 1 we asked students to report their LSAT score and undergraduate GPA. At Wave 2 we had them report their law school GPA.

Results

Change Over Time in Adjustment and Predictor Variables

We first tested whether students' physical and psychological states declined over the course of law school. In addition, given the previous findings of more negative outcomes for women, we tested for and expected such differences in our sample for both the outcome and predictor variables. We used 2 (wave) $\times$ 2 (gender) mixed design analyses of variance to test these differences.

Adjustment. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for outcome variables for each wave. Consistent with our hypotheses, health problems increased during the 1st year, $F(1, 48) = 6.11$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Across the year, positive affect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health symptoms*</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect**</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affect**</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression***</td>
<td>11.87</td>
<td>7.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitudes***</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
declined, \( F(1, 53) = 24.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .31 \); negative affect increased, \( F(1, 53) = 8.45, p < .01, \eta^2 = .14 \); and depression increased, \( F(1, 52) = 15.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23 \). By the end of the 1st year, a notable minority of students (12%) scored high enough on the depression scale (> 31) to suggest depression, and another 30% reported significant dysphoria (> 16). However, we found no effect of gender (all \( Fs < 1 \)) and no interaction between wave and gender (all \( Fs < 3 \)) for any variables.

Also consistent with our hypotheses, students' attitudes became significantly less positive over time, \( F(1, 54) = 65.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .55 \) (see Table 1). There were no effects of gender (all \( Fs < 1 \)) and no interaction between wave and gender (all \( Fs < 2 \)). At Wave 2, 23.6% of students said that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had considered dropping out of law school, and 4.5% said that they agreed or strongly agreed that they did not plan on returning to law school in the following year. There were no gender differences in either consideration of, \( t(87) < 1 \), or planning on, \( t(87) < 1 \), dropping out.

**Predictor variables.** Possible gender differences in adjustment might be generated by gender differences in factors predicting adjustment. Therefore, we checked all predictor variables for gender differences.

We evaluated whether there were gender differences in strain for all participants in Wave 2. There were no gender differences in academic strain (\( M = 26.81, SD = 16.68 \)), \( t(84) < 1 \), perceptions of discrimination (\( M = 6.80, SD = 11.54 \)), \( t(82) < 1 \), lack of personal time (\( M = 43.09, SD = 30.40 \)), \( t(84) < 1 \), or social isolation (\( M = 22.55, SD = 28.17 \)), \( t(86) < 1 \). We also examined whether there were any gender differences in coping and appraisal propensities at Wave 1. A few gender differences emerged. Women (\( M = 2.98, SD = .73 \)) were more likely than were men (\( M = 2.43, SD = .74 \)) to seek emotional support, \( t(136) = 4.19, p < .001 \), as well as instrumental support (\( M_w = 3.08, SD_w = .74 \); \( M_m = 2.78, SD_m = .67 \)), \( t(135) = 2.36, p < .05 \). However, men were more likely (\( M = 2.34, SD = .75 \)) than were women (\( M = 1.98, SD = .80 \)) to use humor as a coping mechanism, \( t(135) = 2.56, p < .05 \), and to use alcohol or drugs to cope, (\( M_m = 1.32, SD_m = .59 \); \( M_w = 1.12, SD_w = .30 \)), \( t(136) = 2.70, p < .01 \). Males were also more likely to say that they would be more likely to cope effectively with a stressful event (\( M = 4.59, SD = .98 \)) than were women (\( M = 4.05, SD = .85 \)), \( t(135) = 3.37, p < .001 \). There were no gender differences in any of the other coping or appraisal propensity variables (all \( ts < 2 \)). Regarding gender difference in relationship variables, men reported less emotional support (\( M = 4.00, SD = .87 \)) than did women (\( M = 4.40, SD = .64 \)), \( F(1, 50) = 4.60, p < .05 \). There were no effect of gender (all \( Fs < 5 \)) and no interaction between wave and gender (all \( Fs < 4 \)) for any of the other variables.

**What Predicts Outcomes?**

We tested whether Wave 2 strain or stress, propensity to use particular coping strategies at Wave 1, relationships, and prelaw academic status (LSAT and
undergraduate GPA) predicted changes in health, emotions, attrition, and attitudes. For coping tactics, we used the coping propensity at Time 1. For the remaining predictor variables, we used both the value at Wave 1 and the change in the value across time to predict outcomes. To evaluate predictive value, we computed partial correlations between each predictor variable and each outcome variable at Wave 2, controlling for the outcome at Wave 1.

**Health.** More health problems at Wave 2 were related positively to greater academic pressures and lack of personal time at Wave 2, more substance use as a coping tactic at Wave 1, and lower relationship happiness at Wave 1; and negatively to an increase in emotional support received over time. See Table 2.

**Emotional outcome.** Higher positive affect at Wave 2 (good mood) was related to low levels of stress or strain from academic pressures and social isolation at Wave 2. Higher positive affect was predicted by use of active coping strategies, less seeking of instrumental social support, and high relationship happiness at Wave 1. See Table 3.

Because negative affect and depression were highly correlated ($r_{\text{wave1}} = .63$, $p < .001$; $r_{\text{wave2}} = .76$, $p < .001$), we transformed depression and negative affect item scores into $z$ scores and then combined depression and negative affect to create a negative emotional outcome scale score for each participant (Wave 1 $\alpha = .92$; Wave 2 $\alpha = .94$). Negative emotional outcome at Wave 2 was related to high strain or stress from academic pressures, social isolation, and a lack of personal time at Wave 2. More negative emotions were also predicted by receiving low

**TABLE 2. Partial Correlations Between Health and Predictor Variables at Wave 2 Controlling for Wave 1 Health Status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Health problems at Wave 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress/strain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic pressures</td>
<td>.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal time</td>
<td>.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping propensity at Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance use as a coping tactic</td>
<td>.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in emotional support</td>
<td>-.46*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship happiness at Wave 1</td>
<td>-.53*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$. 
TABLE 3. Partial Correlations Between Emotional Outcome and Predictor Variables at Wave 2 Controlling for Wave 1 Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Negative emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress/strain at Wave 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic pressures</td>
<td>−.40**</td>
<td>.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal time</td>
<td>−.26</td>
<td>.47***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social isolation</td>
<td>−.39**</td>
<td>.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping propensity at Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active coping at Wave 1</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking instrumental</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social support at Wave 1</td>
<td>−.30*</td>
<td>−.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship happiness at Wave 1</td>
<td>.81***</td>
<td>−.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support at Wave 1</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>−.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving instrumental support at Wave 1</td>
<td>−.23</td>
<td>.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate GPA</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>−.35**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

emotional support at Wave 1, having a low undergraduate GPA, and receiving less instrumental support (i.e., help with chores) at Wave 1 (see Table 3).

Attitudes. Controlling for attitudes at Wave 1, we found that positive attitudes toward law school, positive attitudes toward the legal profession, and positive feelings about practicing law were correlated negatively with levels of strain or stress from academic pressures, lack of personal time, and social isolation at Wave 2. See Table 4. More positive attitudes were predicted by a propensity to use less venting as a coping tactic at Wave 1 and by feeling in control of stressful events at Wave 1. More positive attitudes were also positively correlated with increased relationship happiness at Wave 2.

Having thoughts of dropping out was positively correlated with strain or stress from academic pressures, lack of personal time, and social isolation at Wave 2. See Table 5. In addition, it was predicted by several coping propensities at Wave 1: seeking emotional social support and instrumental social support, using self-distraction techniques, venting, and not seeing stressful events as a challenge. Finally, thoughts of dropping out were predicted by receiving lower emotional support at Wave 1 and were negatively correlated with increased relationship happiness over time.

Actually planning on dropping out (not being in school the following year) was correlated with high levels of strain or stress from academic pressures,
### TABLE 4. Partial Correlations Between Attitudes at Wave 2 and Predictor Variables Controlling for Attitudes at Wave 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Positive attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress/strain at Wave 2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic pressures</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal time</td>
<td>-.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social isolation</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping propensity at Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling in control of stressful events at Wave 1</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in relationship happiness</td>
<td>.47*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.

### TABLE 5. Correlations Between Predictor Variables and Thoughts of Dropping Out and Not Planning on Returning Next Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Thoughts of dropping out</th>
<th>Not planning on returning next year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress/strain at Wave 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic pressures</td>
<td>.38***</td>
<td>.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal time</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.34***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social isolation</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of discrimination</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping propensity at Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking emotional support</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking instrumental support</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to law school faculty or administrators</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-distraction</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceiving stress as a challenge</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>-.31*</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in relationship happiness</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
lack of personal time, social isolation, and perceptions of discrimination at Wave 2. It was also predicted by coping propensities to vent and talk with law school faculty or administrators and by receiving low emotional support at Wave 1.

Discussion

The present study was one of the few that have used a longitudinal panel design to test for changes related to entry into law school. The results contribute to the growing evidence that it is something about the law school experience that causes the distress rather than the law students being atypical before entering law school (see Benjamin et al., 1986; McIntosh et al., 1994; Reifman et al., 2000). Furthermore, unlike previous studies, the present study examined psychosocial predictors of adjustment in law students. These data indicate specific factors that are linked to this distress and establish possible reasons for previously reported gender differences.

Declines in Physical and Psychological Health and Attitudes

Consistent with earlier researchers, we found that law students’ physical and psychological states declined. Negative affect and depression were more prevalent at the end of the 1st year than they were at the beginning, as were physical complaints. Accordingly, positive affect and students’ attitudes toward law school and the legal profession declined significantly over time. These findings confirm that the negative effects of law school on students’ physical and psychological health that have been reported over the past few decades continue to be an issue in legal education.

In contrast with many previous researchers, we did not find significant gender differences in adjustment to law school, or (with the exception of emotional support and a few coping variables) in the potential predictors of outcome—not even in perceived discrimination. Perhaps as more women have entered law school, discrimination has become less prevalent, and factors differentially affecting women might have changed. More specific to this sample—female law students do not report as much discrimination and do not show the magnitude of gender-related problems that have been found in schools with more female faculty (Garrison, Tomko, & Yip, 1996). The University of Denver is in the top 50% of 168 schools that had been surveyed and deemed the best law schools for women, a ranking that was based in part on the percentage of female faculty (Latham, 1995). Alternatively, we might not have had enough power in our longitudinal sample to detect a gender effect. It is a positive sign that we found no gender differences in outcome; additional studies in this and other locations need to be done to evaluate the conclusion of a generalized decrease in gender differences in the experience of legal education.
Predictors and Correlates of Adjustment

The present study also extends understanding of students' difficulties in law school by focusing on what predicts negative outcomes. Prior academic ability did not contribute to students' decline in physical and psychological health (with the exception of undergraduate GPA predicting negative emotion). Thus, it appears to be something about the law school experience rather than prior academic standing that causes student distress. We investigated several possible explanations.

Sources of stress. Like previous researchers, we found that students reported experiencing stress from the academic environment (Granfield, 1992), lack of personal time (Heins et al., 1983; McIntosh et al., 1994), and social isolation (McIntosh et al.). Extending previous work, we found that these variables were significant predictors of nearly every outcome (see Gannon & Pardie, 1989; Reifman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1990). For the first time, there is evidence beyond the anecdotal that these areas are important ones on which law schools should focus to decrease student stress. To the extent that the structure of legal education increases academic stress, the functioning of law students could be enhanced by changing the aversive components of law school (see Benjamin et al., 1986; Guinier et al., 1994; Reifman et al., 2000). Perhaps law schools could minimize environmental stressors (e.g., the Socratic method, large classes, and academic performance based solely on a final examination) to assure the negative outcomes that students experience. In fact, a few law schools have adopted some of these changes and have had some success at alleviating negative outcomes that 1st-year students experience (Fischer, 1996; Garrison et al., 1996).

Coping styles. Several coping propensities at Wave 1 predicted physical and psychological outcome at Wave 2. As noted earlier in the present article, previous results has been inconsistent about which coping styles are adaptive. It might be that the adaptive value of particular strategies varies with situation variables (e.g., how much actual control is present). In the present study, the use of three propensities was related to selected positive outcomes. Active coping predicted positive affect. Perceiving stress as a challenge was negatively related to thoughts of dropping out, and perceiving control over stressful events was positively related to positive attitudes at Wave 2. Propensity to use a number of other tactics at Wave 1 predicted later negative outcomes. Substance use predicted poorer physical health. Seeking instrumental social support to cope predicted lower positive affect and thoughts of dropping out. Several forms of emotion-focused coping (e.g., self-distraction, venting, and seeking emotional social support) were also related to thoughts of dropping out. In addition, venting was related to less positive attitudes at Wave 2.

These findings are in line with the studies that have found that the use of emotion-focused coping styles is related to negative psychological outcome
(Kolenc et al., 1990; Lapp & Collins, 1993; Moeller et al., 1992). Indeed, among law students, merely the propensity to use such tactics predicted worse adjustment to future stressors. Future work should examine what specific situational or individual variables moderate whether specific coping tactics are adaptive.

**Social Relationships**

Students who did not receive emotional support (e.g., did not have someone to listen to them about their problems and encourage them in their careers) at Wave 1 displayed more negative emotions at Wave 2 and were more likely to report thoughts of dropping out and to actually plan on dropping out. In addition, students who were happy with their romantic relationships at Wave 1 displayed more positive affect and fewer health problems at Wave 2. Law schools might want to emphasize to students during orientation that friends and family are valuable resources for students and that having a social support network is important. In addition, giving law students counseling options might also benefit them (Beck & Burns, 1979; Dickerson, 1987). Future studies should examine whether support that is related to such variables might help alleviate students’ law school–related health problems and negative psychological outcomes.

**Limitations**

There are two primary limitations of the present data. First, only about a fifth of the 1st-year class participated in both waves of the research. Although this raises concern about possible biases caused by self-selection, over half of the students responded to at least one of the waves. When we compared our longitudinal sample with those who responded to only one of Wave 1 and Wave 2, there were no differences. Thus, our longitudinal panel does not appear different from their law school peers. Second, these data are from a single law school. Replication with broader samples would strengthen confidence in the generalizability of these findings. However, because our findings of deterioration in physical and psychological status over the 1st-year replicate those from data from other schools, the confidence with which these results can be generalized is heightened. Our longitudinal sample is at least not clearly atypical.

**Conclusions**

Like previous researchers, we found that law students’ physical and psychological health and attitudes declined over time. Beyond previous researchers, we found that specific stressors experienced in law school, certain coping tactics, and relationship happiness and support at the beginning of law school accounted for students’ physical and psychological decline. Future studies should investigate steps that law schools can take to help alleviate these problems. In any case,
we hope that the information provided by this study will help law school administrators gain some insight into why the experience of law school has been such a negative one for some students and what factors might enable all students to thrive in the environment of law school.

NOTE

1. To ensure that there were no differences between responses in the strain items between participants who completed Wave 2 only and participants who completed both waves, we compared the responses of these two groups of participants. We found no differences (all is < 1).

REFERENCES


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