

Tentative citation:

Niemiec, R. M. (in press). VIA character strengths - research and practice: The first 10 years. In A. Delle Fave (Ed.), *Cross cultural advancements in positive psychology*. Springer.

VIA Character Strengths - Research and Practice: The First 10 Years

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Abstract

The VIA Classification is a widely used framework for helping individuals discover, explore, and use those qualities that are strongest in them – their character strengths. The VIA Inventory of Strengths is an accessible and widely used assessment instrument that measures 24 universally-valued strengths. Research has found a number of important links between these character strengths and valued outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction, achievement). The practice of character strengths has not been studied as extensively, however, a number of practices, strength-based models, and applications are emerging with good potential.

1.1 Introduction

The VIA Classification and VIA Inventory of Strengths are widely used by researchers and practitioners around the world. This work with character strengths is one of the most substantial initiatives to emerge from the burgeoning science of positive psychology to date. Research on the VIA Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is flourishing and practitioners ranging from psychologists and coaches to business leaders and educators are eager to find ways to apply the research to their practices while maintaining prudence with the findings. That said, applied research on the 24 character strengths – their use in practice, the effect of strength combinations, and the outcomes of each – is fairly new territory.

There has been a strong interest in applying the research on character strengths across disciplines, as evidenced in positive psychotherapy (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006); various forms of coaching, ranging from executive to life, health, and parent coaching; use with children, adolescents, teachers, and school systems (Fox Eades, 2008; Park & Peterson, 2009b); in positive education (Geelong Grammer School in Australia); positive institutions, business, and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2009; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005); and faculty development and teaching (McGovern & Miller, 2008).

1.2 The VIA Classification

The creation of the VIA Classification of character strengths and virtues was funded by the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation in 2000. This work emerged from several scientific meetings led by Martin E. P. Seligman and rigorous historical analysis led by Christopher Peterson, who collaborated with 53 other leading scientists over a period of three years. The result was a comprehensive typology. Six virtues – wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence – were identified as core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers across time and world cultures (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Twenty-four corresponding strengths of character – “psychological ingredients” or pathways to those virtues – emerged out of a lengthy list of candidates that were thoroughly examined. In addition to being measurable and ubiquitous across cultures, each strength needed to meet most of the following 10 criteria: fulfilling, morally valued, does not diminish others; has non-felicitous opposites; traitlike; distinctive from other strengths; has paragons who exemplify it; has prodigies; selective absence of it in some situations; has institutions/rituals to celebrate or express it (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Character strengths and virtues have been determined to be universal across cultures, nations, and belief systems (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006), and readily found in some of the most remote areas on the planet (Biswas-Diener, 2006). They are remarkably similar across 54 nations and across the United States (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006).

Character strengths are substantially stable, universal personality traits that manifest through thinking (cognition), feeling (affect), willing (conation or volition), and action (behavior). They are morally valued and are beneficial to oneself and others. These positive psychological characteristics are considered to be the basic building blocks of human goodness and human flourishing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As originally hypothesized by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), positive character traits occupy a central role in the field of positive psychology. Pleasure, flow, and other positive experiences are enabled by good character (Park & Peterson, 2009a; Peterson, Ruch, Beerman, Park, & Seligman, 2007). The VIA Classification is descriptive, not prescriptive; it was created to thoroughly examine and describe what is best in human beings. It is not based on any particular theory, thus cannot be called a taxonomy of strengths.

Character strengths are moderately heritable, and twin studies show that love, humor, modesty, and teamwork are most influenced by environmental factors (Steger et al., 2007).

1.3 Prevalence

The most commonly endorsed character strengths reported are (in descending order) kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, judgment, while the least endorsed character strengths are prudence, modesty, and self-regulation (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). Similarly, the most prevalent character strengths in a UK sample were judgment, fairness, curiosity, love of learning, and kindness (Linley et al., 2007).

Young adults (ages 18-24) from the US and Japan showed similar distributions of VIA strengths – higher strengths of kindness, humor, and love, and lower strengths of prudence, modesty, and self-regulation; in addition, females reported more kindness and love while males reported more bravery and creativity (Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). When compared with U.S. adults, youth from the U.S. are higher on the character strengths of hope, teamwork, and zest and adults are higher on appreciation of beauty & excellence, honesty, leadership, open-mindedness (Park & Peterson, 2006b). The most prevalent character strengths in very young children are love, kindness, creativity, curiosity, and humor (Park & Peterson, 2006a).

Among two military samples (US and Norway), the highest strengths were honesty, hope, bravery, perseverance, and teamwork, and the two samples correlated higher with one another than with a civilian sample (Matthews et al., 2006).

1.4 The VIA Survey

The VIA Inventory of Strengths (often referred to as the VIA Survey, or VIA-IS, see

www.viasurvey.org) – a measurement instrument designed to assess the 24 character strengths – has been taken by well over a million people and is a free, online tool. The VIA-IS has good reliability and validity. The results agree with reports by friends and family members of those who complete the test. The tool has been used extensively by researchers studying the correlates and outcomes of various character strengths; much of this research has been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, satisfying the gold standard of scientific research. For the assessment of character strengths in children/adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17, there is the widely used, validated VIA Youth Survey (Park & Peterson, 2006b). Additional briefer youth surveys have been developed and are currently being studied.

The VIA-IS has been translated in Danish, French, German, Spanish, and Simplified Chinese, and is in a later stage of the translation process in more than 20 other languages, including Urdu, Farsi, and Portuguese.

At times, the question is raised as to the impact of VIA Survey-takers attempting to “look good” in their responses to the items. The Marlow-Crowe social desirability index is used to evaluate the potential impact of this phenomenon; the only character strength scale scores that correlate significantly with social desirability are prudence and spirituality. Such biases are reduced by anonymous administration and the use of computerized tests, both of which are typically part of the VIA-IS.

Several studies have conducted factor analyses and further analyses are currently being conducted. In general, these results show strong consistency with the VIA Classification. One factor analysis found the 24 character strengths were well-represented by both a one and four factor solution in which significant relationships were found between each of the 24 character strengths, the one and four factor solutions, and the Five Factor Model of personality. The four factors were described as positivity, intellect, conscientiousness, and niceness (Macdonald, Bore, & Munro, 2008). Another factor analysis found 5 factors: interpersonal (humor, kindness, leadership, love, social intelligence, and teamwork); fortitude (bravery, honesty, judgment, perseverance, perspective, and self-regulation); cognitive (appreciation of beauty/excellence, creativity, curiosity, and love of learning); transcendence (gratitude, hope, religiousness, and zest); and temperance (fairness, forgiveness, modesty/humility, and prudence; Peterson et al., 2008). A third factor analysis found 4 factors: interpersonal, which reflects positive behavior toward others; fortitude, which reflects openness and bravery; vitality, which reflects a global factor of positive qualities; and cautiousness, which reflects self-control (Brdar & Kashdan, 2009). In general, it appears that the interpersonal strengths within the justice and humanity virtues converge, that zest might better locate under transcendence, and that humor loads more strongly under wisdom or humanity. Several other factor analyses have found comparable results, including Littman-Ovadia & Lavy (in press), Shryack et al. (2010), Singh & Choubisa (2010), and Ruch et al. (2010). Studies using much larger sample sizes and different statistical procedures are currently underway (see www.viacharacter.org).

1.5 Conceptualization of “Character”

The work on the VIA expands the thinking on what is meant by the word character, which has different meanings within and among cultures. Traditional views of character typically identify a few character traits and espouse that every person should strive to develop this core set of

characteristics as much as possible. Other approaches to character consider it to be either present or absent, and not occurring in degrees.

The creation of a universal language for what is best in people opens the door to a variety of important principles that lay the groundwork for the science of character:

- Character is individualized and idiosyncratic. Each individual has a unique profile of character strengths.
- Character is plural (Peterson & Seligman, 2006). Individuals are not simply honest or kind, brave or wise, humble or fair; rather an individual's character is best understood as a profile of strengths.
- Character strengths have structure, depth, and dimensionality. People are high or low on different strengths of character, and certain profiles are more typical than others.
- Character strengths are elemental. Character strengths are the basic building blocks of goodness in the individual. They are the core parts of the personality that account for us being our best selves. These elements can combine to form complex character strengths.
- Character strengths are shaped by context and expressed in situations. In the social context, one individual might call forth her social intelligence and curiosity; when eating, use self-regulation and prudence; at work, persistence and teamwork; and with family, use love and kindness.
- Character strengths are expressed in degrees. Individuals will likely express their character strengths in different ways and to a greater or lesser extent based on the circumstance they are in. The level or amount of kindness expressed to the person's relationship partner (e.g., offering to cook dinner) differs in scope from that expressed to a homeless person on the street (e.g., giving away \$5); also, the individual might find it very easy to express kindness to fellow employees and very difficult in another work situation, such as while communicating with a supervisor.
- Character strengths are interactive and interdependent. It is likely that in most situations individuals will express a combination of character strengths together (curiosity and creativity) rather than one character strength alone. Therefore, there are dynamics that occur as the strengths interact with one another, as they lead to increases in one another, or as they hinder the expression of one another. Also, character strengths are interdependent - it is difficult to express kindness without some level of humility, or to be perseverant without some degree of self-regulation.
- Character strengths are substantially stable but can and do change. Character strengths are part of an individual's personality, and may change in response to important life events or as a result of deliberate interventions or conscious lifestyle actions.
- Balanced expression of character strengths is critical. Character strengths can easily be overused and underused. Optimal strengths use occurs according to the golden mean of character strengths, originally derived from Aristotle (2000) – the right combination of strengths, expressed to the right degree, and in the right situation.

2.1 Character Strengths: Empirical Research

2.1.1 Character Strengths and Life Satisfaction

Probably the most common variable studied in positive psychology is life satisfaction (happiness). This is true for research on character strengths, which has found a strong connection between character strengths and life satisfaction. Here are some specifics:

Five character strengths show a consistent, robust relationship to life satisfaction: Hope, zest, gratitude, curiosity, and love (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). This has been replicated a number of times; for example, similar results can be found among Swiss, Germans, and Austrians (Ruch et al., 2007), Croatians (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010), and young Japanese adults (Shimai et al., 2006).

The character strengths least related to life satisfaction (weak association) are modesty/humility, creativity, appreciation of beauty & excellence, judgment, and love of learning (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Viewed from another angle, it has been found that the strengths of the “heart” (e.g., love, gratitude) are more strongly associated with well-being than are strengths of the “head” (e.g., creativity, judgment, appreciation of beauty and excellence; Park & Peterson, 2008b; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004).

Seligman’s (2002) theory of authentic happiness addresses three pathways to happiness: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. A life orientation that encompasses all three pathways is associated with life satisfaction and might be viewed as “the full life” (Peterson, 2007). While each pathway has been found to be a distinct pathway and to predict happiness, the pursuit of meaning and engagement are more predictive of life satisfaction than the pursuit of pleasure (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Vella-Brodrick, Park, & Peterson, 2009). In a study of nations, three groups emerged in a study of 27 nations and routes to happiness: nations high in pleasure and engagement; those high in engagement and meaning; and those low in pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Nations highest in each route were: South Africa (pleasure), Switzerland (engagement), and South Korea (meaning; Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009). These findings are interesting to consider in light of those character strengths that correlate highest with each authentic-happiness pathway. The character strengths most associated with the *meaning* route to happiness are religiousness, gratitude, hope, zest, and curiosity; those most associated with the *engagement* route to happiness are zest, curiosity, hope, perseverance, and perspective; and those most associated with the *pleasure* route to happiness are humor, zest, hope, social intelligence, and love (Peterson et al., 2007).

Among youth, the character strengths most related to life satisfaction are love, gratitude, hope, and zest; very young children (ages 3-9) described by their parents as happy are also noted as showing love, hope, and zest (Park & Peterson, 2009b). A parent’s strength of self-regulation is strongly associated with his or her child’s life satisfaction, but not the parent’s own (Park & Peterson, 2006a).

A higher total score of all 24 character strengths on the VIA-IS correlates positively with life satisfaction and indicates that strong character is associated with happiness and the good life (Ruch et al., 2007).

Character strength predictors of satisfaction in college were hope, social intelligence, self-regulation, and fairness (Lounsbury et al., 2009).

2.1.2 Character Strengths and Health and Wellness:

When an individual has a physical disorder, there is less of a toll on life satisfaction if the person ranks high on the character strengths of bravery, kindness, and humor. For psychological disorders, there is less of a toll on life satisfaction if they rank high on the character strengths of appreciation of beauty & excellence and love of learning (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006).

A handful of studies have found a health benefit to the strength of gratitude. The practice of counting blessings was linked to fewer physical symptoms, more optimistic life appraisals, and more time exercising and improved well-being and optimal functioning (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Adolescent students who counted blessings reported higher levels of optimism and life satisfaction, less negative affect, and fewer physical symptoms (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). The practice of gratitude was linked to increases in well-being among those with neuromuscular disease (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

In terms of sexual health, some character strengths were associated with lower levels of sexual behaviors and sex-related beliefs among African-American adolescents. Specifically on the VIA, higher love of learning was related to boys' self-reported abstinence from sexual intercourse and boys' and girls' self-reported abstinence from drug use; higher curiosity was related to boys' and girls' belief in no premarital sex (love of learning was also significant for boys); prudence was related to reported abstinence from sexual intimacy; judgment was related to sexual initiation efficacy for girls and boys (leadership was also significant for girls; Ma et al., 2008).

There have been few studies looking at the role of character strengths and adherence issues. One exception found hope to be a significant predictor of medication adherence among asthma patients between ages 8 and 12 (Berg, Rapoff, Snyder, & Belmont, 2007).

2.1.3 Character Strengths and Achievement

In terms of achievement in work and school, perseverance appears to be the most robust character strength, emerging in most studies conducted in areas related to life success. Perseverance, love, gratitude, and hope predicted academic achievement in middle school students and college students (Park & Peterson, 2009a). After controlling for IQ, strengths of perseverance, fairness, gratitude, honesty, hope, and perspective predicted GPA (Park & Peterson, 2008a). In another study, those character strengths that predicted GPA in college students were perseverance, love of learning, humor, fairness, and kindness (Lounsbury et al., 2009). Higher hope levels are related to greater scholastic and social competence and to creativity levels (Onwuegbuzie, 1999).

Effective teachers (judged by the gains of their students on standardized tests) are those who are high in social intelligence, zest, and humor in a longitudinal study (reported in Park & Peterson, 2009a). Military performance among West Point cadets was predicted by the character strength

of love (Peterson & Park, 2009).

2.1.4 Character Strengths and Psychological Problems

The character strength of hope appears to be a key factor in this area. Hope, zest, and leadership were substantially related to fewer problems with anxiety and depression (Park & Peterson, 2008a). Hope is negatively related to indicators of psychological distress and school maladjustment (internalizing and externalizing behaviors; Gilman, Dooley, & Florell, 2006). Persistence, honesty, prudence, and love were substantially related to fewer externalizing problems such as aggression (Park & Peterson, 2008a).

In terms of trauma, the more traumatic events an individual reports, the higher the character strength scores (with the exception of gratitude, hope, and love; Peterson et al., 2008). Hope, kindness, social intelligence, self-regulation, and perspective buffer against the negative effects of stress and trauma (Park & Peterson, 2006c; Park & Peterson, 2009a). Gratitude, hope, kindness, leadership, love, spirituality, and teamwork all increased in a U.S. sample (but not a European sample) two months after the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center in New York City; ten months after September 11, these character strengths were still elevated but to a lesser degree (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). The various dimensions of posttraumatic growth appear to correspond with particular character strengths: improved relationships with others (kindness, love), openness to new possibilities (curiosity, creativity, love of learning), greater appreciation of life (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, zest), enhanced personal strength (bravery, honesty, perseverance), and spiritual development (religiousness; Peterson et al., 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

2.1.5 Character Strengths: Additional Research:

Reviewing all of the correlations, consequences, enabling factors, inhibiting factors, and related research on each of the 24 character strengths over the decades is not feasible for this article.

Here are some of the recent highlights.

- Viewing one's work as a "calling," in which one's work is viewed as a source of fulfillment that is socially useful and personal meaningful, rather than as merely a job that pays the bills or solely as a pathway for career advancement, is predicted by the character strength of zest (Peterson et al., 2009).
- Grateful individuals report higher positive mood, optimism, life satisfaction, vitality, religiousness and spirituality, and less depression and envy than less grateful individuals. Grateful people also tend to be more helpful, supportive, forgiving, empathic, and agreeable (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).
- In a study of nearly 1,200 kids who wore a beeping watch prompting them to write about their thoughts, feelings, and actions eight times per day, the most curious kids were compared with the bored kids (the top 207 and the bottom 207). The curious were more optimistic, hopeful, confident, and had a higher sense of self-determination and self-

efficacy believing they were in control of their actions and decisions, than the bored kids who felt like pawns with no control of their destiny (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

- Military leaders' character strength of humor predicted their followers' trust while followers' character strength of perspective earned their leaders' trust (Sweeney et al., 2009).
- Popular students, as identified by teacher ratings, are more likely to score highly on civic strengths such as leadership and fairness, and temperance strengths of self-regulation, prudence, and forgiveness. Interestingly, none of the humanity strengths, such as love and kindness, were related to popularity (Park & Peterson, 2009b).

3.1 Character Strengths: Practical Applications

3.1.1 General Approach

Many practitioners find that working with a client's character strengths is one of the most exciting and fulfilling areas of their work. At the same time, there is no unifying theory or consensus on how a practitioner must proceed in this work. Following this general approach, I will focus on some of the more recent findings that inform practitioners interested in applying the latest science in their work with clients. I hope practitioners will approach these findings with a sense of prudence by viewing them as movements forward with long terrain ahead, rather than as absolute truths or the final answer. What follows is only a sampling of some of the findings and theoretical contributions over the last decade.

To simplify the various strength-based approaches and summarize the approach practitioners take when working with character strengths, Niemiec (2009) offered the three-step process of aware, explore, and apply. The practitioner helps the client become *more* aware of their existing character strengths, which is a critical task as Linley (2008) has reported that fewer than 1/3 of individuals have a meaningful understanding of their strengths. The practitioner follows this with questions that help the client dig deep in exploring their strengths – addressing when they have previously used strengths at their best and worst and how they might tap into strengths to create a best possible future. Exploration is followed by the application of an action plan or goal targeted to improve a particular strength. Looking to character strength exemplars in one's life and in the movies (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008) is ideal for rallying this stage through the power of observational learning (Bandura, 1986). In addition to the Aware-Explore-Apply model, a number of additional strength-based models can be applied to character strengths practice including models from coaching (e.g., the GROW model), business (the Appreciative Inquiry model), and social-constructivist psychology (the 4 E's model; Wong, 2006).

As the steps are implemented and repeated, it is optimal that strength spotting (Linley, 2008) be used throughout the three phases of the model. A preliminary step involving resource priming (Fluckiger & Grosse Holtforth, 2008) should also be considered; this involves the practitioner focusing on the client's strengths prior to the session. When working with helping clients explore and apply character strengths – strengths development interventions - there are a number of issues to be attuned to, such as considering how strengths work together toward a desired

outcome, novel ways to use strengths, the strength-environment fit, the liabilities of strengths, the modulation of strengths to situational demands by using them more or less, and how they align with values (Louis 2010). In addition, the golden mean of strengths – finding the right balance of strength expression in the right context so as not to be overplayed or underplayed – is of great importance for practitioners (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Linley, 2008).

The VIA-Pro report (and its accompanying Practitioner Guide) is an interpretive report that provides a close look at the individual's character strengths through the use of 5 graphs, description of key research around certain character strengths, ways to explore strengths, a description of the overuse and underuse of their highest strengths, and a description of the most recent interventions for building or expressing each of the 24 character strengths (see www.viapro.org/www/). Practitioners have found this to be particularly helpful as a “best practice” tool for working with strengths and serves as a jump-start in the early stages of practitioner-client relationships.

3.1.2 Signature strengths

The quintessential exercise in working with character strength has become the suggestion to use a signature strength in a new and unique way. Signature strengths are character strengths that are displayed the majority of time in relevant settings, readily named and owned by the individual, and are easily recognized by others as characteristic of the individual (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Seligman (2002) added that signature strengths have a rapid learning curve, are invigorating to use, involve a sense of authenticity (“this is the real me”) when used, and involve intrinsic motivation. While the convention has been that people typically name between 3 and 7 strengths of the 24 VIA strengths as signature, this is only a general rule of thumb and research is currently ongoing to determine how many signature strengths individuals typically have. Finding new and unique ways to use signature strengths is indeed an effective intervention; it increased happiness and decreased depression for 6 months in a large, randomized, controlled trial on the Internet (Seligman, Steen, Park, Peterson, 2005). In the same sample, a suggestion to write down three positive things that happened during the day (increasing the strength of gratitude) led to similar results over the 6-month period. These results have been replicated at least one time with similar significant effects on increasing happiness for 6 months and lowering depression for either 3 or 6 months (Mongrain & Anselmo, 2009).

Another randomly controlled study assigned individuals to a group instructed to use 2 signature strengths, to a group instructed to use 1 signature strength and 1 bottom strength, or to a control group. Results revealed significant gains in satisfaction with life for both treatment groups compared to controls, but there were no differences between the 2 treatment groups (Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009). Both treatment groups wrote about an event or occurrence in the past when they successfully used their character strength. Each week, they also wrote about a plan or situation for the coming week in which they could apply the strength. Another signature-strengths study found that the use of one's top strengths led to a decreased likelihood of depression and stress and an increase in satisfaction in law students (Peterson & Peterson, 2008). Finding novel ways to use signature strengths was a core part of a coaching program for youth that led to increases in the students' self-reported levels of engagement and hope (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011). In another study, Mitchell et al. (2009) asked participants to develop three of their top 10 strengths and find ways to develop them in their daily life and found benefits

to the cognitive component of well-being at 3 months.

Deployment of character strengths in the work setting was linked with greater well-being, vocational satisfaction, and meaning (Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). While it is important to endorse one's strengths, these studies show it is important to take it to the next step and deploy them at work. In the first study to explore the connections between signature strengths use, goal progress, psychological needs, and well-being, Linley et al. (2010) found that those who used their signature strengths made more progress on their goals, met their basic psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence), and were higher in overall well-being (a combination of higher life satisfaction, higher positive emotions, and lower negative emotions). This study helps pave the way in explaining why working on signature strengths leads to greater well-being.

3.1.3 Wisdom strengths

These are the cognitive strengths of creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective. Most creativity training programs work, especially when divergent thinking – the capacity to generate multiple alternative solutions as opposed to one correct solution – is fostered (Scott et al., 2004). Many interventions help to increase creativity in older adults, such as cultural/art programs (e.g., music, dance, drawing), poetry, journaling, problem-solving activities, reminiscence, and psycho-educational groups (Flood & Phillips, 2007).

In an experiment in which participants were instructed to pay attention to three novel features with something they disliked (i.e., use their curiosity), the participants changed the way they viewed the activity, and weeks later they were more likely to have done the task again on their own (Langer, 2005). Individuals are more likely to engage in active open-mindedness of multiple views (i.e., judgment) when asked to make decisions around values/goals that are both strong and conflicting (Tetlock, 1986). Students are more likely to value and enjoy learning if they're achieving their grade goal, the subject matter is of personal interest, or the reasons for learning are task-oriented (e.g., there are markers for how they can improve; Covington, 1999).

There are three major paths for developing wisdom (perspective): learning from mentors and reading philosophical literature, teaching skills and wise patterns of thinking and decision-making, and the use of direct, short-term interventions, such as imagined conversation and imagined travel (Gluck & Baltes, 2006).

3.1.4 Courage strengths

These are the emotional strengths of bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest. Labeling one's actions in retrospect as courageous can lead to or promote courage, or at least positive states and values that lead to courageous behaviors (Finfgeld, 1999; Hannah et al., 2007). Most people have tried to increase their courage/bravery in some way. Pury (2008) looked at the strategies people employ to increase courage. The most common approach was outcome-focused strategies in which individuals thought of the outcome of the courageous act- thinking of the person being helped, reminding themselves that it was the right thing to do, or remembering that there was an obligation to act. The second most common approach can be categorized as emotion-focused

coping, which involves individuals reminding themselves to not fear, receiving encouragement from others, and keeping a positive focus. The least common approach was problem-focused coping, in which individuals reminded themselves of the action or mentally rehearsed their plans for the brave act.

Honesty, empathy, and courage – conceptualized as academic heroism – predicted academic honesty and are noted as three potential routes for developing heroism and virtues (Staats et al., 2008). Reinforcement of high effort on tasks results in transfer of effort to other tasks (greater perseverance; Eisenberger, 1992; Hickman et al., 1998). Potential pathways for increasing zest, particularly in the workplace, may be to cultivate optimism, gratitude, or savoring; emphasize good social relationships outside work; and focus on physical health and fitness (Peterson et al., 2009).

3.1.5 Humanity strengths

These are the interpersonal strengths of love, kindness, and social intelligence. The focus on cultivating love toward oneself and/or others was found to increase feelings of social connection and positivity toward others (Hutcherson et al., 2008), as well as positive emotions, sense of purpose, and mindfulness in general (Fredrickson et al., 2008). The approach of sharing good news (capitalization) with a person who responds in an active, enthusiastic, genuine, and positive way (active-constructive responding) is beneficial for the speaker, the listener, and their relationship (Gable et al., 2004). Shelly Gable, the lead researcher in this area, has shared that the key character strengths involved in this process are love, social intelligence, and self-regulation (Gable, personal communication, 2009). Kindness and gratitude increased among happy Japanese women who counted their kind acts (Otake et al., 2006).

3.1.6 Justice strengths

These are the civic strengths of teamwork, fairness, and leadership. Potential pathways to build teamwork and develop successful teams come from correlational research that found team optimism predicts outcomes for teams that are newly formed; and team resiliency and team efficacy predict outcomes for established teams (West et al., 2009). Instructors are more likely to be perceived as fair if they present information clearly, give regular feedback, stick to the course syllabus, and give many opportunities to earn a good grade in the course (Chory, 2007). Moral-reasoning development (fairness) is developed through stimulating and interactive peer discussions that involve moral issues, heterogeneous reasoning, and orient toward consensus or resolution of disagreement (also called transactive discussions; Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983). The development of two or three different leadership styles (e.g., directive, participative, coaching) relates to higher leader behavioral flexibility, which is an important characteristic of effective leaders (Sumner-Armstrong et al., 2008).

3.1.7 Temperance strengths

These are the protective strengths of forgiveness, modesty/humility, prudence, and self-regulation. Writing about the personal benefits of forgiving a transgressor led to greater forgiveness than writing about the traumatic features of a transgression suffered or an unrelated

control topic (McCullough et al., 2006). Viewing and working with forgiveness as a process, whether this is done individually or in groups, is crucial for building this strength (Baskin & Enright, 2004). A meta-analysis of 65 group-intervention conditions found that the amount of time spent empathizing with transgressors, committing to forgive, and practical strategies (e.g., anger management and relaxation) was significantly related to forgiveness outcome (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005).

Daily self-control exercises increase a general core capacity for self-control (i.e., our self-regulation “muscle”), such as food monitoring, improving mood, improving posture, physical exercise programs, financial monitoring exercises, and the use of a non-preferred hand to do routine activities (Baumeister et al., 2006).

3.1.8 Transcendence strengths

These are the spiritual strengths of appreciation of beauty/excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and religiousness/spirituality. Keeping a “beauty log” of writing briefly about the beauty one appreciates in nature, art, or morality leads to a higher engagement with moral beauty and trait hope levels (Diessner et al., 2006). A combination of cognitive strategies (e.g., evaluating beliefs) and social problem-solving strategies (e.g., assertiveness training) leads to greater optimism (Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox, & Seligman, 1995). Visualizing and writing about one’s best possible self at a time in the future leads to increases in optimism/hope and well-being (King, 2001; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Emmons (2007; Emmons & McCullough, 2003) reviews a number of strategies for building gratitude, including counting one’s blessings, keeping a gratitude journal, writing a gratitude letter, making a gratitude visit, and replacing ungrateful thoughts with grateful thoughts. Four studies taken together found that prayer increases the strength of gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009). Learning from spiritual models or exemplars reduced negative religious coping and images of God as controlling and provided an avenue for learning about spirituality (Oman & Thoresen, 2003; Oman et al., 2007).

4.1 Future Directions

While there is strong direction and exciting research that has emerged in the science of character, this is a field that is best described as young and developing, particularly in areas of character strengths application. I have summarized some of the most recent basic and applied research on character strengths. There are a number of areas to which robust research on character strengths is needed: relationships (Does appreciation of a partner’s character strengths relate to a stronger relationship?); judgment of character (What are the main variables people use to judge each of the character strengths in others?); teaching & learning (What is the impact of character strengths on classroom learning?); connection with talents (Does alignment of signature character strengths with talents and interests lead to better performance and/or well-being than those whose signature strengths/talents/interests are not aligned?).

It is likely that each research or application point discussed in this paper leads to further questions and research that could be conducted. For example, take the finding that some

researchers have found that life satisfaction increases with degree of virtuousness (the development of character strengths); however, this increase is more apparent for the less virtuous (Ruch et al., 2007). While this is an interesting finding, it leads to many questions needing to be explored: What are the various outcomes of increasing one's character strengths? How much is enough? To what extent does one need to increase one's character strengths to buffer externalizing or addictive behaviors and mental illness? Does it cause flourishing? Does it lead to more authentic individuals, to more virtuous individuals, or both?

This is an exciting area of positive psychology. I look forward to the decade ahead for research that replicates and expands these findings, as well as research that pushes this science forward along new paths and into new territory exploring the elements of what is best in humanity.

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