Character Strengths and Virtues: A Brief Introduction

The emergence of the field of positive psychology at the turn of the 21st century presents an insight into the future direction of the science and practice of psychology. While psychology has generally concerned itself with healing- with fixing what is wrong or malfunctioning with individuals-, a number of psychologists have argued that equal emphasis should be placed on the factors contributing to healthy human functioning.[1] This new field, which is now at the cutting edge of psychological research, has as its goal the creation of "a psychology of positive human functioning…that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families and communities."[2]

It is worth comparing the hope for positive psychology's role in the 21st century with John Dewey's hope for the field of psychology when he delivered the 1899 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association. Dewey believed that psychology as a discipline should be able, in its unique position as a social science committed to the comprehension of human behavior, to contribute to the value of human life. Psychological practice for Dewey should be judged "by the contribution which they make to the value of the human life,[3]" and assist in the development of flourishing communities. Such sentiments are clearly echoed 100 years later by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi:

> (In this millennium), the social and behavioral sciences can play an enormously important role. They can articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive. They can show what actions lead to well being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities. Psychology should be able to document what

[1] The personality psychologist Gordon Allport was among the first to propose such a venture; see Gordon Allport, *Pattern and Growth in Personality* (Holt, Rinehart, & and Winston, 1961)
[2] Seligman, "Positive Psychology, Positive Prevention, and Positive Therapy," p. 7.
[3] John Dewey, "Psychology and Social Practice," *Psychological Review* 7 (1900), 121.

kinds of families result in children who flourish, what work settings support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic engagement, and how people's lives can be most worth living.[4]

As Seligman, the field's most prominent researcher, has written, "we will learn how to build the qualities that help individuals and communities not just endure and survive but also flourish"[5] through the evaluation of positive human traits. The question of assessing the positive traits than facilitate human flourishing was a task taken up by Seligman, who asserted that two fundamental questions needed to be at the heart of any assessment program: how can one define the concept of a human "strength" and "highest potential"; and, how can one tell that a positive youth development program utilizing this new approach has succeeded in meeting its goals- that how does one know is the approach has worked?

It was with this question in mind that Peterson and Seligman attempted a scientific classification of human strengths. The Values in Action (VIA) Institute was set up with the assistance of the Manual D. and Rhonda Mayerson Foundation in 2000 with Seligman as its scientific director and Christopher Peterson as the project director. The fruit of the VIA Institute's first three years was the publication in 2004 of a preliminary classification of character strengths and virtues, Character Strengths and Virtues.

This manual represents a first attempt to scientifically classify human strengths and virtues, and is to a significant extent influenced by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The classification itself is intentionally modeled on the Linnaean classification

[4] Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist 55* (2000), 5.
[5] Martin Seligman, "Positive Psychology, Positive Prevention, and Positive Therapy," 8.

of species[6], and is divided into three conceptual levels: virtues, character strengths, and situational themes. The text deals primarily with the first two levels.

Virtues are defined as the central characteristics that have been valued moral philosophers and religious thinkers worldwide. Six central virtues were defined following extensive historical studies: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. In this account, virtues are seen as universal traits possibly grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selects the best traits for solving the most important tasks at hand.[7]

Character strengths are the means that one may employ to exhibit a particular virtue. While each of these strengths requires the acquisition and use of knowledge, and are intimately (though not exclusively) connected with a particular virtue, they are distinct from one another. Generally, a virtuous individual would only exhibit one or two strengths from a particular virtue group. 24 distinct strengths have been thus far identified, although this number is very much a provisional one; the VIA projects envisages having a near-exhaustive list in the near future. These strengths were also derived from extensive cross-cultural and historical investigations, and repeated reductions of larger trait lists. The 24 selected were deemed to have satisfied most of the following ten criteria:

1. A strength contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others. Although strengths and virtues determine how an individual copes with adversity, the focus is on how they fulfill an individual.
2. Although strengths can and do produce desirable outcomes, each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes.
3. The display of a strength by one person does not diminish other people in the vicinity.

[6] Christopher Peterson & Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2004), 13.
[7] Peterson & Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 13.

4. Being able to phrase the “opposite” of a putative strength in a felicitous way counts against regarding it as a character strength.
5. A strength needs to be manifest in the range of an individual’s behavior-thoughts, feelings, and/or actions- in such a way that it can be assessed. It should be trait-like in the sense of having a degree of generality across situations and stability across time.
6. The strength is distinct from other positive traits in the classification and cannot be decomposed into them.
7. A character strength is embodied in consensual paragons.
8. This feature probably cannot be applied to all strengths, but an additional criteria where sensible is the existence of prodigies with respect to the strength.
9. Conversely, another criterion for a character strength is the existence of people who show- selectively- the total absence of a given strength.
10. The larger society provides institutions and associated rituals for cultivating strengths and virtues and then for sustaining their practice.

With these criteria in mind, the 24 strengths were identifies and classified under their respective virtues as follows:

1. Wisdom and knowledge
    - Creativity
    - Curiosity
    - Open-mindedness
    - Love of learning
    - Perspective
2. Courage

- Bravery
- Persistence
- Integrity
- Vitality

3. Humanity
    - Love
    - Kindness
    - Social Intelligence
4. Justice
    - Citizenship
    - Fairness
    - Leadership
5. Temperance
    - Forgiveness and mercy
    - Humility/ Modesty
    - Prudence
    - Self-regulation
6. Transcendence
    - Appreciation of beauty and excellence
    - Gratitude
    - Hope
    - Humor
    - Spirituality

Each of these 24 strengths is expounded upon with substantial detail, with information on behavioral definitions of the strengths, the theoretical and research traditions that have studied them, existing individual difference measures, correlates and consequences of their possession, their life-span development in the individual, factors that facilitate or hinder their growth, information on cross-gender, cross-cultural and cross-national differences, as well as on successful intervention programs to foster the strengths, unknown aspects, and a up-to-date bibliography.

Finally, situational themes refer to the specific habits that lead individuals to manifest particular character strengths in a given situation. An assessment of themes needs to be made setting by setting, and thus far only the workplace has been studied in significant detail. In Peterson and Seligman's views, any socio-cultural variation can be explained primarily at the level of situational themes, thus increasing the cross-cultural validity of the classification.

While the project's view of character descends from the personality psychology tradition, and trait theory in particular, an attempt is made to ground the classification in the virtue ethics tradition. As Peterson and Seligman write:

> Virtue ethics is the contemporary account within philosophy to strengths of character, and we believe that virtues are much more interesting than (moral) laws, at least to psychologists, because virtues pertain to people and the lives they lead. Said another way, psychology needs to downplay prescriptions for the good life (moral laws) and instead emphasize the why and how of good character.[8]

Indeed they refer to their project as the "social science equivalent of virtue ethics, using the scientific method to inform philosophical pronouncements about the traits of a good person."[9]

[8] Peterson & Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 10.
[9] Peterson & Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 89.

However, the extent to which this classification is really grounded in virtue ethics is a relevant question.

The VIA project made early progress on developing assessment tools for the empirical study of character strengths. With a preliminary objective of creating a multi-method strategy that can be employed among English speakers in the contemporary Western world, four measures are currently in different stages of development: the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IA), the Values in Action Rising to the Occasion Inventory (VIA-RTO), the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth), and the Values in Action Structured Interview. Of these, the VIA-IA has been revised five times, and has been administered to over 150,000 subjects. It was a 240-item face-valid self-report questionnaire, and all scores obtained from it have had substantial test-retest correlations (>.70) and satisfactory alphas (>.70).

Interestingly, despite the fact that the VIA inventory has been developed primarily to be administered to Western populations, a cross-cultural study of 123 members of the Kenyan Maasai, 71 seal hunters in Northern Greenland, and 519 students from the University of Illinois found that while there was a high rate of agreement about the existence, desirability, and development of these strengths. Despite these strong similarities, however, there were differences between and within cultures based on gender, the perceived importance of specific virtues (such as modesty), and the existence of cultural institutions that promote these strengths.[10]

More recently, McGrath (2005) has used large datasets utilizing the VIA to identify a more parsimonious three-factor model, with dimensions labeled caring, inquisitiveness, and self-

[10] Robert Biswas-Diener & Ed Diener, "From the Equator to the Artic: A Cross-Cultural Study of Strengths and Virtues," at http://www.viastrengths.org/index.aspx?ContentID=51

control[11]. This factor structure has been replicated by Park and colleagues (2016)[12]. More generally, recent work has focused on improving the quality of measures utilized for assessing character strengths, as well as examining the benefits of developing character and the developmental trajectories of specific character strengths over time[13].

[11] McGrath, R. (2015). Integrating psychological and cultural perspectives on virtue: The hierarchical structure of character strengths. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 10*(5), 407-424.
[12] Duckworth, A. L., Tsukayama, E., & Patrick, S. D. (2014). A tripartite taxonomy of character. In *annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA*.
[13] Lerner, R. M., & Callina, K. S. (2014). Relational developmental systems theories and the ecological validity of experimental designs. *Human Development, 56*(6), 372-380.;