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Positive Psychology and Character Strengths: Application to Strengths-Based School Counseling

The basic premise of positive psychology is that the happiness and fulfillment of children and youth entail more than the identification and treatment of their problems. This article provides an overview of positive psychology and the Values in Action (VIA) project that classifies and measures 24 widely recognized character strengths. Good character is multidimensional, made up of a family of positive traits manifest in an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Recent research findings are presented concerning the correlates and the consequences of the VIA character strengths for positive youth development. Character strengths are related to achievement, life satisfaction, and well-being of children and youth. Further, the implications and specific techniques informed by positive psychology are discussed for school counselors in the context of a strengths-based approach.

Raising children who are happy, healthy, and morally good is the ultimate goal of all parents and educators. Although specific definitions of happiness, health, and good character may vary across time, place, and culture, their importance for personal as well as societal well-being cannot be contested. In previous decades, researchers and practitioners focused largely on psychopathology, developing treatment strategies and risk-based prevention programs. In recent years, these traditional approaches—all based on a disease model in which health and well-being are defined only by the absence of distress and disorder—have been challenged. Calls have been made for balanced attention to the positive aspects of human development, including life satisfaction and character strengths. Psychologists and school counselors interested in promoting human potential need to start with different assumptions and to pose different questions from their peers who assume only a disease model (Park & Peterson, 2006b).

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology is the scientific study of what goes right in life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is the study of optimal experience—people being their best and doing their best. Positive psychology is a newly christened approach within psychology that takes seriously as a subject matter those things that make life most worth living. Positive psychology does not deny the problems that people experience, and positive psychologists do not ignore stress and challenge in their attempts to understanding what it means to live well. Positive psychology intends to complement business-as-usual psychology, not replace it, by expanding the topics of legitimate study to yield a full and balanced depiction of human thriving and flourishing. The most basic assumption that positive psychology urges is that human goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease, disorder, and distress and therefore deserve equal attention from psychologists and human service providers (Peterson & Park, 2003).

The contribution of contemporary positive psychology has been twofold: (a) providing an umbrella term for what had been isolated lines of theory and research, and (b) making the self-conscious argument that what makes life worth living deserves its own field of inquiry within psychology (Peterson & Park, 2003). The framework of positive psychology provides a comprehensive scheme for describing and understanding the good life. Domains identified by positive psychology as critical to the psychological good life include positive subjective experiences (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction, fulfillment, flow); positive individual traits (e.g., character, interests, values); positive relationships (e.g., friendship, marriage, colleagueship); and positive groups and institutions (e.g., families, schools, businesses, communities). Positive groups and institutions enable the development and display of positive relationships and positive traits, which in turn enable positive subjective experiences. People are at their best when institutions, relationships, traits, and experiences are in alignment, and doing well in life represents a coming together of all four domains.

Positive psychology argues that the goal of coun-

seling should be more than moving students from –5 to 0—the absence of a problem, the presumed goal of business-as-usual psychology. The ultimate goal of interventions informed by positive psychology is helping people with or without problems to lead a fulfilling life, moving them to +2 or +5 or beyond, regardless of where they start. This is the novel contribution of positive psychology. Positive psychology also emphasizes prevention as opposed to remediation. Whatever the presenting complaints, students also bring into counseling assets and strengths that can be used to resolve their problems. A crucial task of any counseling effort is therefore to identify a student's resources and encourage their use. Such a balanced emphasis should build rapport and bolster student confidence, which in turn should facilitate the success of counseling.

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CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND VIRTUES

What is good of a person, how can we measure it, and how can we build good character among children and youth? These timeless questions were asked by the Athenian philosophers and are still posed by modern psychologists and educators. Positive psychology has refocused scientific attention on character, identifying it as one of the pillars of this new field and central to the understanding of the psychological good life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Character refers to those aspects of personality that are morally valued. Good character is at the core of positive youth development. Baumrind (1998) noted that "it takes virtuous character to will the good, and competence to do good well" (p. 13). Most schooling and youth programs today focus on helping youth acquire skills and abilities—reading, writing, doing math, and thinking critically—that can help them to achieve their life goals. However, without good character, individuals may not desire to do the right thing.

Good character is central to psychological and social well-being. It is not simply the absence of problems but rather a well-developed family of positive traits. The building and enhancing of character strengths not only reduce the possibility of negative outcomes (Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Botvin, & Diaz, 1995) but are important in their own right as indicators and indeed causes of healthy positive lifelong development and thriving (Colby & Damon, 1992; Park, 2004a; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1997). Growing evidence shows that certain strengths of character—for example, hope, kindness, social intelligence, self-control, and perspective—can buffer against the negative effects of stress and trauma, preventing or mitigating disorders in their wake (Park & Peterson, 2006b). Character strengths also help youth to thrive. Good character is associated with desired outcomes such as school success, leadership, tolerance and the valuing of diversity, the ability to delay gratification, kindness, and altruism (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Good character is associated with a reduction of problems such as substance use, alcohol abuse, smoking, violence, depression, and suicidal ideation (Park, 2004a).

Although a growing research literature has contributed much to our understanding of such positive traits as altruism, gratitude, and self-control, most of these lines of research have focused on one component of character at a time, leaving unanswered questions about the underlying structure of character within an individual (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Some individuals may be wise and have integrity but are neither courageous nor kind, or vice versa. Thus, there is a need for a systematic approach to character in multidimensional terms.

THE VALUES IN ACTION PROJECT

For several years, guided by the perspective of positive psychology, we have been involved in a project that addresses important strengths of character (Park & Peterson, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The resulting project—Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths—focuses on the strengths of character that contribute to optimal human development. The project first defined, identified, and classified consensual components of good character and virtues and then devised ways to assess these components as individual differences relevant for different cultural and developmental groups. The VIA classification identifies 24 widely acknowledged and acclaimed character strengths and organizes them under six broad virtues (see Table 1). We have argued that each strength is morally valued in its own right. The most general contribution of the VIA project is to provide a vocabulary for psychologically informed discussion of the personal qualities of individuals that make them worthy of moral praise.

In our work, *virtues* are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These broad categories of virtue emerge consistently from historical surveys. *Character* is the entire set of positive traits that have appeared across cultures and throughout history as important for the good life. *Character strengths* are the psychological processes or mechanisms that define the virtues. These strengths are ubiquitously recognized and valued. Character strengths are the subset of personality traits on which moral value is placed. Introversion and extraversion, for example, are traits with no moral weight. Kindness and team-

Table 1. VIA Classification of Strengths

Virtue	Character Strengths
Wisdom and knowledge—cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge	• Creativity: thinking of novel and productive ways to do things • Curiosity: taking an interest in all of ongoing experience • Open-mindedness: thinking things through and examining them from all sides • Love of learning: mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge • Perspective: being able to provide wise counsel to others
Courage—emotional strengths that involve exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, either external or internal	• Honesty/authenticity: speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way • Bravery: *not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain • Perseverance: finishing what one starts • Zest: approaching life with excitement and energy
Humanity—interpersonal strengths that entail "tending and befriending" others	• Kindness: doing favors and good deeds for others • Love: valuing close relations with others • Social intelligence: being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others
Justice—civic strengths that underlie healthy community life	• Fairness: treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice • Leadership: organizing group activities and seeing that they happen • Teamwork: working well as a member of a group or team
Temperance—strengths that protect against excess	• Forgiveness: forgiving those who have done wrong • Modesty: letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves • Prudence: being careful about one's choices; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted • Self-regulation: regulating what one feels and does
Transcendence—strengths that build connections to the larger universe and provide meaning	• Appreciation of beauty: noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life • Gratitude: being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen • Hope: expecting the best and working to achieve it • Humor: liking to laugh and joke; bringing smiles to other people • Spirituality/religiousness: having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

work, in contrast, are morally valued, which is why they are considered character strengths.

By implication, therefore, good character is (a) a family of positive traits that exist as individual differences—in principle distinct strengths that people possess to varying degrees; (b) shown in thoughts, feelings, and actions; (c) malleable across the lifespan; (d) measurable; and (e) subject to numerous influences by contextual factors, proximal and distal. This way of conceptualizing good character has important implications for assessment.

We measure character as manifest in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This approach separates our work from those of others who approach moral competence in terms of moral reasoning or abstract values. Character is plural and must be measured in ways that do justice to its breadth. One needs to be cautious about searching for single indicators of good character. It would be misleading to treat a single component of character such as hope, kindness, or teamwork as the whole of character. Individuals might be very kind or very hopeful but lack the other components of good character. Researchers interested in character per se must assess

it in its full range. Good character can only be captured by a set of components that vary across people. Our measure is unique in that it not only allows for the comparison of character strengths across individuals but also allows ipsative scoring—identifying an individual's "signature strengths" relative to his or her other strengths.

We developed separate surveys to assess strengths among adults and youth. The VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth) is a self-report survey that allows a comprehensive assessment of the 24 character strengths among youth ages 10–17 (Park, 2004a). The current VIA-Youth measure contains 198 items and takes about 45 minutes on average to complete. The survey has good reliability (alphas in all cases exceed .70) and construct validity (see Park & Peterson, 2006c, for details). These surveys are available online at no cost (www.viastrengths.org or www.authentichappiness.org). Later in this article, we discuss examples of how school counselors can use the VIA-Youth.

Growing evidence shows that certain strengths of character can buffer against the negative effects of stress and trauma, preventing or mitigating disorders in their wake.

Once individuals complete the strengths survey, feedback is given about their top strengths—we call them *signature strengths*. Helping students to identify their signature strengths and use them in their everyday lives may provide a route to a psychologically fulfilling life (Seligman, 2002). The effects of naming these strengths for an individual and encouraging their use deserve study. We offer a few caveats. Positive traits not included among a respondent's signature strengths are not necessarily weaknesses but simply lesser strengths in comparison to the others. The order of top strengths (e.g., among one's top five strengths) should not be interpreted in a rigid way because there may be no meaningful differences among them.

The measures of character strengths that we have developed are relatively efficient, but they take time to administer, and younger respondents sometimes require supervision to prevent break-off effects due to wandering attention. However, anyone interested in assessing character strengths needs to appreciate that there is no shortcut to measuring good character. No one questions that the assessment of intellectual ability requires hours on the part of researchers and individual research participants. The assessment of moral competence is no simpler and certainly no less important (Park & Peterson, 2005).

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Evidence concerning the correlates and positive outcomes of the character strengths is accumulating. Although all strengths of character contribute to fulfillment—happiness broadly construed—certain positive traits are more robustly associated with well-being and fulfillment than others (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004a). Overall, the youth in America show most of the components of good character (Park & Peterson, 2006c). Despite widespread negative perceptions of youth, the majority of young people have developed character strengths. Among them, gratitude, humor, and love are most common, whereas prudence, forgiveness, spirituality, and self-regulation are least common, much as is found among adults.

In general, the strengths of character consistently related to life satisfaction are gratitude, hope, zest, curiosity, and, perhaps most importantly, love, defined as the ability to sustain reciprocated close relationships with other people (Park et al., 2004a). Thus, for a good life, individuals need to cultivate these strengths in particular.

We also have discovered developmental differences. Gratitude shows an association with life satisfaction only among children who are at least 7 years of age (Park & Peterson, 2006a), and curiosity is related to life satisfaction only among adults. Given that curiosity is one of the most common character strengths among young children, this finding is especially interesting. Most young children are naturally curious, which means that this strength may not differentiate between those who are more versus less happy. But only those adults who are able to sustain curiosity are happy. It is important that parents, educators, school counselors, and other professionals not discourage natural curiosity among children and indeed help them to use it constructively in their learning and play.

Furthermore, in our longitudinal study with middle school students, certain character strengths such as love, hope, and zest at the beginning of the school year were related to *increased* level of life satisfaction at the end of the school year (Park & Peterson, 2006c). However, effects in the opposite direction—high life satisfaction increasing the later level of character strengths—were not supported by these data. That is, certain character strengths not only are linked to present happiness but also lead to increasing happiness. Considering that life satisfaction and happiness are critical for mental and physical health, good relationships, success, and well-being across all ages (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Park, 2004b), certain character strengths represent critical pathways to a good life.

"Popular" students (identified by teacher ratings) were more likely to score highly on VIA-Youth scales measuring civic strengths such as leadership and fairness and temperance strengths such as self-regulation, prudence, and forgiveness. Peer interaction and social relationships among children and youth become more important during school years. Maintaining good peer relationships and popularity is related to better psychological development and

adjustment in schools (Cillessen & Rose, 2005). Perhaps working on students' character strengths can provide ways to prevent possible social problems and furthermore to increase opportunities for children to build healthy relationships with lifelong positive consequences.

Character strengths also were related to less psychopathology among youth. The strengths of hope, zest, and leadership were substantially related to fewer internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety disorders, whereas the strengths of persistence, honesty, prudence, and love were substantially related to fewer externalizing problems such as aggression. Different sets of character strengths were related to fewer internalizing and externalizing problems. Again, building and enhancing certain strengths could be an important strategy of providing protective factors against common youth problems (Park & Peterson, 2008).

The relationship between academic achievement and character strengths among students also was examined in a longitudinal study (Park & Peterson, 2006c). After controlling for student IQ scores, we found that the character strengths of perseverance, fairness, gratitude, honesty, hope, and perspective predicted end-of-year grade point averages. These findings importantly show nonintellectual influences—character strengths—on academic achievement.

Strengths of character such as bravery, humor, kindness, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty are associated with successful recovery from physical illness, psychological disorder, and the effects of trauma (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). Professionals who deal with such issues among their clients might attend to these strengths as they plan their interventions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELING

These findings have significant implications for school counselors and others concerned with promoting positive youth development. First, our research shows that students' academic achievement is influenced by a set of character strengths above and beyond intelligence, which means that these strengths—notably perseverance, gratitude, and hope—should be recognized, celebrated, and encouraged. That is, students who already possess these strengths should be encouraged to use them in their school life and studies, and for those who lack these strengths, individual and/or group programs should be designed and implemented to develop and strengthen them. A variety of exercises and activities tailored to individual students and the lives they lead in and out of school would be helpful. For instance, the strategy of counting blessings as a way of nurturing gratitude is described below, and this strategy needs to be presented in a flexible way. Some students can be plausibly asked to count the blessings found in their family, other students might better be encouraged to reflect on the good things about their friends, and so on.

Second, given the importance of character to the psychological good life, counselors need to pay explicit attention to good character. Research consistently shows that strengths of the "heart" that connect people to one another—such as love and gratitude—are much more strongly associated with well-being than are strengths of the "head" that are individual in nature—such as creativity, critical thinking, and aesthetic appreciation (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004a, 2004b). If students are low on strengths such as love, hope, zest, and gratitude, it would be important for counselors to devise strategies to improve these strengths. Character strengths also were related to popularity of students and to measures of psychopathology. In sum, the encouragement of character strengths would not only make students happier, healthier, and more socially connected but also help them attain better grades. Working on students' character is therefore not a luxury but a necessity.

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According to Aristotle, virtues—a reflection of the individual's character—can be taught and acquired by practice. Aquinas later argued that a virtue is a habit that a person can develop by choosing the good and consistently acting in accordance with it. Character can be cultivated by good parenting, schooling, and socialization and instantiated through habitual action. Character development programs should teach specific activities of strengths and encourage youth to use them in their daily lives.

Third, counselors should start to measure students' assets such as character strengths as much as their deficits. Measures of problems, deficits, and weaknesses have a long lineage within education and mental health, whereas measures of positive development have been largely neglected. Identifying and understanding each student's character strengths profile provide important bases for individually tailored interventions.

Our multidimensional approach to character strengths has practical implications for school counselors. The VIA classification provides a useful vocabulary for people to talk about character strengths. Simply saying that a student has good character (or not) does not lead anywhere useful. In contrast, using the VIA classification, counselors and educators can describe the *profile* of character strengths that characterize each student. The VIA measures can be scored within the person (e.g., rank ordered)—to identify a student's "signature

strengths" relative to his or her other strengths. We believe that everybody has strengths regardless of where they may stand relative to others. This strength-based approach is particularly useful for working with students with a history of disability or low achievement. When we compare these students against the norm or other students, as often we do, it is hard to find anything at which they are good. However, if we compare the 24 strengths *within* a student, we can identify those strengths that are stronger than others. And then, teachers and professionals can help students to use these strengths in their lives, in school and out of school.

For example, Resnick and Rosenheck (2006) described an intervention with adults that is applicable to youth. They encouraged patients at a Veterans Administration Medical Center to take an online VIA test that provided immediate feedback about signature strengths. The mere act of taking the survey was helpful because it allowed patients to take stock of their strengths and to think more positively about themselves as they discovered a "self" that was usually better than expected. Moreover, many of the patients acted in light of what they had learned.

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> One veteran who identified a "love of learning" as one of his signature strengths found that taking the strengths survey encouraged him to follow through with his plans to attend a professional school. When he begins to doubt himself, he reminds himself that the computer told him that he has the strength to pursue his dreams. (Resnick & Rosenheck, p. 121)

Some of these patients wrote out a list of their top strengths, which they kept next to their bed or posted on their refrigerator door. Following up on this spontaneous practice, Resnick and Rosenheck created a wallet-sized card for each patient that listed his top strengths. The veterans reportedly consult these cards during treatment planning sessions, clinical groups, and even informal conversation.

Such strengths-based approaches can be used with students at any level. Because signature strengths are the ones students already possess, it is often easier and more enjoyable for students to work with them. Once students build their confidence by continuing to use their signature strengths, they can be taught how to use these strengths to work on weaknesses or less-developed strengths. It is frustrating and difficult to work only on weaknesses and problems from the beginning. Often students give up early or become defensive about their problems. However, if discussions and interventions start with the strengths of students—things at which they are good—this can build rapport and increase motivation. The net effect of a strengths-based approach should be greater success of interventions.

We have hypothesized that the exercise of signature strengths is particularly fulfilling. In support of this hypothesis, we asked adults to complete a VIA survey, identify their top five strengths, and then use them in novel ways each day for one week (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Relative to a comparison group without this instruction, people who found new ways to do what they already did well became less depressed and happier as a result. The effect of interventions lasted even at 6 months follow-up. Not surprisingly, these changes were evident only if individuals continued to find new ways to use their strengths. Finding *novel* ways to use strengths is therefore critical and reflects the importance of ongoing personal growth in producing a flourishing life. When this exercise is used for young people, it is important for counselors to sit down with children and help them to generate a list of ways to use these top strengths in various settings such as learning, social relationships, family, and school; to monitor how the students use them; and to provide ongoing feedback and encouragement until the students have made this part of their daily life.

This exercise can be used in a group counseling format. Students can meet regularly as a group and share with one another how they use their strengths in their life. This could be a good way to motivate students and also allow them to learn from other students about how to use their strengths in different ways. In group settings, counselor can ask students to introduce themselves based on what they do well. If a student has a difficult time coming up with a story, then it is very useful to encourage other students in the group to say something good about that student (if they know one another). Young people are much more open and comfortable when encouraged to think about and talk about what they do well instead of their problems and the skills they lack.

Fourth, there are several positive psychology techniques that align with the strengths-based approach. The "counting your blessings" exercise is one example. Research shows that people who end each day by identifying good things that have happened to them become less depressed and happier as a result (Seligman et al., 2005). These effects last for months. For example, students can be asked to count their blessings:

> Every night, before you go to bed, write down three things that went really well on that day and why they went well. You may use a journal or your computer to write about the events. It is not enough to do this exercise in your head. The three things you list can be relatively small in importance or relatively large

in importance. Next to each positive event in your list, answer the question, "Why did this good thing happen?"

This exercise can be modified depending on student age and circumstances. It does not have to be done every night. Instead, to avoid making this exercise burdensome to children, it could be a few times a week (e.g., one to three times a week) and count one or two blessings instead of three blessings.

Fifth, positive psychology intervention techniques can be easily incorporated into existing counseling programs. But there are issues to be considered. These techniques are not like crash diets or antibiotics. Rather, the people for whom these interventions have a sustained benefit are precisely the people who continue to practice them. So, doing something novel with one's strengths once in a while might result in short-term exhilaration, but no long-lasting changes.

In our study, to the degree that interventions had lasting effects, it was because clients integrated them into their regular behavioral routines (Seligman et al., 2005). Counting blessings for a week will make a person happier for that week, but only if the person becomes habitually grateful will there be a more enduring effect. Also, nothing is known about the match of an exercise with individuals' particular presenting problems or goals or with their age, gender, social class, or ethnicity. These exercises may not be equally useful for everybody. They should not be considered as one-size-fits-all.

CONCLUSION

Positive psychology is interested in promoting optimal lifelong development for *all*. Character strengths are the foundation of lifelong healthy development. Evidence is accumulating that character strengths play important roles in positive youth development, not only as broad protective factors, preventing or mitigating psychopathology and problems, but also as enabling conditions that promote thriving and flourishing. Studies of character strengths go beyond a focus on problems and their absence to reflect healthy development. The VIA project supports the premise of positive psychology that attention to good character—what a person does well—sheds light on what makes life worth living. The goal of positive youth development should not be merely surviving in the face of adversity but flourishing and thriving.

Problem-focused approaches can be useful only in reducing and treating the specific targeted problems. But they do not necessarily prepare young people to have healthy, fulfilling, and productive lives. In contrast, strengths-based approaches may pay much greater dividends, not only preventing or reducing in the short run specific problems but also building in the long run moral, healthy, and happy people who can overcome challenges in life and enjoy a good and fulfilling life (Cowen, 1998; Lerner & Benson, 2003).

Research support is still accumulating. Enough outcome studies have been conducted to conclude that strengths-based approaches to change are more than just promising. Not known in most cases is how these expanded therapies fare in direct comparison to business-as-usual treatments for problems and what are the mechanisms involved. Our even-handed suspicion is that attention to both strengths and weaknesses is critical and that no useful purpose is served by regarding these as mutually exclusive therapeutic goals.

All young people want to do well with their lives and live a happy and fulfilling life. It is a fundamental human desire and right. No matter how they act and what they say, there are no children or youth who truly do not desire to do well at school, in relationships, at home, and in society. But more often than not, young people do not know how to find happiness and meaning in the right place and in the right way. Perhaps, identifying character strengths is where we can start. Everyone has strengths. They need to be recognized, celebrated, strengthened, and used. ▮

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