Depression and Affect
Among Law Students During Law School:
A Longitudinal Study

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ABSTRACT. Law students report a variety of negative emotional states and indicate that they experience humiliation, a lack of control, and isolation during their legal training. However, it is unclear whether their distress increases after entry into law school, and how their levels of distress compare to other populations. We collected self-report data on a cohort of students at a major law school before and throughout their training to investigate changes over time in psychological distress. Compared to their responses before starting law school, the students’...
amount of work required (Beck & Burns, 1979; Patton, 1968; Taylor, 1975), and the students' sense that law courses are too academic and not practically or socially relevant (Beck & Burns, 1979; Carrington & Conley, 1977; Taylor, 1975) have been proposed as sources of stress.

Qualitative information suggests the range and depth of the trauma experienced by some law students. As part of our research on stress in law school, we interviewed current and former law students, and asked current law students to write down anonymously their most stressful experience in law school. Themes that ran through the students' descriptions included humiliation, lack of control, and isolation. A 27-year-old man wrote that what was most difficult was: "Having one's confidence and self-esteem crushed into dirt; feeling ashamed of one's self all the time; feeling inadequate next to my peers." A 30-year-old woman wrote about the "pain" and "humiliation" of the job search process. A recent male graduate said that there is no connection between the amount of work and grades. Others echoed this theme; a 27-year-old woman wrote that grades seemed "so arbitrary that it drives me crazy." Similarly, a 26-year-old man wrote, "People need feedback, not a God-awful sense of impending doom!" Other students wrote of a "lack of community," or becoming "increasingly angry, lonely, and depressed as I listened to my 'friends' talk."

Given these descriptions, it may be no surprise that some law students show emotional distress. Humiliation, lack of control, and isolation are frequent components of emotionally abusive situations (Keashly, 1998). However, despite previous work documenting high levels of distress, two significant issues warrant further investigation. First, based on extant research, it is difficult to tell whether it is the law school experience itself that makes students depressed and anxious, or whether instead law school attracts applicants already demonstrating depression and anxiety (Dammeyer & Nunez, 1999, refer to these possibilities respectively as "socialization" and "selection"). To discover whether the psychological problems actually develop at law school, one must know how happy and healthy the students were before they arrived and trace their subsequent emotional progress through law school. A longitudinal study is required.

Shanfield and Benjamin (1985) collected data twice during the first year of law school, in October and in February, and found no significant differences in the average responses to the two questionnaires. These same investigators, along with some other colleagues (Benjamin, Kaszniak, Sales, & Shanfield, 1986), then released findings of a larger study in which some of their earlier respondent samples were augmented by the addition of a cohort in which students were surveyed in the summer before starting law school and in the spring of their first year. Results in this cohort showed a significant increase in symptoms from pre-law school days to middle of the first year. Noting this
depression levels were elevated during their law school careers. At the end of both the first and third years of law school, approximately half the students attained symptom scores suggestive of clinical depression. Comparisons were also made between the present sample and other groups for whom aggregate data were available. The law students appeared comparably distressed to unemployed people or individuals experiencing marital separation, for example. Assessment and treatment of psychological distress in graduate and professional students are discussed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: http://www.haworthpressinc.com>]

KEYWORDS. Emotion, professional training, law school, stress, trauma

Many law students experience depression, hostility, anxiety, and other emotional problems (Carrington & Conley, 1977; Dammeyer & Nunez, 1999; Patton, 1968; Pritchard & McIntosh, 1999; Shanfield & Benjamin, 1985; Silver, 1968; Stone, 1971; Taylor, 1975). Such symptoms in medical students are linked to training-related abuse (Richman, Flaherty, Rospenda, & Christensen, 1992). Law students show higher levels of symptoms than do medical students (Dammeyer & Nunez, 1999). For example, law students are more likely than are medical students to report drinking too much, trouble sleeping, diminished functioning, and loss of appetite (Heins, Fahey, & Henderson, 1983). These high levels of emotional symptoms suggest that, as with medical training, aspects of law school may be emotionally abusive (see discussion in Keashly, 1998).

The potentially aversive experiences of being a law student were vividly described in the popular media (e.g., Turow’s, 1977, One L, and the film, The Paper Chase, Bridges & Osborn, 1973). Dammeyer and Nunez (1999) report that there are “literally hundreds of published anecdotal” descriptions of the law school experience suggesting that students experience high levels of anxiety and depression. In addition, research suggests several potential sources of emotional distress in law school. The unfamiliar and challenging (some say abusive) style of teaching known as the “Socratic method” has been blamed (Beck & Burns, 1979; Patton, 1968; Stone, 1971; Taylor, 1975). In this procedure, students are singled out and questioned intensively (some students we interviewed said, “grilled”) in front of the class. The professor-student power difference, being singled out, and the humiliation many feel, make this a particularly clear example of potential abuse (see Keashly, 1998). In addition, the students’ fear of failure in an atmosphere of intense competition (Beck & Burns, 1979; Heins et al., 1983; Silver, 1968; Taylor, 1975), differences in values between professors and students (Stone, 1971), the
and their other findings, Benjamin et al. stated that, “Apparently, entering law students developed most of their symptoms within a few months after law school began” (p. 240). Throughout this research, however, Shanfield, Benjamin, and colleagues had no information that enabled them to link questionnaires for the same students over time, and therefore no way to trace changes in particular individuals. Thus, their data could have masked patterns such as a significant decline in well-being in some students compensated for by a significant improvement in others. Without the tracking of specific scores, we cannot know fully at the individual student level whether entry into law school is linked to increased symptoms, decreased symptoms, or no change. Regarding the selection/socialization distinction noted above, Benjamin et al. concluded, based on the data available to them, that “It also appears that the law school educational process itself affects individuals rather than that certain types of individuals choosing to enter law school overreact [sic] to the process because of their unique and rare vulnerabilities” (p. 247).

The second question not fully answered involves the extent of distress. How does the psychological status of law students compare to that of other populations? Even if the law school experience increases levels of distress, this does not tell us whether these levels are normal or extreme. Only one study (Benjamin et al., 1986; Shanfield & Benjamin, 1985) has used established psychological measurement instruments and large samples. Although qualitative investigations using small samples provide insight into the experience of law school (e.g., Stone, 1971), the use of established measures and larger samples allows for cross-group comparisons of the level of symptoms (Dammeyer & Nunez, 1999). For example, Shanfield and Benjamin found that law students had distress scores higher than those of the general population. Standardized psychological tests also allow investigators at different institutions to replicate previous findings and ensure that psychological characteristics are measured reliably.

In the present study, we used the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). By consulting published summaries of CES-D research, we could compare the scores obtained in our samples with those obtained by “non-stressed” respondents, and by people experiencing other forms of trauma (e.g., unemployed persons or individuals going through marital separation). We used the CES-D and a measure of mood to track the depression and affect of a law school class from before students’ arrival on campus throughout their law school career. This allowed us to compare their levels of distress to other groups, and to shed further light on whether the law school experience itself causes negative changes in psychological status.

Finally, a critical question in the study of stress among law students is one of generalizability of time and place. Are the students surveyed in previous
reports more stressed than students at other law schools? Has the environment in law schools become less traumatizing over time? Our study begins to address this issue by examining the status of students at another school, roughly a decade later than most previous work (i.e., our study was done primarily in the early 1990s, compared to other studies that took place in the early 1980s and before).

**METHOD**

*Sample and Procedure*

We followed a cohort of students at the University of Michigan law school for all three years of their training. Approximately 370 individuals were in the class at the start of the first year. We sent a cover letter explaining the project and a questionnaire with return envelope in the orientation packets to all incoming first-year students before the Fall semester with a request that questionnaires be returned before the start of classes. Questionnaires were obtained from 175 respondents at this first wave (at this and other waves, sample sizes for specific variables may be lower than the number of returned questionnaires due to missing data on individual items).

In February, we distributed the second questionnaire to all first-year students through their school mailboxes. One hundred thirty-six were returned at Wave 2. A third questionnaire was administered in classes on the last day of first-year instruction; 244 were completed (Wave 3). Finally, we distributed questionnaires through campus mail in the last month of students' second (Wave 4; 74 returned) and third (Wave 5; 118 returned) years. Because some people may have dropped out or taken leaves of absence before the second or third years of school, the potential base of students during the later waves was somewhat lower than the initial pool of 370. To guarantee anonymity, respondents did not put their names on any of the questionnaires. We traced students from one assessment to the next by matching their birthplaces and birth dates, which they provided on each questionnaire.

The sample was roughly 55% male and 45% female (this figure differed slightly from one questionnaire administration to the next). The sample was also approximately 75–80% white. Most students came directly from undergraduate college (63.0%), while approximately 30% had been employed during the previous year (8.1% in law-related work, 22.5% in other work). The remaining students were distributed across other endeavors (e.g., other types of graduate school). Their average age during the first year was approximately 24 years, although ages ranged to the 50s. Married students constituted approximately 10% of the class at Wave 1.
We had hoped to contrast students' levels of psychological health throughout all five waves of assessment, but attrition made this impossible. We focus instead on changes that occurred over Waves 1, 3, and 5, because a reasonable number of students completed the depression inventory on all three of these occasions (N = 45). Thus, changes in depression can be assessed in the same individuals over these three time points. We refer to the individuals with complete participation at waves 1, 3, and 5 as the focal sample. The focal sample did not differ substantially from those who responded sporadically to the questionnaires across waves.

**Measures**

**Depression.** As stated above, we measured depressive symptoms with the CES-D (Radloff, 1977). This 20-item instrument lists various symptoms (e.g., "I felt sad," "I had crying spells") and asks respondents to indicate how often they had experienced each one in the past week (scored from 0 [rarely or none of the time/less than 1 day] to 3 [most or all of the time/5-7 days]). Cronbach's alpha coefficients of internal consistency were generally in the range of .8-.9 during the study. While neither the CES-D nor any other self-report depression scale alone can be used for clinical diagnosis of depression (Kendall, Hollon, Beck, Hammen, & Ingram, 1987), cut-off scores on the CES-D have been used to suggest cases of depression (16 or higher) and "severe" depression (31 or higher) (Frerichs, Aneshensel, & Clark, 1981; Hsu & Marshall, 1987; Ritchey, LaGory, Fitzpatrick, & Mullis, 1990). We present the results in terms of both continuous scores and percentages above the two cut-off scores.

**General mood.** We assessed general positive and negative mood with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Ten items each are used to measure positive affect (e.g., excited, inspired) and negative affect (e.g., upset, afraid). Respondents indicate the degree to which they experience these feelings in general (scored from 1 [very slightly or not at all] to 5 [extremely]). Items are summed to provide scores. Similarly high alpha coefficients were obtained for the positive and negative affect scales as for depression (i.e., .8-.9 range). The PANAS has been used primarily with college-student samples. Whereas the CES-D assesses specific behavioral symptoms of depression, the PANAS items are somewhat more abstract and tap a broader range of affective experience (e.g., anxiety, hostility).

**RESULTS**

**Patterns of Depression over Time**

Table 1 displays comparative levels of depression over the first, third, and fifth waves of the study, both in terms of mean depression scores and the
TABLE 1. Depression Indicators Across Waves 1, 3, and 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure and Sample</th>
<th>Wave 1 Prior to First-Year Orientation</th>
<th>Wave 3 End of First Year</th>
<th>Wave 5 End of Third Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean CES-D Focal Sample (N = 45)</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean CES-D Focal Sample (N = 163)</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean CES-D Focal Sample (N = 208)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Maximum sample at each wave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with CES-D ≥ 16 Focal Sample</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with CES-D ≥ 16 Maximum Sample</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent with CES-D ≥ 16 Maximum Sample</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with CES-D ≥ 31 Focal Sample</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with CES-D ≥ 31 Maximum Sample</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

percentage of respondents above the cut-off scores. Also, results are presented both for the focal sample (complete participation) and for the largest possible sample at each wave (i.e., all individuals who completed the measure at Wave 1 are included in the Wave-1 mean, whether or not they completed the other waves; the same for Waves 3 and 5).

First, mean CES-D levels are presented for the focal sample. A one-way within-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated that the means were significantly different across waves, $F(2, 88) = 14.03, p < .0001$. Inspection of the means indicates the major difference was between depressive symptoms at Wave 1 versus those at the later waves. The second row of Table 1 presents CES-D means from the maximum available samples at each wave. Each time, the means were similar for the focal sample and for the broader set of respondents. Thus, although our focal sample of 45 students represents a small proportion of the total class, these students did not differ in depression from students who participated only sporadically.

Examining mean scores may conceal important information about the underlying distribution of students experiencing problems (Dammeyer & Nunez, 1999). Therefore, we also considered the percentage of students reporting very high levels of depression. The third and fourth lines report the percentage of the focal and maximum available samples that were at or above the CES-D cut-off of 16 at each wave. At Wave 1, approximately 20% could
be considered depressed under either sampling arrangement (focal or maximum available). Again, the major rise took place after Wave 1, with roughly half of the respondents meeting or exceeding the depression cut-off at Waves 3 and 5; we discuss the practical significance of these percentages below. The fifth and sixth lines report the percentages of respondents meeting or exceeding the "severe" depression cut-off of 31. Whereas almost no respondents were at this high level before they started law school, approximately 10% had reached this level at the later waves.

Mean CES-D levels were very similar at Waves 3 and 5, as were percentages of students with elevated scores. One possible explanation for this aggregate similarity is that many of the students developed a chronic level of depressive symptoms that were maintained from the end of the first year of law school (or earlier) to the end of the third year. Alternatively, equal numbers of students could have experienced large increases and large decreases in their depression scores between Waves 3 and 5, with these two trends canceling each other out.

To investigate this issue, we examined the standing of students in the focal sample on the dichotomous depression indicator (< 16 vs. ≥ 16) at Waves 3 and 5. Nineteen students were under 16 at both waves, 19 were at or above 16 at both waves, three went from below 16 at Wave 3 to at least 16 at Wave 5, and four went from at least 16 at Wave 3 to below it at Wave 5. In a similar analysis with ≥ 31 as the cut-off, 37 students were below 31 at Waves 3 and 5, with no more than four students showing any other pattern of symptom change. Thus, students tended to remain stable in their depressive symptom levels from the end of the first year (Wave 3) to the end of the third year (Wave 5), whether they were above or below 16 at Wave 3.

**Comparison with Depression Levels in Other Samples**

Although our results indicate a rise in students' levels of depressive symptoms from before they started law school to later points in their training, they do not convey how distressed the students were compared to other groups of people. The mean depression levels at Waves 3 and 5 were higher than what is commonly used as a cut-off on the CES-D to suggest depression (i.e., 16), and therefore provide some indication of the students' distress, but other sources of information are also available.

Epidemiological studies, using representative samples of large geographic areas (e.g., Los Angeles County), have found mean CES-D levels of approximately 11 for samples of 18-24 year-olds (Dean & Ensel, 1983; Frerichs et al., 1981; Newmann, 1989). The law students' means before class attendance were similar to this level (see Table 1, Wave 1), which argues against the idea that students coming to law school, as a group, are already highly distressed.
By the end of a year of law school, half the law students had CES-D scores equal to or exceeding 16, and one-tenth had scores at or above 31, and their scores remained at these high levels throughout their law school career. These results are startling, given percentages reported for other groups (Clery et al., 1993; Hsu & Marshall, 1987; Ritchey et al., 1990). Only 5-20% of “normal” community samples, 23% of medical residents, interns, and fellows, and 33% of general practice medical doctors have scores above the cutoff point of 16. The percent of law students above the cutoff is more similar to percentages from samples experiencing extreme stress: 30-45% of unemployed people; 30-45% of HIV-positive blood donors two weeks after notification; 50% of people experiencing death of their spouse or marital separation in the past year; 50-60% of patients being treated for substance abuse; 50-70% of homeless people; and 60% and higher for various psychiatric samples. (Comparable data on the cut-off score of 31 are not available.)

Additional Indicators of Emotional Well-Being

To test whether the increases in law students’ distress were specific to the types of symptoms measured on the CES-D or reflect a broader spectrum of emotional problems, we also report data on general mood as assessed by the PANAS. As shown in Table 2, students who completed the negative affect measure at Waves 1, 3, and 5 demonstrated a small but significant increase on this variable between Wave 1 and the later occasions, $F(2, 92) = 3.25, p < .05$. The positive affect scale represents an upbeat, energetic disposition. Relative to Wave 1, students experienced a significant reduction on this variable during their law school years, $F(2, 88) = 21.67, p < .0001$.

As mentioned above, norms for the PANAS are based primarily on college undergraduates (Watson et al., 1988). The positive mood mean of 35.0 in the published normative sample is similar to our Wave 1 means of 35.8 (students who completed all phases of the research) and 36.27 (the 172 students total who completed this scale at Wave 1). The law students’ pre-attendance negative mood means (20.5 for all-phase respondents, 20.0 for the 171 students total who completed this scale at Wave 1) were somewhat higher than the normative mean of 18.1, however. Many of the negative mood items reflect feelings of fear and anxiety. In the weeks before the start of classes, students

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2. General Mood Across Waves 1, 3, and 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Affect (N = 47)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Affect (N = 45)</td>
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</table>
may have been somewhat uncertain about whether they really wanted to go to law school, or may have been worrying about the upcoming transition.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous research, we found that law students experience high levels of emotional distress during their professional training. However, our data go beyond most of the previous literature by documenting that before law school the students' depression levels were similar to general population norms. This argues against the proposition that law school attracts students who are already distressed. Further, students show significant changes in negative and positive affect after beginning classes, demonstrating more general negative emotional consequences of law school. It appears that attending law school can cause high levels of negative emotional symptoms. An indication of the students' distress is the similarity of their depression levels at the end of the first and third years to those of individuals who had undergone major life traumas (e.g., death of spouse, marital separation). Indeed, the mean depression score after entry into law school is above the scale cut-off for depression. Similar data just collected at another law school show similarly high levels of depression at the end of the first year (Pritchard & McIntosh, 1999). This suggests that the phenomenon is not limited to the present study's sample, and that some current students continue to experience difficulties.

One might expect some increase in psychological symptoms corresponding to entry into law school, simply because the students were undergoing a life transition. The high levels of depression reported, and the continuation of the emotional symptoms throughout law school suggest, however, that the source of the distress is not merely a life transition. Instead, this suggests that factors in law school itself cause a high level of psychological distress.

Limitations of the Present Study

Although this study provides clear evidence that scores on measures of emotional distress rise significantly after entry into law school, there are a number of limitations that should be addressed by future researchers. First, like earlier studies, our data are from a single institution at a particular time. Our findings could reflect something unique about the environment or students at the University of Michigan law school. Research based on a broader sampling of institutions would provide more generalizable information about whether there are notable problems in legal education in general, or only at select schools.

Second, there are limitations to using a self-report measure. Specifically, scores on the CES-D cannot be used to diagnose depression. These data indicate only that a group of law students was reporting significant emotional
distress. In the absence of a full clinical evaluation, we do not know how many, if any, are clinically depressed. In addition, law students may be motivated to over-report their distress (Glenn, 1996).

Third, although other researchers and the students we interviewed suggest possible proximal causes for distress, the present data do not indicate why these students’ emotional distress increased in law school. Some previous findings suggest some possible explanations. In an earlier report of ours focusing on just the first year of the study (McIntosh, Keywell, Reifman, & Ellsworth, 1994), various indices of stress (e.g., social isolation, grading/feedback concerns, reactions to the Socratic method) were found to predict prospectively several unhealthy outcomes. Further, Benjamin et al. (1986) found that concern with meeting high standards and time pressures increased from before the start of law school to the middle of the first year. Future research should continue to search for causes of student distress. There is, however, variability in student responses to law school, which indicates that distress is not an inevitable feature of legal education. Therefore, future work should examine variability within student populations to determine what factors are helpful and detrimental in adapting to and thriving during professional training.

**Implications**

Studies of students in medicine (Clark & Zeldow, 1988; Wolf, Von Almen, Faucett, Randall, & Franklin, 1991), psychology (Goplerud, 1980), and social work (Koeske & Koeske, 1991), as well as studies using samples from multiple disciplines (Heins et al., 1983; Shanfield & Benjamin, 1985) find that other graduate and professional students show emotional distress. Such distress is pervasive and has been related to abuse of those being trained in medical settings (Richman et al., 1992; Uhari et al., 1994). Although the severity of the problem appears to be worse among law students than among medical students, for example (Dammeyer & Nunez, 1999; Heins et al., 1983; Shanfield & Benjamin, 1985), the combined findings should prompt consideration of the seemingly aversive nature of the processes of graduate education in general. Is there an effective way to educate professionals without causing high levels of emotional harm?

There has already been discussion of interventions on a more individual level. Beck and Burns (1979) present a model of response to student distress based on their own experience; these authors were, respectively, the Vice-Dean of a law school and a psychiatrist at the affiliated medical school. Beck and Burns suggested that law school officials (faculty, deans, or administrators) can take a very active role when distressed students come to them for help. In Beck and Burns’s own experience during a previous academic year, the Vice-Dean counseled 25 students, 12 of whom were referred to the
psychiatrist (for another description of a law school counseling program, see Dickerson, 1987).

Beck and Burns (1979) offer specific advice about how to listen to the student describing his or her problems, what kinds of questions to ask the student, how to administer and interpret measures of depression (both paper-and-pencil and interview), and how to decide whether the student should be referred for professional help. Provided the symptoms appear to be mild or moderate and the official is genuinely interested in aiding the student, Beck and Burns believe that a law school official can provide nonprofessional intervention. Specific exercises for raising the student’s mood and motivation are described, for law school personnel who are interested in providing counseling. The success of this and other types of interventions in ameliorating the negative consequences of law school should be studied.

Clark and Zeldow (1988) also discussed steps that could be taken to improve student well-being; their suggestions were directed to medical educators, but presumably could be extended to officials in other disciplines. According to Clark and Zeldow,

> Increased support for students might take the form of anticipatory education and more active outreach on the part of student counseling services. Vigorous counseling outreach activity may be necessary to inform students of available services and to correct misperceptions about psychiatric treatment. (p. 2527)

Dammeyer and Nunez (1999) note that students’ symptoms may derive from experiencing many uncontrollable stressors. They speculate that increasing students’ feelings of control may help. More generally, they point out that work investigating the specific causes of distress among law students will suggest potentially useful interventions. They also note that any interventions should be empirically evaluated. We agree with both points.

Law school provides an example of an institution whose practices and/or environment can have severe emotional consequences for its members. We believe that further work is needed to explore both the specific causes of distress among law students, and also general institutional practices that cause members to report, as ours did, that they feel humiliated, out of control, and isolated.

REFERENCES


