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Character Strengths: Research and Practice

Nansook Park, University of Rhode Island
Christopher Peterson, University of Michigan[1]

Abstract

Character strengths are the foundation of optimal life-long development and thriving. Good character is not a singular thing but rather plural—a family of positive traits shown in one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This paper provides an overview of the Values in Action (VIA) project, which classifies and measures 24 widely-recognized and valued strengths. Research shows that character strengths are linked to important aspects of individual and social well-being, although different strengths predict different outcomes. This paper discusses ways to recognize and cultivate character strengths, within the context of a strengths-based approach to education and personal development. Character matters, and cultivating its components should be an important goal for all.

What is the good of a person, and how can we encourage good character in young people? Despite the importance of good character, scholars largely neglected this topic throughout most of the 20th century. Positive psychology has refocused scientific attention on character, identifying it as key to understanding the psychological good life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology further emphasizes building a fulfilling life by identifying individual strengths of character and fostering them (Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Park, 2003).

Good character is what we look for in leaders, what we look for in teachers and students, what we look for in colleagues at work, what parents look for in their children, and what friends look for in each other. Good character is not the absence of deficits and problems but rather a well-developed family of positive traits.

Character strengths are those aspects of personality that are morally valued. As Baumrind (1998) noted, "It takes virtuous character to will the good, and competence to do good well" (p. 13). Many higher education and social programs today focus on helping young people acquire academic skills and abilities such as thinking critically. These help young people achieve their life goals, and of course are important. Nonetheless, without good character, individuals may lack the desire to do the right thing.

Character strengths, when exercised, not only prevent undesirable life outcomes (Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Botvin, & Diaz, 1995) but are important in their own right as markers and indeed causes of healthy life-long development (Colby & Damon, 1992; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1997). Growing evidence shows that specific strengths of character—for example, hope,

[1]This paper is based on a keynote address delivered February 6, 2009, at the 19th Annual Institute on College Student Values (Florida State University, Tallahassee). Nansook Park is in the Department of Psychology, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881-0808, USA; npark@uri.edu. Christopher Peterson is in the Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1043, USA; chrispet@umich.edu. We welcome collaboration with schools, colleges, and youth programs. Those interested in collaborative research or program developments on character strengths should contact Christopher Peterson.

kindness, social intelligence, self-control, and perspective—buffer against the negative effects of stress and trauma, preventing or limiting problems in their wake. In addition, character strengths help young people to thrive and are associated with desired outcomes like school success, leadership, tolerance and valuing of diversity, ability to delay gratification, kindness, and altruism (see Park, 2004a, for a review.)

The Values in Action (VIA) Project

For the past several years, from the perspective of positive psychology (Peterson, 2006), we have been involved in a project that addresses important strengths of character and how to measure them (Park & Peterson, 2006b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Our project—the *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths*—focuses on what is right about people and more specifically about the strengths of character that contribute to optimal development across the lifespan. We first identified components of good character and then devised ways to assess them. The project provides a starting point for the systematic scientific study of good character. The VIA Classification consists of 24 widely-valued character strengths, organized under six broad virtues (see Table 1).

Table 1
VIA Classification of Strengths

1. wisdom and 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
2. courage
    - honesty: speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
    - bravery: *not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
    - persistence: finishing what one starts
    - zest: approaching life with excitement and energy
3. humanity
    - 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
4. justice
    - 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 member of a group or team
5. temperance
    - 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

6. transcendence

- appreciation of beauty and excellence: 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
- religiousness: having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

We have previously described the process by which the strengths were identified and classified under six broad virtue categories, as well as the process by which we created and validated measures for children, youth, and adults (Park & Peterson, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In our judgment, the most general contribution of the VIA project is to provide a legitimized vocabulary for psychologically-informed discussion of the personal qualities of individuals that make them worthy of moral praise.

An important assumption inherent in the VIA Classification is that character is plural rather than singular. Accordingly, character must be measured in ways that do justice to its breadth and complexity. Our project approaches character as a family of positive characteristics shown in feelings, thoughts, and actions, each of which exists in degrees—i.e., along a continuum. In everyday conversation, we may speak casually of character as something that a person has or does not have, but the components of character, the specific strengths included in Table 1, are distinguishable and furthermore exist in degrees. Someone may be high on one strength yet low on another and average on yet a third, which means that people's moral character is most sensibly described in terms of profiles of greater and lesser strengths (Walker & Pitts, 1998).

As we use the terms, *virtues* are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. *Character strengths* are the more specific psychological processes or mechanisms that define the virtues. To convey the multidimensionality of good character, we refer to its components as *character strengths*. Accordingly, we need to be cautious about searching for single indicators of good character. There is no reason for educators and professionals to refrain from assessing a single component of good character—like kindness or hope or teamwork—but it would be a mistake to then treat this single component assessed in a particular way as the whole of good character. Individuals might be very kind or very hopeful but lack other components of good character. They can of course be described as kind or hopeful, but simply that. To repeat: Good character is best captured by a profile of its components.

The *VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)* is a self-report survey suitable for adults ages 18 or older that comprehensively assesses the 24 character strengths. The VIA-IS can be completed in a single session, typically taking about 45-minutes. For children and youth aged 10-17, the *VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth).* is suitable. Both of these surveys are available online at no cost (www.authentichappiness.org or www.viastrengths.org). Once individuals register on the website and complete the survey, feedback is given about their top strengths, what are called signa*ture strengths*. Identifying signature strengths and then using them in everyday life may provide a route to a psychological fulfillment (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Here are a few caveats to keep in mind. Positive traits not included among a respondent's signature strengths are not necessarily weaknesses but rather lesser strengths in comparison to the others. Furthermore, the order of top strengths (e.g., among one's top 5 strengths) should not be interpreted in a rigid way because there are typically no meaningful differences in their magnitudes.

Research Findings and Implications

Empirical evidence concerning the correlates and outcomes of the character strengths is accumulating. It is already clear that while all strengths of character contribute to fulfillment, certain character strengths are more robustly linked to well-being and flourishing of young people than are others (Park & Peterson, 2006c).

For example, the strengths of character consistently related to life satisfaction—an important indicator of personal well-being—are gratitude, hope, zest, curiosity, and most importantly, love, defined as the ability to sustain reciprocated close relationships with other people (Park & Peterson, 2006c; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). So, for a psychologically good life, individuals need to cultivate in particular these strengths.

These findings have important implications for educators, parents, mental health professionals, and policy makers who concern themselves with the promotion of positive development among young people. First, schools and youth programs should start to measure young people's assets, like the VIA character strengths, as much as they measure deficits and shortcomings. The tracking of problems and weaknesses has a long lineage within education and mental health, whereas measures of positive development such as character strengths are neither as numerous nor as well developed (Park & Peterson, 2005). By and large, schools, youth programs, and societies do not monitor positive development and outcomes, despite the proliferation of character education programs.

One measures what one values, and one values what one measures. If society really cares about good character among young people, we should be assessing strengths and paying attention to how they develop. Educators and parents are already busy measuring young people's academic abilities and monitoring the progress of learning. We hope that someday schools will also assess the character strengths of students and just as diligently record the progress of their development.

Second, educators and policy makers should pay attention to particular character strengths. Research consistently shows that strengths of the "heart" like love and gratitude, those that connect people together, are more strongly associated with well-being than are strengths of the "head" that are necessarily individual in nature—e.g., creativity, critical thinking, and appreciation of beauty and excellence (Park & Peterson, 2008; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Formal education has long stressed the latter strengths, but if an additional goal of education and youth programs is to encourage a psychologically healthy life, the research results suggest that the former strengths deserve equal attention.

We have found that students' academic achievement is influenced by a set of character strengths. Among middle-school students, the character strengths of perseverance, love, gratitude, hope, and perspective predict academic achievement. Similar results are found as well among college students. Learning occurs not just within people but among them, and character strengths can facilitate the process.

Furthermore, the strengths of bravery and appreciation of beauty play a role in successful recovery from illness and spirituality/religiousness is associated with a life of meaning and purpose. In a longitudinal study, we have found effective teachers—judged by the gains of their students on standardized tests—are socially intelligent and show zest and humor.

Taken together, these findings imply that the encouragement of particular character strengths would not only make young people happier, healthier, and more socially connected but also help them do better at school and to be more productive at their eventual work. Attention to young people's character is not a luxury for our society but a necessity, and it requires no tradeoff with traditional academic goals.

Third, the VIA classification provides a useful vocabulary for people to talk about character strengths in an appropriately nuanced way (Park, 2004a; Park & Peterson, 2008).

Simply saying that someone has good character (or not) does not lead to anywhere useful. In contrast, using the strengths concepts and measures associated with VIA classification, people can describe the profile of strengths that characterize each individual. The VIA measures allow comparison of character strengths across individuals but also within individuals. That is, they can be scored ipsatively (e.g., rank ordered for an individual)—to identify one's signature strengths relative to his or her other strengths of character. We believe that everybody has signature strengths regardless of where he or she may stand compared to others.

Such a strength-based approach would be particularly useful for working with students having a history of disability, poor achievement, and other troubles. When we compare these individuals to the norm, as often we do, it may be difficult to find anything at which they are good. However, by considering the profile of the 24 VIA strengths *within* an individual, we can identify those strengths that are most salient for that person. And then, educators, parents and professionals can help young people to use these strengths in their lives, in and out of school.

A strengths-based approach can be used with young people at any level and of any ability. Because signature strengths are the ones people already possess, it is often easier and more satisfying to work with and on these strengths. Once young people build their confidence by using and developing their signature strengths, they can be taught how to use these strengths to work on their less-developed strengths. It can be frustrating and difficult to work only on weaknesses and problems. Young people may give up or become defensive or indifferent about their problems. However, if discussions and interventions start with the strengths of young people—things at which they are already proficient—rapport can be built, and motivation thereby increased. The net effect of a strengths-based approach should be enhanced success of any and all interventions.

The exercise of signature strengths is particularly fulfilling. Consider a study we did with adults who completed a VIA survey and identified their top strengths, who were then asked to use these strengths for a week in novel ways (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Relative to a comparison group without this instruction, these individuals increased their happiness and also decreased their depression at six months follow-up. These changes were evident if research participants continued to use their strengths in new ways. Finding *novel* ways to use strengths every day is critical and reflects the importance of ongoing personal effort in producing a flourishing life.

Cultivation of Character Strengths

Throughout the duration of this project, we have been interested in how strengths of character in the VIA Classification develop and change, although our first order of business was to establish the groundwork—the classification and the measures (Park & Peterson, 2009). Our interest stemmed from practical and theoretical concerns. Given the desirable consequences of character strengths, there is good reason to ask how they can be strengthened among those who possess them or created from scratch among those who lack them. And we have long agreed with Kurt Lewin's (1947) adage that the best way to understand a phenomenon—in this case good character—is to try and change it.

It is clear from our research that character strengths among youth and among adults are relatively stable across time, a finding in keeping with our view of them as trait-like. We have also learned that character strengths show interpretable developmental trajectories. For example, the least common strengths among young children and adolescents are those that require cognitive maturation: e.g., appreciation of beauty and excellence, forgiveness, modesty, and open-mindedness (Park & Peterson, 2006a, 2006c; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006).

This work is in its infancy, but we have so far learned that character strengths are

influenced by nurture and nature. Indeed, a variety of influences contribute to development of good character—genes, family, schools, peers, and communities. Not surprisingly, the character strengths of parents and children tend to converge, especially between fathers and sons and between mothers and daughters. In a twin study that compared similarities in the VIA strengths in identical versus fraternal twins, it was found that each of the strengths is moderately heritable, as are many individual differences (Steger, Hicks, Kashdan, Krueger, & Bouchard, 2007). The study additionally showed that shared family environment influenced some of the strengths (e.g., love of learning), an unusual result in this type of research, which rarely finds any influence of growing up in a given family after common genetics are controlled (Dunn & Plomin, 1992). Perhaps family influence is more relevant for positive characteristics than for the negative characteristics typically on focus in twin studies. For virtually all of the VIA strengths, nonshared family environment (e.g., peers and teachers) proved the most important influence.

Dramatic events can increase character strengths. For example, in the six months after the 9/11 attacks, the character strengths of faith (religiousness), hope, and love were elevated among US respondents but not among European respondents (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Successful recovery from physical illness is associated with increases in the strengths of bravery, kindness, and humor, whereas successful recovery from psychological disorder is associated with modest increases in the strengths of appreciation of beauty and love of learning (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). And exposure to trauma results in increases in the character strengths of religiousness, gratitude, kindness, hope, and bravery—precisely the components of post-traumatic growth (Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Andrea, & Seligman, 2008).

None of these studies had a fine-grained design, and we do not know the process by which strengths of character develop. The VIA Classification is intentionally descriptive and not based on any given theory. However, we have some ideas about how character strengths are created, increased, sustained, and displayed.

We believe that character strengths are habits, evident in thoughts, feelings, and actions (cf. Aristotle, 350 BCE/2000). They are certainly not latent entities. No one is a "good kid deep down at heart" unless he or she shows good character in ways that can be seen.

When we say that character strengths are trait-like, we mean only that the habits to which they refer are relatively stable across time and relatively general across situations. No further meaning should be inferred, and the fact that character strengths as we have measured them are moderately heritable does not mean that they are immutable or singular things (Peterson, 2006). According to Aristotle, virtues (character strengths) can be taught and acquired only by practice. Aquinas similarly argued that a virtue is a habit that people develop only by choosing the good and consistently acting in accord. Other scholars have made the same point that character must be developed by doing and not just by thinking or talking about it (e.g., Maudsley, 1898). These various notions about virtue imply that character can be cultivated by good parenting, schooling, and socialization and that it becomes instantiated through habitual action.

Positive role models are also important for the development of good character (Bandura, 1977; Sprafkin, Liebert, & Poulos 1975). Adults in young people's lives may play important roles as character mentors. Indeed, we are all role models, for better or for worse, and we need to act in ways worthy of emulation. Remember the saying: "Children may not listen to their parents, but they never fail to imitate them." If adults value and want to teach young people good character, they should start by showing them how through their own actions. We visited a private high school a few years ago and were impressed that the "no makeup" policy for students was followed as well by their teachers, even though it was not in any teacher manual, simply because it gave teachers the moral authority and credibility to enforce the rules. Finally, we assume that the situation matters not only for acquiring character strengths but also for using them. It is obviously easier to display certain character strengths in some settings than in others.

Character development programs need to teach specific activities of strengths and encourage young people to keep using them in their daily lives (Park & Peterson, 2008, 2009). Saying "do your best" or "be the best that you can be" is not a good way to cultivate good character. Young people need to be instructed to choose the target strengths on which they want to focus, to set specific and measurable goals, and to devise concrete action plans to achieve these goals. For example, if kindness is the chosen target strength, saying hello to at least one new person each day at school provides an effective goal and action plan. Continuous monitoring and journaling of progress are critical. In short, one must make a measurable life style change.

An individualized program for cultivating character based on an individual's character strength profile may be more effective than a general—one size fits all—program for everyone. Chanting slogans or putting up banners or holding monthly school assemblies will not be as effective as an individualized program for each young person that encourages him or her to behave in different ways.

Change does not occur in a vacuum, and a first step in cultivating strengths of character is to legitimize a strengths vocabulary in whatever settings people happen to be. Here the VIA Project can be helpful by providing the words with which we can describe our own strengths and those of others, whether they be strengths that already exist or strengths that we want to build. Then one needs to start using these words often enough so that they do not sound awkward or quaint.

Here is one example of a strength-based approach that can be easily adopted in the classrooms. Over the years in our college classes, we have begun with what we call *serious introductions,* which introduce a strengths vocabulary and underscore its importance. Most college seminars begin by the students introducing themselves like this: "My name is Jennifer. I am a sophomore studying psychology because my first-year science courses for premed destroyed me and ruined by grade point average. I grew up in Newark, New Jersey. I am taking this particular course because it fits my schedule." The instructor may say something similar, if typically less frank.

Introductions like these are familiar to all college students. But we instead ask our students to tell a story about an event in their lives that showed them at their very best, not in terms of an athletic or academic achievement, but as a moral being. We preface this request by a small sermon on modesty, a virtue in many circumstances but not if it gets in the way of the truth.

In a class of twenty students, these serious introductions can take several hours and may even stretch over a few class periods, but it is always time well spent. These introductions frame how we all think about one another for the rest of the semester and thereafter. With apologies to any readers from the Garden State, it is better to know that Jennifer once went against the social currents to befriend an ostracized classmate during high school than to know that she grew up in New Jersey and was a failure as a chemistry student.

We have learned that we need to tell students about appreciative listening, how to listen carefully to what is said and then to respond in a way that builds on what has been conveyed as opposed to disagreeing with it, dismissing it, or ignoring it out of discomfort. Positive psychology as we teach it has become a course in rhetoric—not just reading and writing but also peaking and listening (Seligman, 2004).

Something powerful occurs during these serious introductions. During most of the introductions, one or more of the listeners is moved to quiet tears. With or without tears, strong bonds are created. Talking about strengths is heady stuff.

Conclusions

Our research shows that character strengths and virtues have important consequences for an individual. They are also critical for the well-being of an entire society. No one will live his or her life without challenges and setbacks, but to the degree that young people have greater life satisfaction, character strengths, and social support, they will experience fewer psychological or physical problems in the wake of inevitable difficulties (Park, 2004b; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006).

Research on character strengths goes beyond a focus on problems and their absence to address healthy development. The VIA project illustrates the premise of positive psychology that attention to good character—what a person does well—sheds light on what makes life worth living.

All young people want to do well and to live a happy and fulfilled life. These goals are fundamental human desires and rights. But too frequently, young people do not know how to find happiness and meaning in the right activities and in the right way. Perhaps the identification of character strengths is a good place to start. Everyone has strengths. Strengths need to be recognized, celebrated, strengthened, and used.

Some two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson (1819) wrote that happiness is the aim of life, but virtue is the foundation of happiness. In his 2009 inaugural address, Barack Obama reminded everyone that virtue is still the foundation of a flourishing nation. He reminded us all that virtues can help us survive and indeed thrive as individuals and as a society. Virtues do not belong in dusty books or the even dustier discourse among scholars. Virtues belong in our everyday life, where they can matter so much. Character matters, then and now and in the future. Cultivating its components should be an important goal for all: parents, educators, students, and citizens.

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