

STRENGTHS OF CHARACTER AND WELL-BEING

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We investigated the relationship between various character strengths and life satisfaction among 5,299 adults from three Internet samples using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths. Consistently and robustly associated with life satisfaction were hope, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity. Only weakly associated with life satisfaction, in contrast, were modesty and the intellectual strengths of appreciation of beauty, creativity, judgment, and love of learning. In general, the relationship between character strengths and life satisfaction was monotonic, indicating that excess on any one character strength does not diminish life satisfaction.

Positive psychology is an umbrella term for theories and research about what makes life most worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Strengths of character and positive experiences such as a satisfied life are among the central concerns of positive psychology (McCullough & Snyder, 2000; Seligman, 2002). Character strengths can be defined as positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They exist in degrees and can be measured as individual differences. We speculate that these are grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these predispositions toward moral excellence as means of

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solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species (cf. Bok, 1995; Schwartz, 1994; Wright, 1994).

As an initial step toward specifying important positive traits, *The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths* was developed. The details of our thinking are spelled out elsewhere (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Here are our conclusions:

- A character strength is “a disposition to act, desire, and feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to a recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing” (Yearley, 1990, p, 13).
- Character strengths are plural—that is, good character comprises a family of positive traits.
- Character strengths are *not* segregated mechanisms with automatic effects on behavior; rather, virtuous activity involves choosing virtue for itself and in light of a justifiable life plan, which means that people can reflect on their own strengths of character and talk about them to others.
- Character strengths can be distinguished from related individual differences such as talents and abilities by criteria such as those summarized in Table 1.
- The application of these criteria led us to identify 24 different strengths of character.

Table 2 lists the character strengths included in the VIA Classification. Note that many of the character strengths are identified with lists of related synonyms. This was a deliberate strategy, an attempt to capture the family resemblance of each strength while acknowledging that the synonyms are not exact replicas of one another (Wittgenstein, 1953). So the character strength of hope is rendered fully as hope, optimism, future-mindedness, and future orientation. We call this strategy one of piling on synonyms, and besides keeping the classified strengths to a manageable number, it pays the additional benefit of minimizing subtle connotations associated with any given synonym. So *hope* has Christian connotations, which we do not wish to emphasize, whereas *future orientation* has socioeconomic connotations, which we likewise do not wish to emphasize. The only downside is that our short-hand identification of a strength (e.g., “hope”) may not convey the acknowledged heterogeneity of the trait.

As one possible approach to good character, the VIA Classification is presented in a handbook that contains one chapter per strength that describes what psychologists know about the strength as an individual difference, including approaches to measurement and established correlates (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These literature reviews show that

TABLE 1. Criteria for a Character Strength

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1. Ubiquity—is widely recognized across cultures.
 2. Fulfilling—contributes to individual fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness broadly construed.
 3. Morally valued—is valued in its own right and not for tangible outcomes it may produce.
 4. Does not diminish others—elevates others who witness it, producing admiration, not jealousy.
 5. Nonfelicitous opposite—has obvious antonyms that are “negative.”
 6. Traitlike—is an individual difference with demonstrable generality and stability.
 7. Measurable—has been successfully measured by researchers as an individual difference.
 8. Distinctiveness—is *not* redundant (conceptually or empirically) with other character strengths.
 9. Paragons—is strikingly embodied in some individuals.
 10. Prodigies—is precociously shown by some children or youth.
 11. Selective absence—is missing altogether in some individuals.
 12. Institutions—is the deliberate target of societal practices and rituals that try to cultivate it.
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individual strengths of character are associated with indices of well-being, but the variety of operationalizations—both of positive traits and of well-being—make comparisons across strengths all but impossible.

Accordingly, we have created uniform tools for assessing each of the positive traits in the classification. One of these is a self-report questionnaire (VIA Inventory of Strengths; VIA-IS) that asks individuals to report the degree to which statements reflecting each of the strengths apply to themselves (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, in press). For example, the character strength of hope is measured with items that include “I know that I will succeed with the goals I set for myself.” The strength of gratitude is measured with such items as “At least once a day, I stop and count my blessings.”

Preliminary investigations demonstrate acceptable (and comparable) reliability and promising validity of the 24 subscales of the VIA-IS (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, in a study using a nomination procedure, people were asked to identify individuals whom they believed to possess a given strength to a notable degree. These individuals in turn completed the questionnaire without being told why. People nominated as a paragon of a given strength usually scored higher than those not nominated with respect to that strength, in the $r = .20$ to $.30$ range familiar to personality psychologists. We therefore conclude that the VIA-IS has a modicum of validity by the known-groups procedure

TABLE 2. VIA Classification of Character Strengths

Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience.
Bravery [valor]: <i>Not</i> shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it.
Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share.
Creativity [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it.
Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience; finding all subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering.
Fairness : Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; <i>not</i> letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.
Forgiveness and mercy : Forgiving those who have done wrong; giving people a second chance; <i>not</i> being vengeful.
Gratitude : Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks.
Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about.
Humor [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes.
Integrity [authenticity, honesty]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.
Judgment [open-mindedness, critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; <i>not</i> jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly.
Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them.
Leadership : Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintaining good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.
Love : Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people.
Love of learning : Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add <i>systematically</i> to what one knows
Modesty and humility : Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; <i>not</i> seeking the spotlight; <i>not</i> regarding oneself as more special than one is.
Persistence [perseverance, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks.
Perspective [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people.
Prudence : Being careful about one's choices; <i>not</i> taking undue risks; <i>not</i> saying or doing things that might later be regretted.
Self-regulation [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions.
Social intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit in to different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick.
Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.
Zest [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; <i>not</i> doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated.

and further that this measure allows a systematic foray into the comparative psychology of character strengths.

In the research reported here, we examined the relationships between strengths of character and subjective well-being (SWB) by looking specifically at life satisfaction, the cognitive aspect of SWB. Life satisfaction reflects the individual's appraisal of his or her life as a whole (Diener, 2000). High life satisfaction correlates with the absence of psychological and social problems such as depression and dysfunctional relationships (e.g., Furr & Funder, 1998; Lewinsohn, Redner, & Seeley, 1991). Furthermore, individuals who are satisfied with life are good problem-solvers, show better work performance, tend to be more resistant to stress, and experience better physical health (Frisch, 2000; Veenhoven, 1989). Research shows that only 15% of the variance in SWB is accounted for by demographic variables such as income, intelligence, and education (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976).

Two questions guided our research. First, although part of the definition of a character strength is that it contributes to fulfillment (Table 1), do some strengths show a stronger link to life satisfaction than others? Research into character strengths has been cautiously ecumenical in that few psychologists who study given strengths—whether hope (Snyder, 2000), kindness (Taylor et al., 2000), gratitude (Emmons & Hill, 2001), forgiveness (McCullough, 2000), open-mindedness (Baron, 2000), curiosity (Loewenstein, 1994), and so on—would say that the specific strength on which they focus in their research is the most fulfilling.

Philosophers, in contrast, have not hesitated to deem some strengths of character more important than others. From Aristotle (1962), who championed practical wisdom, and Confucius (1992), who emphasized benevolence, through Cicero (1960), who regarded gratitude as the chief virtue, and Aquinas (1989), who stressed the theological virtues of faith, hope, and especially charity, to Comte-Sponville (2001), who singled out love, we find explicit arguments that one or another character strength (virtue) is the master or queen that organizes others and adjudicates conflicts among them. As provocative as these discussions may be, no consensus has emerged among philosophers concerning the most fulfilling of the character strengths. Empirical data of course bear on this issue.

Our second question was whether character strengths taken to an extreme diminish well-being. The notion that too much of a good thing can be problematic was voiced as early as Aristotle (1962) in his doctrine of the mean and as recently as Polivy and Herman (2002), Diener (2003), and Lovallo and Kahneman (2003). It has crept into the popular culture ("Curiosity killed the cat"), the "women who love too much" self-help genre, and even the scientific literature (cf. Snyder & Rand, 2003). But what is the empirical evidence? Does too much humor make someone a

buffoon, too much bravery make someone foolhardy, and too much love of learning make someone pedantic—each with the net effect of reducing life satisfaction? If so, we would find that any associations between character strengths and SWB tail off at the extreme high ends of these strengths.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Study participants were three samples of adult volunteers recruited over the Internet in fall 2002 and winter 2003. Sample 1 ($n = 3,907$) was obtained from the Authentic Happiness Website, and Sample 2 ($n = 852$) and Sample 3 ($n = 540$) were obtained from the Values in Action Website. In each sample, respondents on average were 35–40 years of age; 70% were females, and 80% were U.S. citizens.

MEASURES

VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson et al., in press). The VIA-IS is a 240-item self-report questionnaire that uses a 5-point Likert scale to measure the degree to which respondents endorse strength-relevant statement about themselves. There are a total of 24 strengths of character in the VIA Classification, and the VIA-IS includes 10 items per strength. Responses are averaged within scales, all of which have satisfactory internal consistency measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha > .70$) and substantial test-retest correlations ($r_s = .70$). Scale scores are negatively skewed (M_s : range from 3.5 to 4.0) but somewhat variable (SD_s : range from .5 to .9). Coefficients of variation ranged from 15 to .25, implying acceptable variability (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2001).

Except for gender, demographic variables did not relate to specific character strengths. Females scored somewhat higher than males on interpersonal character strengths such as social intelligence, kindness, and love, but these correlates never exceeded $r = .20$. Nevertheless, we controlled for demographics in the analyses reported.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS is a five-item self-report questionnaire that measures individuals' evaluation of satisfaction with their life in general: For example, "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Individuals respond to each item on a 7-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Responses are summed to yield an overall score of life satisfaction. Research demonstrates acceptable psychometric properties for the SWLS (see Diener, 1994, for details). In the current

