

Did the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic lead to changes in character strengths?



Dr. Lisa Wagner

Vortrag im Rahmen der Vortragsreihe Wissenschaft in Zeiten von Corona –
Forschung über und während der Corona-Pandemie am Campus Oerlikon»

Character strengths

- Peterson and Seligman (2004) proposed the Values in Action (VIA) classification of 24 character strengths.
- Character strengths are *positive valued personality traits* and describe "what is right about people" .
- Character strengths are expected to:
 - *"contribute to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others"*
 - be malleable; they can for example be changed by deliberate practice or significant life events.
- The idea that major life events foster growth in character strengths has been mentioned early on ("That which does not kill us makes us stronger")

The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths

Wisdom and Knowledge

- (1) **creativity**: thinking of novel and productive ways to do things
- (2) **curiosity**: taking an interest in all of ongoing experience
- (3) **judgment**: thinking things through and examining them from all sides
- (4) **love of learning**: mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge
- (5) **perspective**: being able to provide wise counsel to others

Courage

- (6) **bravery**: not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
- (7) **persistence**: finishing what one starts
- (8) **honesty**: speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
- (9) **zest**: approaching life with excitement and energy

Humanity

- (10) **love**: valuing close relations with others
- (11) **kindness**: doing favors and good deeds for others
- (12) **social intelligence**: being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others

Justice

- (13) **teamwork**: working well as member of a group or team
- (14) **fairness**: treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice
- (15) **leadership**: organizing group activities and seeing that they happen

Temperance

- (16) **forgiveness**: forgiving those who have done wrong
- (17) **humility**: letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves
- (18) **prudence**: being careful about one's choices
- (19) **self-regulation**: regulating what one feels and does

Transcendence

- (20) **appreciation of beauty and excellence**: noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life
- (21) **gratitude**: being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen
- (22) **hope**: expecting the best and working to achieve it
- (23) **humor**: liking to laugh and joke; bringing smiles to other people
- (24) **spirituality**: having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

Character growth following life events?

- Peterson et al. (2008) examined the relationship between character strengths, the number of adverse life events experienced and posttraumatic growth (perceived positive changes following a potentially traumatic event)
- Several character strengths were positively related to the number of potentially traumatic events experienced (largest effects: bravery, creativity, appreciation of beauty and excellence, and kindness)
- Substantial relationships between character strengths and posttraumatic growth (in particular, spirituality, gratitude, kindness, hope, bravery, and appreciation of beauty and excellence)



($N = 1.739$)

t_0

Adverse life events

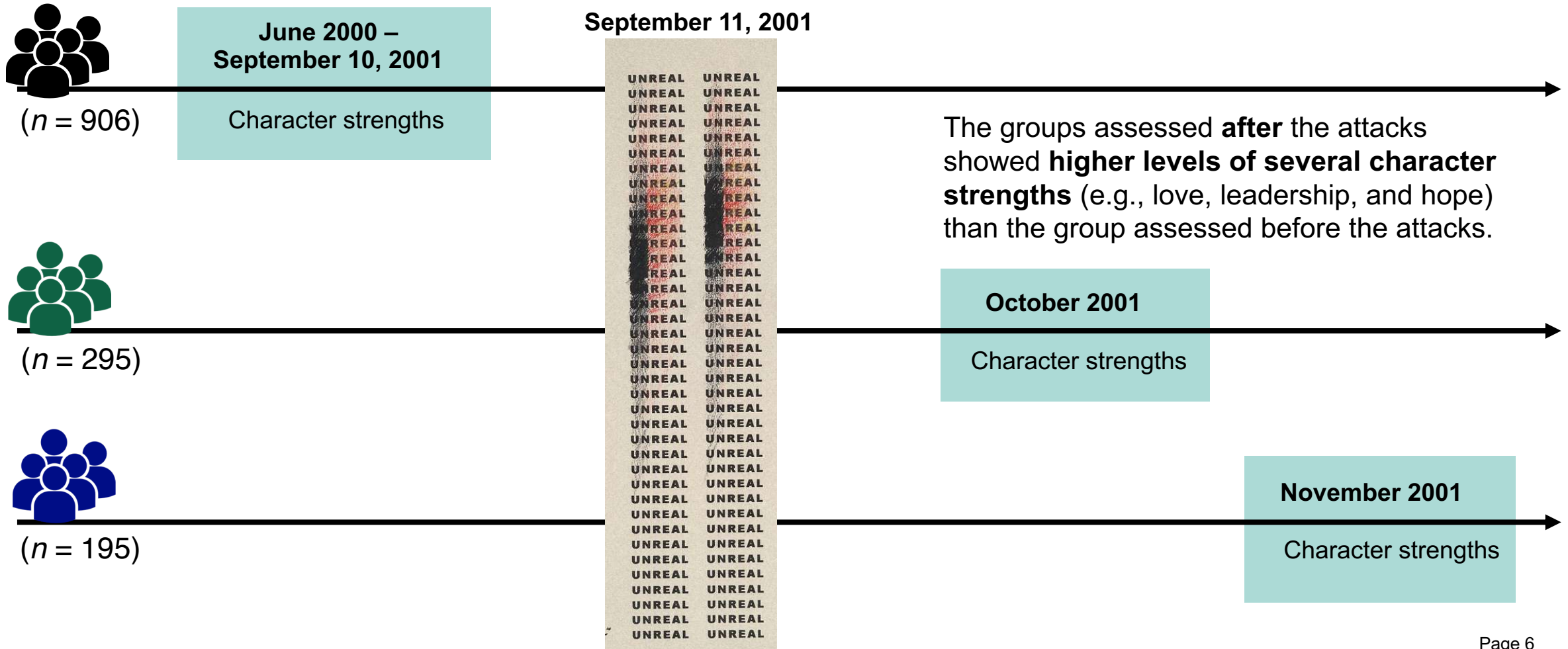
e.g., accident, natural or human-made disaster
physical attack, unwanted sexual contact, kidnapping, torture, illness

t_1

- Character strengths
- Number of events
- Posttraumatic growth

Character growth following *collective* life events?

Peterson and Seligman (2003) compared character strengths of individuals who completed a character strengths measure before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, one month, and two months after.



Your own experience

Did you perceive any changes with regard to your character strengths following the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Wisdom and Knowledge

- (1) creativity
- (2) curiosity
- (3) judgment
- (4) love of learning
- (5) perspective

Courage

- (6) bravery
- (7) persistence
- (8) honesty
- (9) zest

Humanity

- (10) love
- (11) kindness
- (12) social intelligence

Justice

- (13) teamwork
- (14) fairness
- (15) leadership

Temperance

- (16) forgiveness
- (17) humility
- (18) prudence
- (19) self-regulation

Transcendence

- (20) appreciation of beauty and excellence
- (21) gratitude
- (22) hope
- (23) humor
- (24) spirituality



Research questions of the present study

1. Did **character strengths change** following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a) Did people perceive changes in themselves?
 - b) Did people perceive changes in others?
 - c) Did character strengths change when measured before and after the pandemic?
2. Do character strengths predict **well-being** during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Do character strengths predict **compliance with governmental regulations** and **engagement in volunteering** during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

Sample & Instruments



($N = 337_{\text{self}} / 366_{\text{peer}}$)

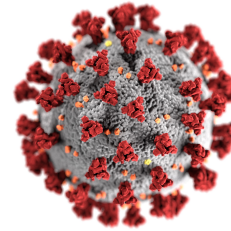
July 18 – December 19

Before crisis

- Character strengths

March 20 – April/May 20

First wave of crisis



June 20 – August 20

After first wave of crisis

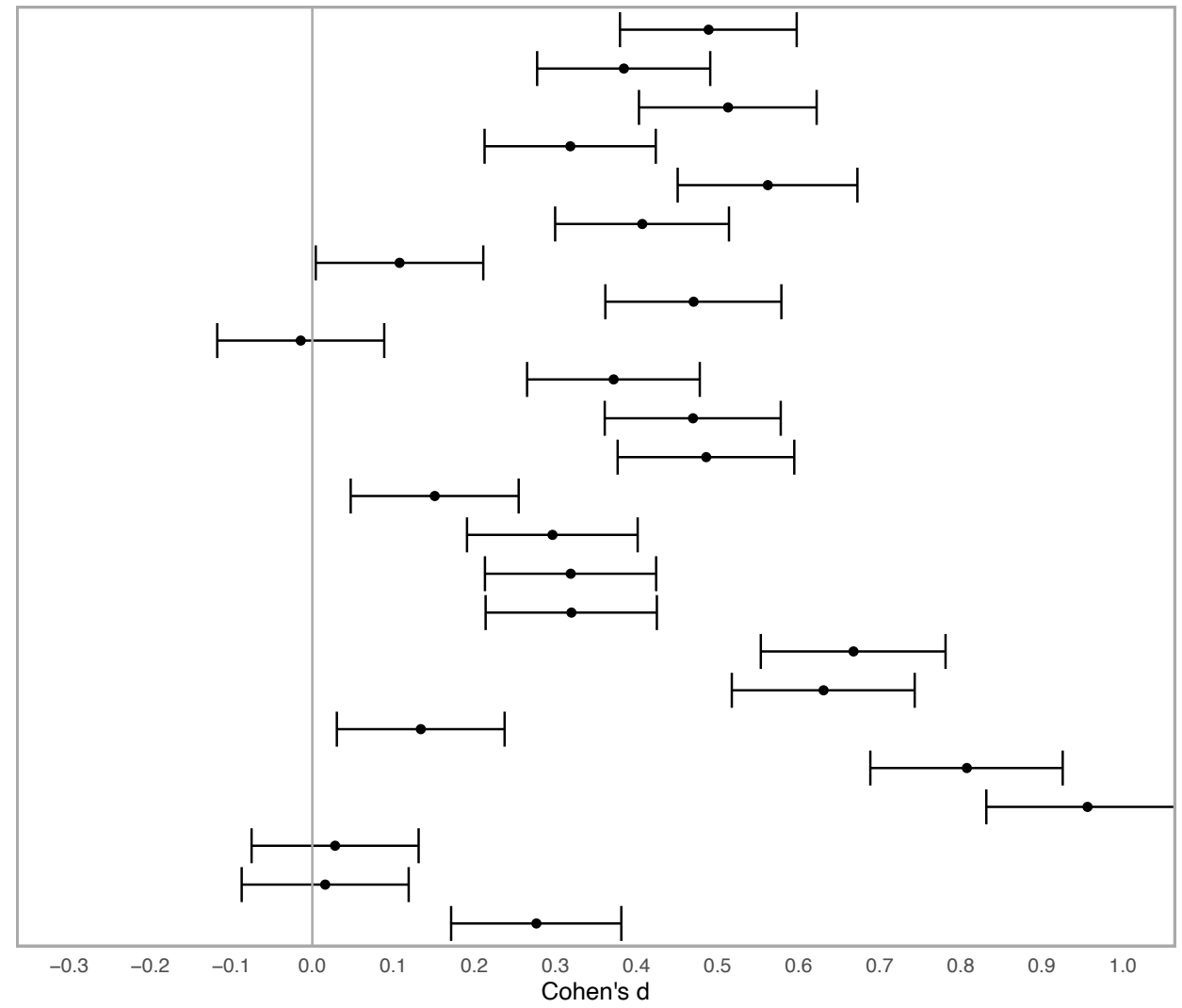
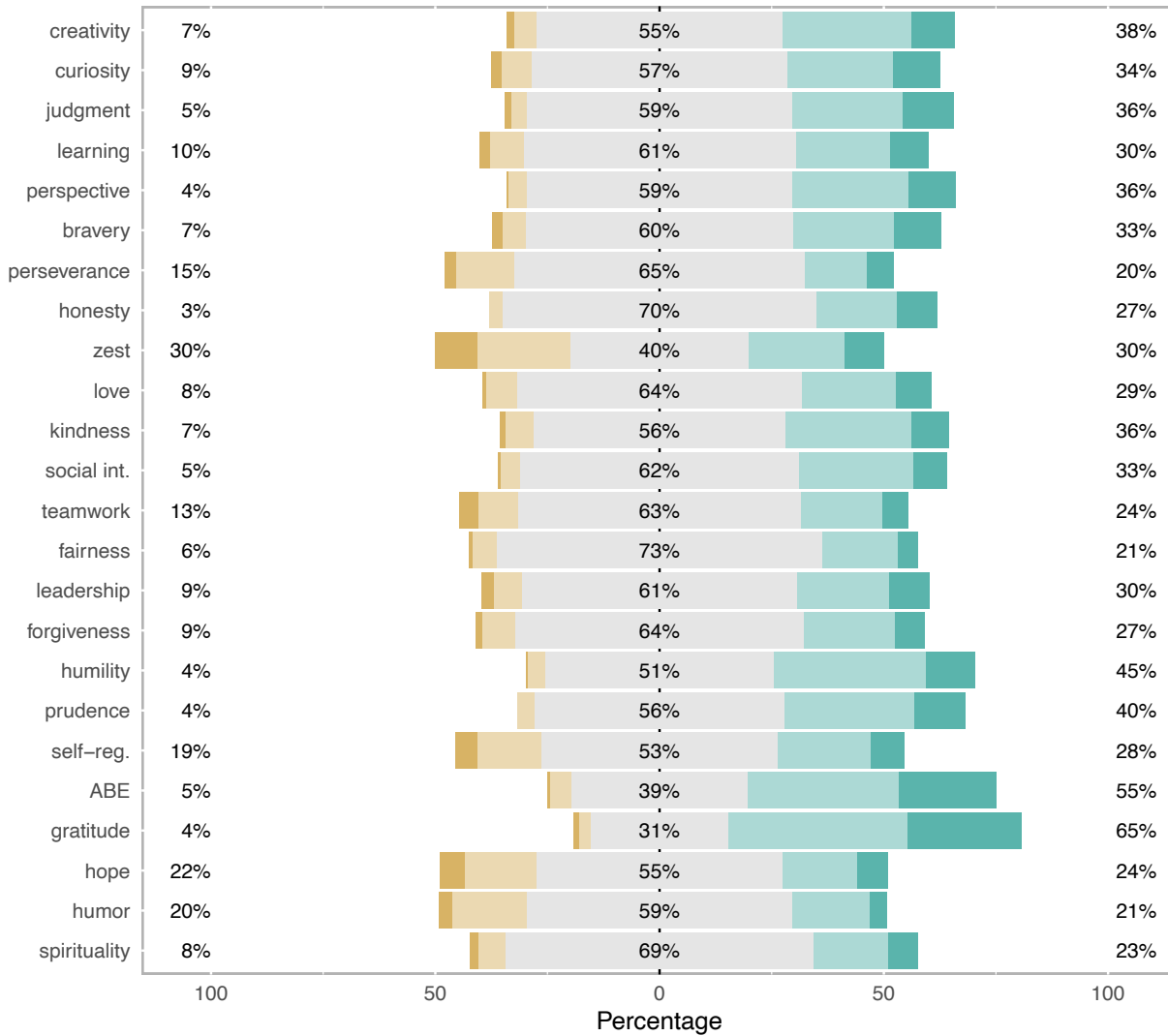
- Character strengths
- Perceived changes
- Thriving
- Compliance
- Volunteering

Participants completed measures of...

- **character strengths** (VIA-IS; Ruch et al., 2012) *before* the crisis and *after* the crisis (subsample; $n = 150$)
- **perceived changes in character strengths in oneself and others** *after* the crisis
- **thriving** (BIT; Su et al., 2014) *during* the crisis
- **compliance**: "to what extent have you complied with the official measures and recommendations of the government?"
- **volunteering**: "have you volunteered in any form? (e.g., shopping for neighbors)"

Results

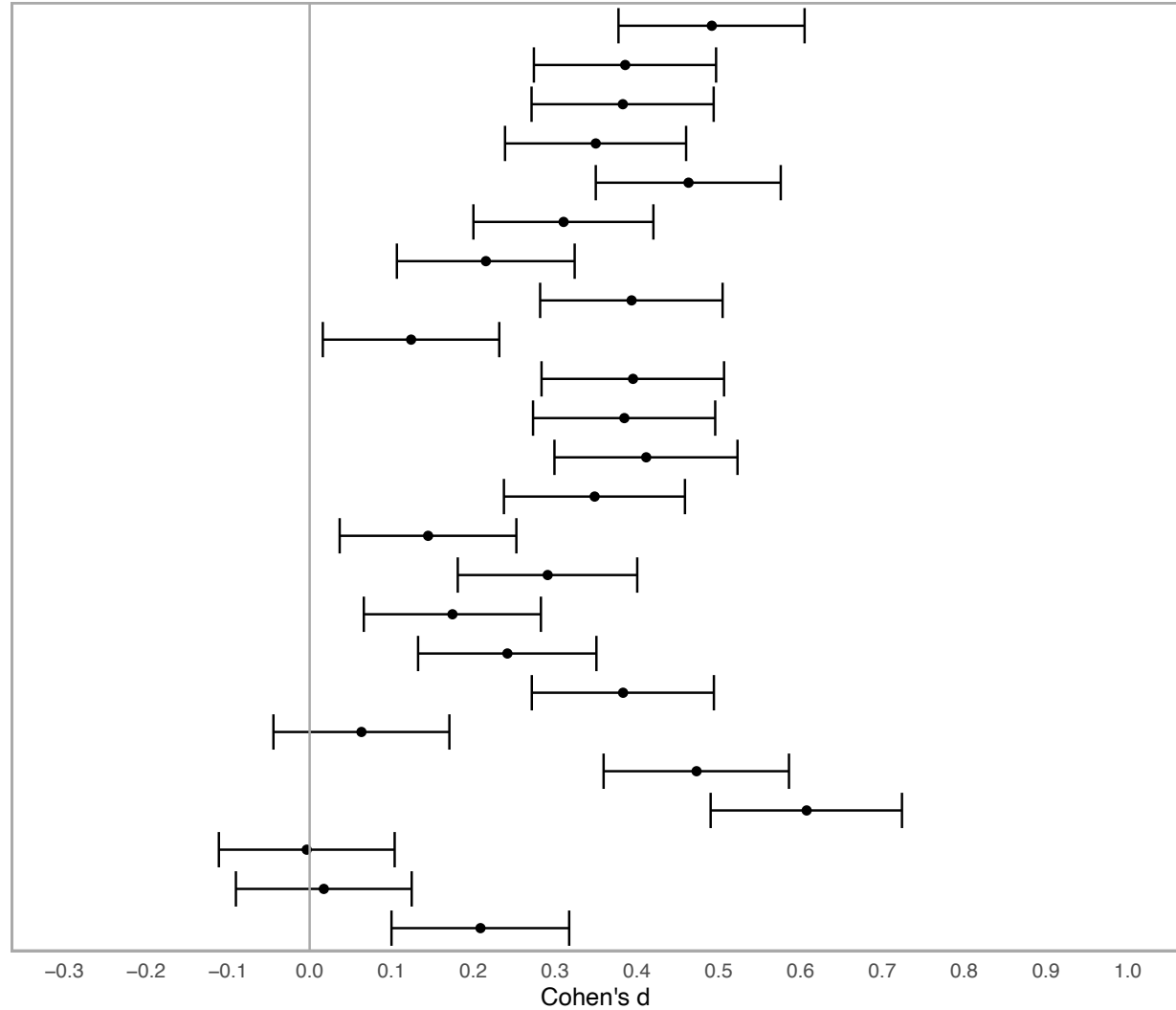
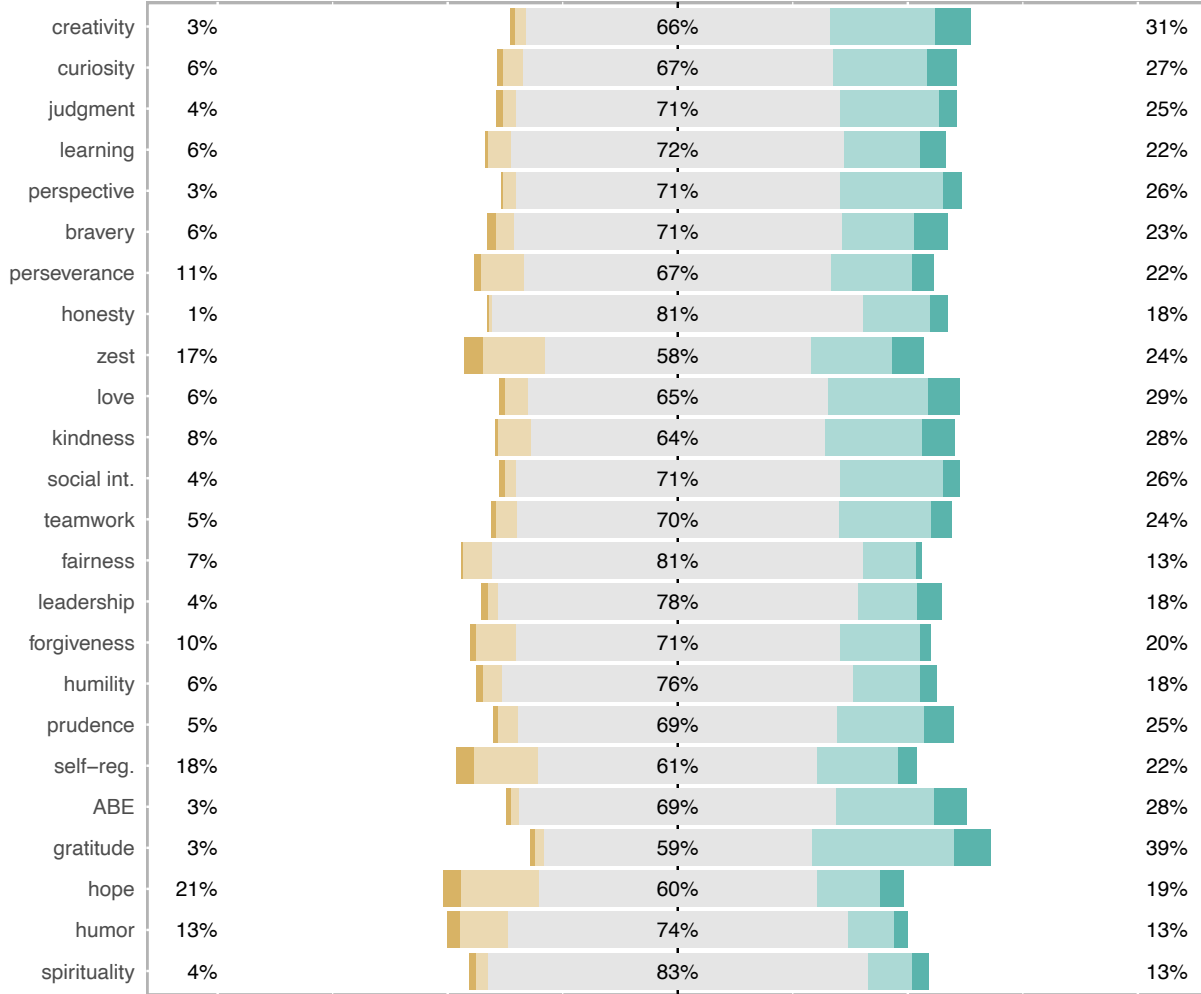
Perceived changes in oneself



less
 somewhat less
 no change
 somewhat more
 more

→ Increases in 21/24 character strengths; especially gratitude, and appreciation of beauty and excellence

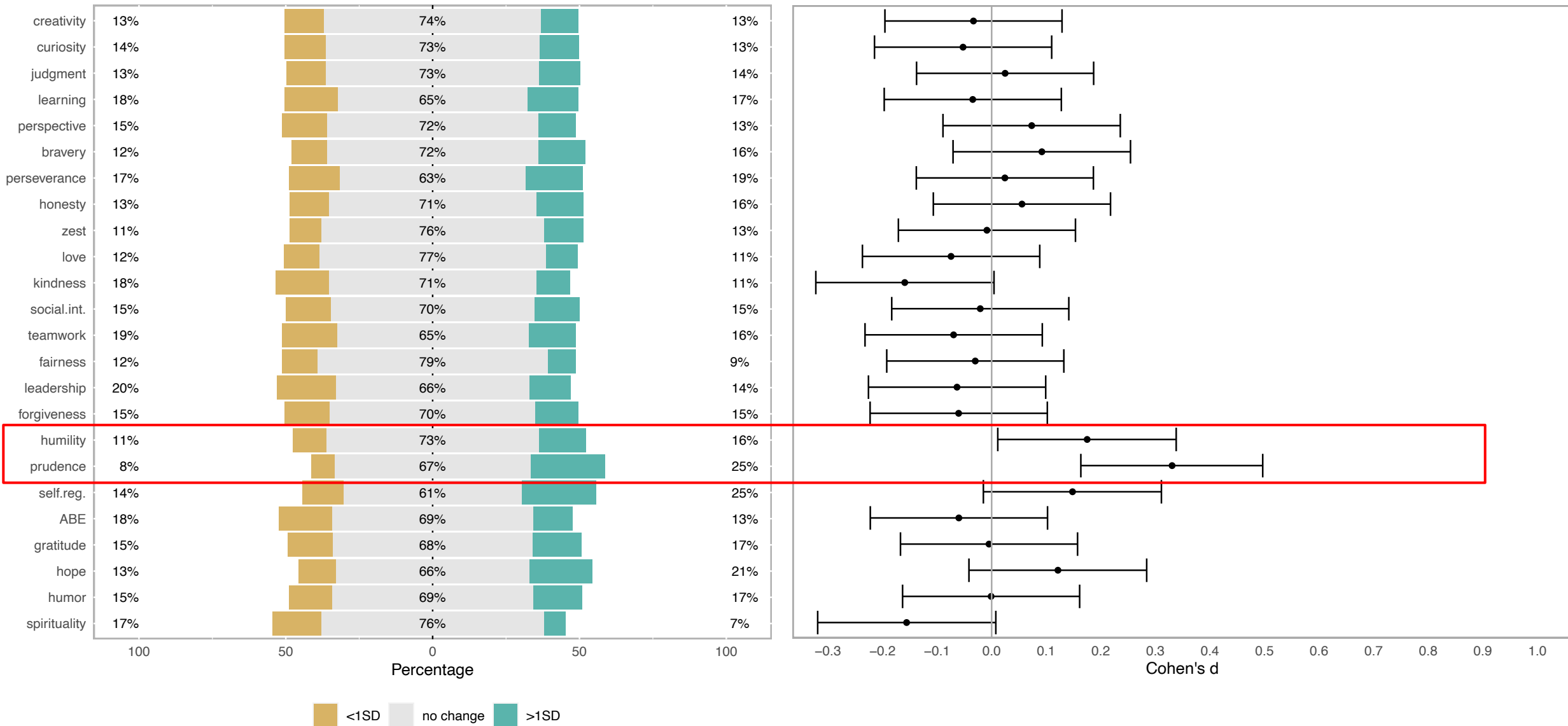
Perceived changes in others



less
 somewhat less
 no change
 somewhat more
 more

→ Increases in 21/24 character strengths; especially gratitude, and appreciation of beauty and excellence

Measured changes

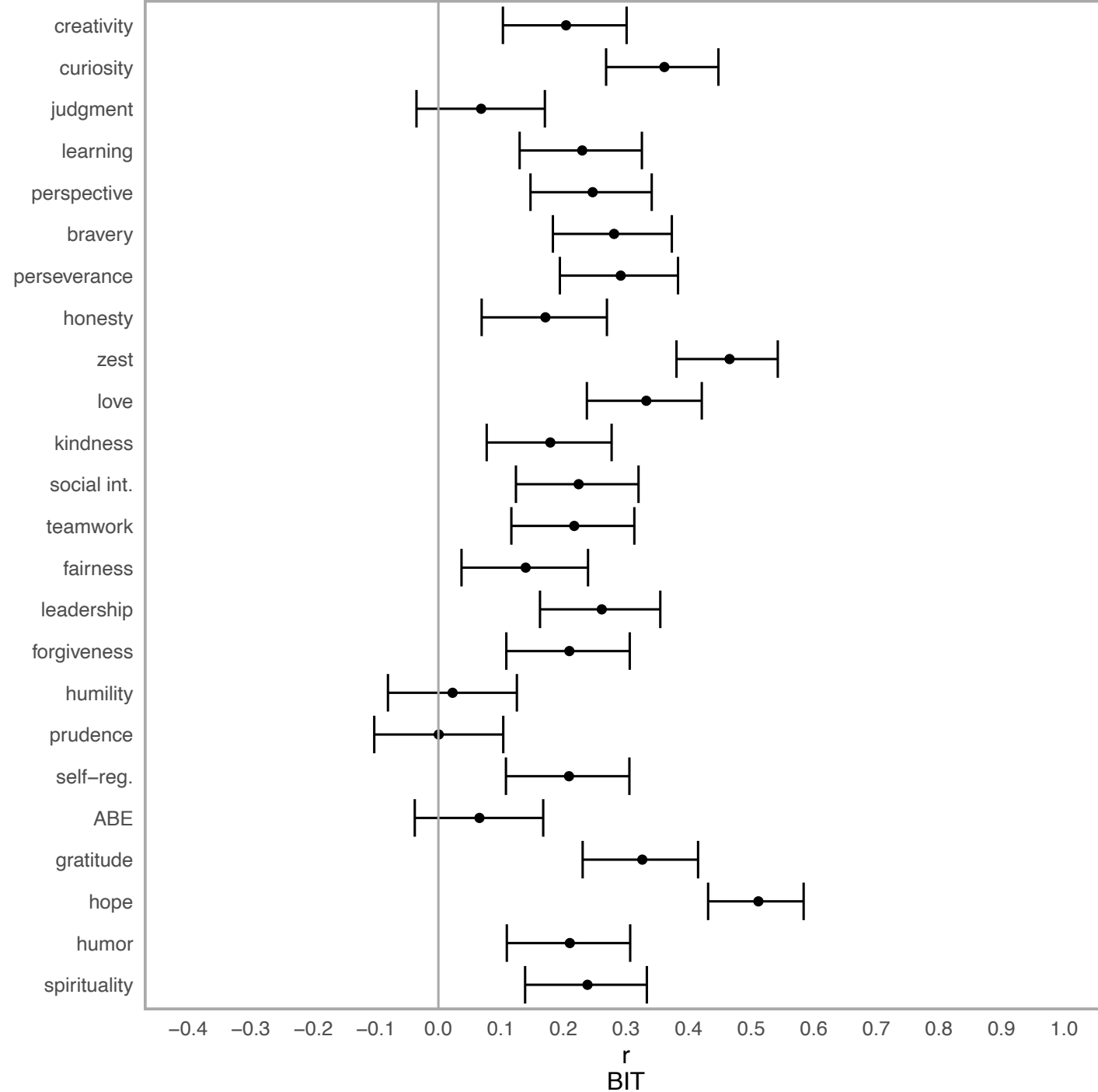


→ Increases in 2 character strengths: Humility and prudence.

Thriving during the crisis

→ 20/24 character strengths *before* the crisis went along with higher thriving *during* the crisis.

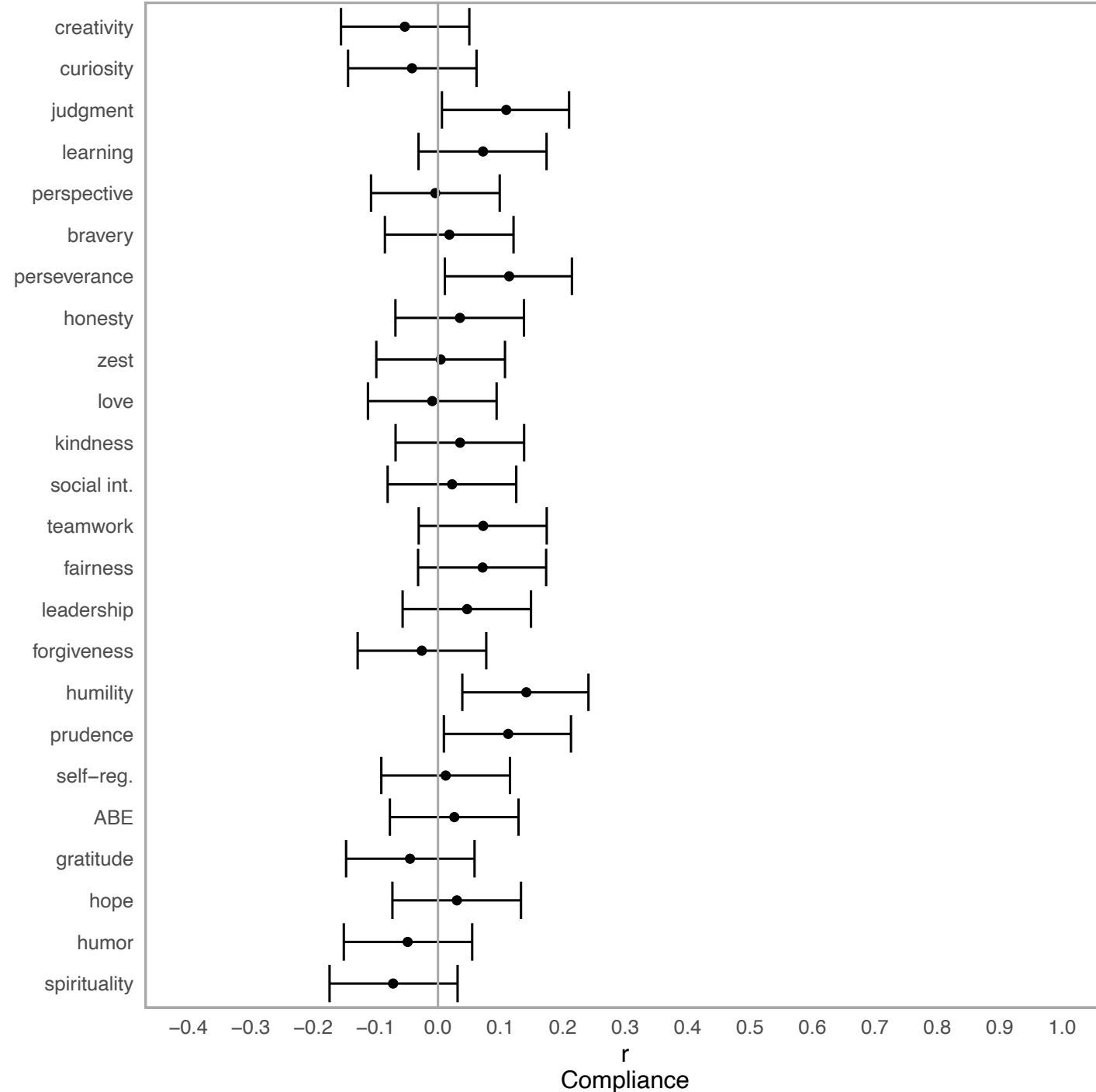
→ Strongest effects for hope, zest, curiosity, love, and gratitude ("happiness strengths").



Compliance with regulations

→ 4 strengths *before* the crisis went along with higher compliance with government regulations *during* the crisis:

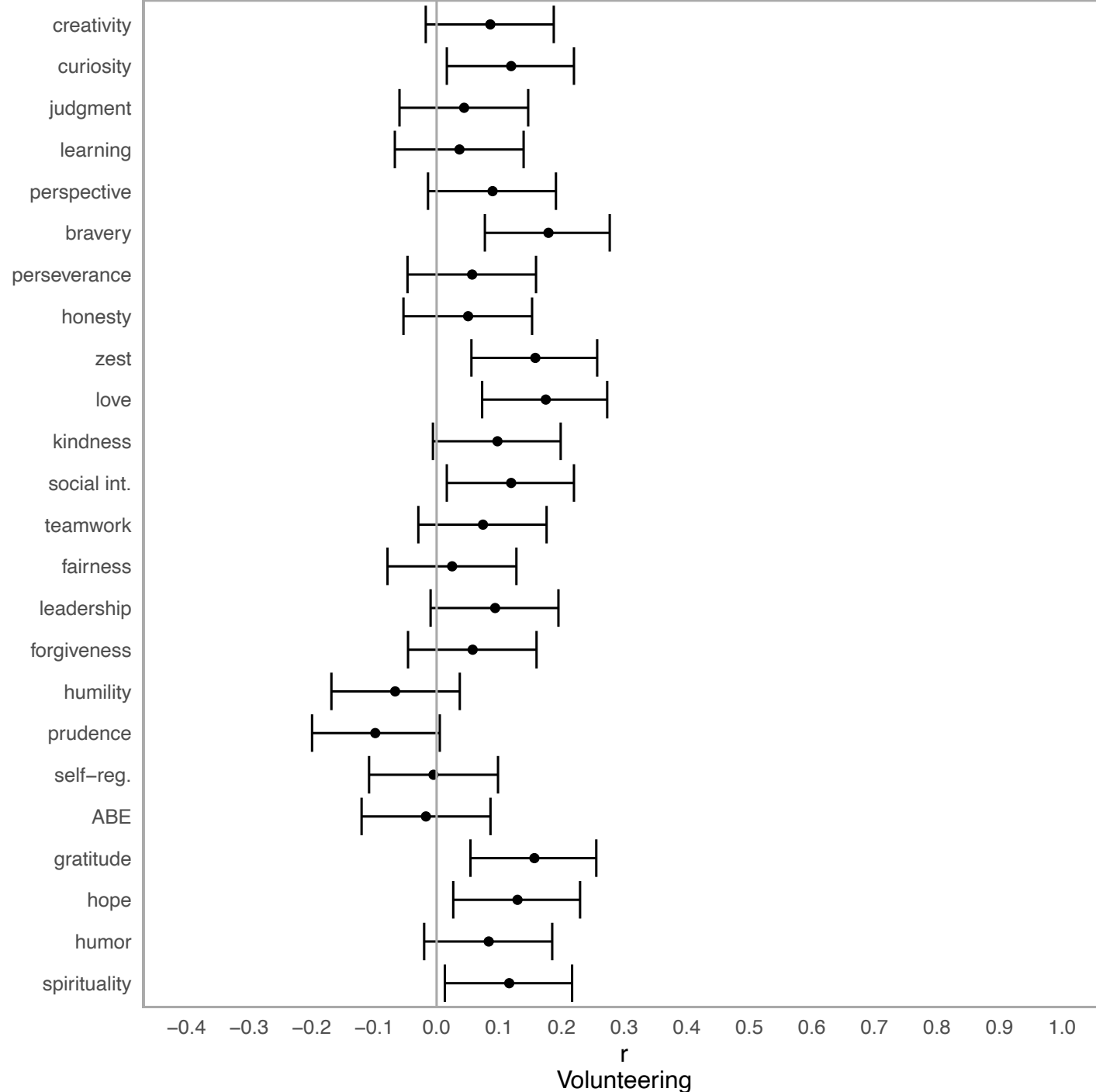
- judgment
- perseverance
- humility
- prudence



Volunteering

→ 8 strengths *before* the crisis went along with higher volunteering *during* the crisis:

- curiosity
- bravery
- zest
- love
- social intelligence
- gratitude
- hope
- spirituality



Conclusions

Conclusions

1. While people report having experienced character growth following a major life event, few actual changes are found when comparing assessments before and after the event.
2. Retrospective assessments of oneself or others do not allow reliably concluding that character strengths increased.
3. Character strengths were widely unaffected by the COVID crisis; with the exception of **humility** and **prudence**, which **increased**.
4. Many character strengths before the crisis predicted thriving during the crisis the strongest effects were found for the “happiness strengths”.
5. Several character strengths assessed before the crisis predicted:
 - **compliance with government regulations and recommendations:**
judgment, perseverance, humility, and prudence
 - **engagement in volunteering:**
curiosity, bravery, zest, love, social intelligence, gratitude, and hope

DANKE!
THANK YOU!
MERCİ!
GRAZIE!
GRACIAS!
DANK JE WEL!
.....

Thank you for your attention!

Empirical Paper

Character Growth Following Collective Life Events: A Study on Perceived and Measured Changes in Character Strengths During the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic



Fabian Gander and Lisa Wagner

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Contact:

l.wagner@psychologie.uzh.ch

f.gander@psychologie.uzh.ch

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The screenshot shows a news article from Nau.ch. The title is "Menschen wuchsen charakterlich an erster Corona-Welle". Below the title is a sub-headline: "Der Charakter ist nicht unveränderlich in der Persönlichkeit eines Menschen festgeschrieben. So stärkte die erste Corona-Welle viele Charaktere." The article includes a photograph of a street in Bern, Switzerland, during a lockdown. The caption reads: "Menschenleere Marktgasse in der Berner Altstadt – auch die Schweiz setzte auf Lockdowns. (Archivbild) - Keystone".

Das Wichtigste in Kürze

- Die erste Corona-Welle hatte positive Auswirkungen auf den Charakter.
- Dies fanden Forscher der Universität Zürich und Basel heraus.
- Die erste Pandemie-Phase hatte also auch positive Effekte.

References

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