

# THE RELATIONSHIP OF ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE, WORK ADDICTION, PERCEIVED STRESS AND ALCOHOL ABUSE IN LAWYERS IN NORTH CAROLINA

Excerpts from a doctoral dissertation by

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"The legal profession, like all other cultures, functions a bit like a huge campfire around which people tell stories deep into the night. Whether the stories are humorous, outrageous, poignant, or distressing, together they capture the tone and texture of what it feels like to practice law today. (Keeva, 1999, p. 4)

Increasingly, however, the stories many contemporary lawyers tell speak of growing dissatisfaction and disappointment, with a tonal darkness nearly as deep as night itself. There is evidence of high levels of depression (Beck, Sales, & Benjamin, 1995; Benjamin, Kaszniak, Sales, & Shanfield, 1986), work addiction (American Bar Association, ABA, 1991; Sells, 1993), perceived stress (Beck, et al.), and substance abuse (Beck, et al.; Benjamin, Darling & Sales, 1990; Drogin, 1991) among lawyers. Moreover, evidence of such distress is found not only in data from empirical studies, but it is also told in the pessimistic attributions lawyers ascribe to their personal and professional dilemma (ABA, 1991; Boston Bar Association, BBA, 1997; North Carolina Bar Association, NCBA, 1991).

The purpose of this study was to examine variables previously reported to have some relationship to depression in lawyers (e.g., alcohol abuse and perceived stress) and to add new variables (e.g.,

attributional style and work addiction) which had not been examined in the literature. Evidence from prior studies of lawyers reported higher than normal levels of depression (Beck, Sales, & Benjamin, 1995; Benjamin, Kaszniak, Sales & Shanfied, 1986; North Carolina Bar Association (NCBA), 1991), alcohol abuse (Beck, et al., Benjamin, Darling & Sales, 1990; Drogin, 1991), and perceived stress (Beck, et al.). Moreover, lawyers' work habits appeared to have an association with work addiction (American Bar Association (ABA), 1991; Sells, 1993) and the pessimistic attributions lawyers ascribed to their personal and professional dilemmas were noted in the literature (ABA, 1991, Boston Bar Association (BBA), 1997). It was therefore determined that variables measuring lawyers' attributions and work addiction would be included in this study. Further, a comprehensive examination of this phenomenon required an inspection of those aspects of law practice which distinguished the more salient predictors of depression in lawyers.

The problem was determined to be significant for at least three reasons. First, the scant research available on lawyers' depression was limited to a few empirical studies. Because a clear picture of the specific risk factors related to depression was not fully examined, this study was designed to offer a first step to address this gap in knowledge by focusing on depression-related variables reported in the literature. Second, because empirical studies and anecdotal reports suggested serious problems with depression in the legal profession, a key to this dilemma had been left unexamined. Attribution theory

suggests that the causes of successes and failures in life are dictated by the extent to which "helplessness" (depression) is chronic, pervasive and undermining of self-esteem. Therefore, the influence of attributional style on depression in lawyers had not been previously examined. Finally, because legal training and practice produces intense competition, multiple demands, high performance requirements, and need for control and perfectionism, such conditions are reported to be risk factors for work addiction (Robinson, 1999) and can lead to depression, anger, and anxiety (Haymon, 1993). To date, a study of the legal culture's patterns of work behaviors had not been previously reported.

The primary aim of this study was to 1) determine if there was relationship to attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse in lawyers, and 2) if attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse predicted depression in lawyers. A summary of the study's research questions, methodology, findings, conclusions, and concluding comments follow.

### Research Questions

This study used survey research methods to collect data. Correlational methods were used to examine the relationship between depression (dependent variable), and (a) attributional style, (b) work addiction, (c) perceived stress, and (d) alcohol abuse (independent variables). The following research questions were examined in this study:

1. In lawyers, is there a relationship between (a) depression and

attributional style, (b) depression and work addiction, (c) depression and perceived stress, and (d) depression and alcohol abuse?

2. In lawyers, do (a) attributional style, (b) work addiction, (c) perceived stress, and (d) alcohol abuse predict depression?

### Methodology

A random sample was drawn from the computerized membership list of the North Carolina State Bar. A survey, including demographic questions and five psychometric instruments (measuring depression, attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse), was mailed to 1000 lawyers. A cover letter, a self-addressed stamped envelope, and a self-addressed stamped return post card was mailed to each lawyer using first class postage. Assurances of confidentiality were included in the cover letter and printed on the survey. Two separate reminder post cards were mailed within two week periods of the preceding reminder notice. Data was dated, coded, and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software as it was received. A sample of 292 was used in the final analysis.

To assess whether a relationship existed between depression and attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse, Pearson product correlation coefficients were calculated. A standard multiple regression analysis was used to determine the independent variables predicting depression. Independent *t* tests were conducted to measure the differences between males and females and an analysis of variance was conducted to measure the differences

occurring between types of law firm practice and types of law firm positions.

### Findings

The findings revealed that over 27% of the lawyers in the study are depressed. The higher levels of depression found in this study relative to previous studies indicates depression in lawyers has risen considerably over time (Beck, et al., 1995, Benjamin, et al., 1990; NCBA, 1991). The study reported no differences in levels of depression between males ( $M = 31.32$ ,  $SD = 9.52$ ) and females ( $M = 33.42$ ,  $SD = 10.56$ ). The study also reported no differences in depression between types of practice, including private practice, corporate counsel, government/public sector, judiciary, and "other" practice. Statistically significant differences were found in law firm positions between partners ( $M = 29.59$ ,  $SD = 8.58$ ) and junior associates ( $M = 36.05$ ,  $SD = 12.16$ ).

The study revealed that a significant number of lawyers (53%) have attributional personality styles which are pessimistic in nature. There were statistically significant differences between males ( $M = 16.58$ ,  $SD = 4.53$ ) and females ( $M = 14.90$ ,  $SD = 4.71$ ) for attributional style, showing males to be more pessimistic than females. Junior associates had a lower average attributional style scores than all other positions types ( $p < .05$ ), demonstrating that younger lawyers appear to be more pessimistic than other participants in the study. This is consistent with earlier research (ABA, 1991), and may speak to the growing

dissatisfaction in the profession found among younger lawyers. The analysis revealed no differences between law practice descriptions.

The study revealed that over half of the lawyers (51%) experience stress at levels beyond that of the normal population. Junior associates ( $M = 26.39$ ,  $SD = 3.29$ ) had a higher average levels of stress than did partners ( $M = 21.19$ ,  $SD = 3.58$ ) ( $p < .05$ ). These findings may be the result of the pressure younger lawyers feels to work longer hours, imposed deadlines, scrutiny, or critical judgment from others, and which may be different from partners. Female participants ( $M = 21.62$ ,  $SD = 8.32$ ) were more likely to be stressed than males ( $M = 23.90$ ,  $SD = 9.52$ ). This result is consistent with previous research (Beck, et al., 1995). There were no statistical differences found between law practice descriptions.

A significant number (26%) of lawyers in the study were found to be work addicted. There were no statistically significant differences between genders, position type, or law practice description on work addiction.

The results of the study also revealed that 5.5% of the participants had higher averages of alcohol abuse than the normal population, and that males ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 2.98$ ) were more likely to abuse alcohol than females ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 4.53$ ). Alcohol abuse was not a statistically significant predictor of depression in lawyers. This result is different from earlier studies (Beck, et al., 1995; Benjamin, et al., 1990; NCBA, 1991).

In summary, the results of this study revealed that there are

statistically significant factors that are predictive of depression in lawyers. These factors include a pessimistic attributional style, work addiction, and perceived stress. These results indicate potentially serious implications for legal education, legal practice, clients, and lawyers' important relationships. The findings in this study suggest that the legal profession needs to take a careful look at how it can assist lawyers who show signs of depression by supporting programs and services that may help them understand the consequences of such distress. Leaders in the profession, including legal educators, law firm administration, and bar organizations should begin serious introspection into the way the contemporary practice of law may be feeding depression in lawyers.

### Concluding Remarks

This study offers evidence that levels of depression in lawyers continue to rise and that pessimism, work addiction, and perceived stress play important relationships in the distress symptoms found in the legal profession. Further research can help to clarify whether these dysfunctions are a direct result of the way lawyers are trained and their work environments.

For over fifteen years, leaders in the profession have discussed and debated what measures can be taken to assist lawyers who are suffering from depression and how the contemporary practice of law may be influential in such distress. Lawyer Assistance Programs have been developed in virtually every state in the country, providing lawyers with assistance and advice to help them with depression. But

much more can be done before the debilitating effects of depression takes its toll on lawyers, their clients, and their families, breeding dissatisfaction and public distrust of the legal system.

The results of this study offer a first step into a more complete picture of depression in lawyers. It is apparent that in order to thrive in a culture that is highly stressful, where work addiction and pessimism are apparent, lawyers must learn to 1) manage stress, 2) avoid occupational habits that are workaholic in nature, and 3) understand that optimism is favorable to pessimism. It may be that such knowledge and behaviors can help reduce depression in lawyers and that lawyers can live productive, healthy lives as a result.

Three important aspects remain for the future. First, the legal profession needs to take an open and honest approach to helping depressed lawyers. Such approaches may be to expand Lawyer Assistance Program services to address these problems. Second, the legal profession should pay special attention to younger lawyers who, from the results of this study, demonstrate higher than average levels of depression, pessimism, and stress than other positions. Third, there is need to know what other factors endemic to the practice of law lead to pessimism, work addiction, and stress, and when combined, lead to depression. Additional research on the matter can provide further evidence, but it is fair to question how much more evidence is needed for the legal profession to act responsibly in educating, supporting, and encouraging treatment for depression. What is done by leaders in the profession can result in positive consequences for clients, family



members, and lawyers themselves. One can only hope that a combination of programs, including informed counseling and treatment, will result in beneficial changes in the lives of our lawyers. Perhaps then, the stories that lawyers tell will be ones that are absent depression.

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