CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND VIRTUES

November 13, 2017
“Using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and abundant gratification.” – Martin Seligman
Gordon Allport (1897-1967)
Father of modern personality theory
Gordon Allport

• Began career as a social worker with the goal of “promoting character and virtue”
• Character soon became too moralistic to Allport
• Settled on “personality” (a descriptive word) rather than “character” (a prescriptive word)
• “Although 20th century psychology tried to exorcise character from its theories, good and bad character remained in our laws, our politics, the way we raised our children, and the way we talked and thought about why people do what they do.” -- Seligman
Why character was neglected

1. Character as a phenomenon was thought to be derived entirely from experience
2. Science should not prescriptively endorse, it should just describe
3. Character is value-laden and tied to Victorian Protestantism.
1999

- Martin Seligman held a conference where youth development professionals described their interventions
- It became clear that the various practitioners lacked a common language of describing optimal development
- Made it hard to generalize across programs and measure different outcomes
The Values in Action (VIA) Institute

- Created by the Mayerson Foundation in 2000 to provide the concepts and empirical methods of describing positive youth development.
- What does “good character” mean? How can it be measured?
What virtues are ubiquitous?

• Martin Seligman, Chris Peterson, Katherine Dahlsgaard and colleagues read 200 virtue catalogues— including Aristotle and Plato, Aquinas and Augustine, the Old Testament and the Talmud, Confucius, Buddha, Lao-Tze, Bushido, the Koran, Benjamin Franklin, and the Upanishads.

• To their surprise, there was striking overlap and agreement across every major religious and cultural tradition spanning over 3000 years.
Seven heavenly virtues

- Four cardinal virtues
  - Prudence
  - Justice
  - Temperance
  - Courage

- Three theological virtues
  - Faith
  - Hope
  - Charity
Franklin’s classification

1. Temperance: Eat not to dullness and drink not to elevation.
2. Silence: Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling conversation.
3. Order: Let all your things have their places. Let each part of your business have its time.
5. Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself: i.e. Waste nothing.
7. Sincerity: Use no hurtful deceit. Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. Justice: Wrong none, by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
10. Cleanliness: Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes or habitation.
11. Chastity: Rarely use venery but for health or offspring; Never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
12. Tranquility: Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
6 core virtues endorsed by almost all religious and philosophical traditions

• Wisdom and knowledge
• Courage
• Love and humanity
• Justice
• Temperance
• Spirituality and transcendence
Routes to Virtue—“Signature Strengths”

• To be a virtuous person is to display, by acts of will, all or at least most of the 6 ubiquitous virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

• There are several distinct routes to each of the six virtues. These are your “signature strengths”.

Criteria

• Ubiquitous (widely recognized across cultures)
• Is trait-like
• Fulfilling (contributes to individual fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness)
• Is morally valued in its own right and not for the outcomes it may produce
• Strengths can be seen in what parents wish for their newborn
• The display of strengths is not zero-sum.
Criteria

• Has an obvious antonym that is negative
• Is measurable
• Is distinct from the others
• Has paragons (is strikingly embodied in some individuals)
• Has prodigies
• Can be selectively absent (missing altogether in some individuals)
• The culture supports the strengths by providing institutions, rituals, role models, parables, maxims, and children’s stories.
Character vs. Talent

• Character strengths have a moral connotation, talent doesn’t
• Strengths are partially voluntary. Talents are often automatic.
• Building strengths and virtues and using them in daily life are a matter of making choices.
• You cannot squander a strength. You can squander a talent.
• “With enough time, effort, and determination, the strengths can be acquired by almost any ordinary person.” -- Seligman
• We feel elevated and inspired when the exercise of will culminates in virtuous action.
Character Strengths and Virtues

A HANDBOOK AND CLASSIFICATION

Christopher Peterson
Martin E. P. Seligman
VIA-IS

• The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) includes 240 items assessing 24 character strengths
• Developed by Chris Peterson as a classification and measurement system for character
VIA Virtues

- Wisdom and knowledge
  - Creativity
  - Curiosity
  - Judgment
  - Love of learning
  - Perspective/Wisdom
- Courage
  - Bravery
  - Perseverance
  - Honesty/Authenticity
  - Zest
- Humanity
  - Love
  - Kindness
  - Social Intelligence
- Justice
  - Teamwork
  - Fairness
  - Leadership
- Temperance
  - Forgiveness
  - Humility
  - Prudence
  - Self-control
- Transcendence
  - Appreciation of beauty
  - Gratitude
  - Hope
  - Humor
  - Spirituality
I. Wisdom and Knowledge

Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
1. Creativity

• Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things
• “I like to think of new ways to do things”
• “Most of my friends are more imaginative than I am”
2. Curiosity/Interest in the world

- Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
- “I am always curious about the world”
- “I am easily bored”
3. Judgment/Critical thinking/Active open-minded thinking

• Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one’s mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
• “When the topic calls for it, I can be a highly rational thinker”
• “I tend to make snap judgments”
4. Love of learning

- Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one’s own or formally; related to curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
- “I am thrilled when I learn something new”
- “I never go out of my way to visit museums or other educational sites”
5. Perspective/Wisdom

- Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that makes sense to oneself and to other people
- “I am always able to look at things and see the big picture”
- “Others rarely come to me for advice”
II. Courage
Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
6. Valor and bravery

- Not 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
- “I have taken frequent stands in the face of strong opposition”
- “Pain and disappointment often get the better of me”
7. Perseverance/Industriousness/Diligence

• Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of actions in spite of obstacles, “getting it out the door”, taking pleasure in completing tasks
• “I always finish what I start”
• “I get sidetracked when I work”

“I can accept failure, but I can't accept not trying.”
~ Michael Jordan
8. Honesty/Authenticity

- Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one’s feelings and actions
- “I always keep my promises”
- “My friends never tell me I’m down to earth”
9. Zest/Passion/Enthusiasm

- Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
- “I throw myself into everything I do”
- “I mope a lot”
III. Humanity

Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
10. Love

- Valuing close relationships with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
- “There are people in my life who care as much about my feelings and well-being as they do about their own”
- “I have trouble accepting love from others”
11. Kindness/Generosity

- Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
- “I have voluntarily helped a neighbor in the last month”
- “I am rarely as excited about the good fortune of others as I am about my own”
12. Social intelligence/emotional intelligence

• Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
• “I have a lot of social intelligence.”
• “I have a lot of emotional intelligence.”
IV. Justice

Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
13. Teamwork

- Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one’s share
- “I work at my best when I am in a group”
- “I hesitate to sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of groups I am in”
14. Fairness and Equity

- Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.
- “I treat all people equally regardless of who they might be”
- “If I do not like someone, it is difficult for me to treat him or her fairly”
15. 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.
• “I can always get people to do things together without nagging them”
• “I am not very good at planning group activities”
V. Temperance
Strengths that protect against excess
16. Forgiveness

- Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
- “I always let bygones be bygones”
- “I always try to get even”
Forgiveness

• “In forgiving, a victim responds to the transgressor in prosocial ways that recognize the humanity of the offender, while still holding him or her accountable for the offense and genuinely desiring that person’s good.” – vanOyen et al.
REACH Model (Worthington, 2001)

- **Recall the hurt**
  - How we recall the offense matters. Remember in a way that does not fuel revenge but facilitates empathic perspective taking.

- **Empathize with the offender**
  - Seek to understand the perspective of the other person

- **Altruistically grant forgiveness**
  - This emerges most naturally when people are humbly aware of their own need for forgiveness and grateful for receiving forgiveness from others.

- **Commit to forgive**
  - Tell another person about the decision to grant forgiveness as a way of holding oneself accountable.

- **Hold on to forgiveness**
  - Develop strategies to actively resist the return of unforgiving ruminations. It is important to acknowledge but not dwell on, one’s negative emotions.
Forgiveness and Well-Being

• Overall, pre- to –post-intervention effect size on forgiveness is 0.78, and the effects persist after treatment concludes.
• Empathy is the key predictor of granting forgiveness (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005).
• Fluctuations in forgiveness are related to increases in self-reported hedonic well-being (i.e., satisfaction in life, positive and negative mood, physical symptoms; Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008).
• Forgiveness leads to increased feelings of closeness with the transgressor, which then facilitates hedonic well-being.
Forgiveness and Well-Being

- Both trait forgiveness and state forgiveness during interviews about a betrayal by a parent and by a partner/friend are associated with lower blood pressure (Lawler et al., 2003).
- During interviews, forgiveness was positively related to empathy and positive emotion and inversely related to unforgiving motivations, brow muscle tension, and blood pressure.
- People higher in trait forgiveness use less alcohol and medication, have fewer physical symptoms, and have a lower heart rate (Lawler-Row et al, 2008).
- The emotional and physiological side effects of empathy and forgiveness differ significantly from those of rumination and grudge-holding.
17. Humility

- Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
- “I am aware there is much I do not know.”
- “I am in awe by the vastness of this universe beyond me.”
18. Prudence

• Being careful about one’s choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted

• “I avoid activities that are physically dangerous”

• “I sometimes make poor choices in friendships and relationships”
19. Self-control

- “I control my emotions”
- “I can rarely stay on a diet”
VI. Transcendence
Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning
20. Appreciation of beauty and excellence

• Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience

• “In the last month, I have been thrilled by excellence in music, art, drama, film, sport, science, or mathematics”

• “I have not created anything of beauty in the last year”
21. Gratitude

- Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
- “I always say thank you, even for little things”
- “I rarely stop and count my blessings”
Gratitude

• Gratitude is the amplifier of goodness in oneself, the world, and others (Watkins, 2014), and has a unique power to heal, energize, and change lives (Emmons, 2013).
• 5 main areas that have been linked to gratitude.
Gratitude increases spiritual awareness

- Gratitude is fundamental to the spiritual life, because it is in gratitude that people become aware of their limitations and their need to rely on forces and sources outside of them.
Gratitude reduces stress and promotes mental and physical health

- Gratitude interventions have been shown to reduce bodily complaints, increase sleep duration and efficiency, promote exercise, decrease functional limitations caused by pain, improve mood among individuals in treatment for alcohol use disorders and improve cardiovascular functioning (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Hill, Allemand & Roberts, 2013; Wood et al., 2009).

- People who experience gratitude cope more effectively with everyday stress and show increased resilience in the face of trauma-induced stress (see Watkins & McCurrach, 2016).

- Gratitude interventions have also shown promise as a treatment for mental illnesses. The generation of gratitude has been associated with reductions of hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts (Huffman et al., 2014) independently of depression.
Gratitude maximizes pleasure

- Gratitude promotes the savoring of positive life experiences and situations, so that the maximum satisfaction and enjoyment is derived from one’s circumstances.
- In helping people not take things for granted, gratitude may recalibrate people’s “set points” for happiness—baseline levels of happiness that are primarily driven by one’s genes (Emmons, 2007).
Gratitude protects against the negative

- Nothing can destroy happiness more quickly than envy, greed, and resentment. Grateful people tend to be satisfied with what they have, and so are less susceptible to such emotions as disappointment, regret, and frustration.

- In the context of material prosperity, by maintaining a grateful focus a person may avoid disillusionment and emptiness. The sense of security that characterizes grateful people makes them less susceptible to needing to rely on material accomplishments for a stable sense of self.
Gratitude strengthens relationships

• Gratitude is a way of seeing that reminds us that we are not alone. Gratitude helps cultivate a person’s sense of interconnectedness.
• People who have an easier time conjuring up reasons to be grateful are less likely to say that they lack companionship or that no one really knows them well.
• The innate longing for belonging is strengthened when gratitude is experienced and expressed, leading one researcher to characterize gratitude as the “find, remind, and bind emotion” (Algoe, 2012).
22. Hope/Optimism/Future-Mindedness

- Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
- “I always look on the bright side”
- “I rarely have a well-thought-out plan for what I want to do”
23. Playfulness and humor

- Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
- “I always mix work and play as much as possible”
- “I rarely say funny things”
24. Spirituality/Sense of Purpose/Faith

• 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

• “My life has a strong purpose”
• “I do not have a calling in life”
VIA validity

- Nominations of strengths by friends and family correlate about .50
- The majority of the scales correlate positively with scores on measures of life satisfaction.
- Love of learning and gratitude are the most strongly correlated with well-being (PERMA)
- Factor analyses provide some support for the existence of five factors (strengths of restraint, intellectual strengths, interpersonal strengths, emotional strengths, theological strengths)
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Note. Social IQ = social intelligence. Primary loadings are boldfaced, secondary loadings ≥.50 are italicized.
Some strengths may “naturally” develop over time, whereas others may weaken.
Is a *perfect* character impossible?

*Figure 6.3. Tradeoffs Among Character Strengths*

The farther apart are two strengths, the less likely it is that the same person habitually shows both.
From strategies to habits

• “Our virtues are habits as much as our vices...our nervous systems have grown to the way in which they have been exercised, just as a sheet of paper or a coat, once creased or folded, tends to fall forever afterward into the same identical folds”
  --William James (1899)
Character can be trained

• Like William James, Franklin suggested that character was a habit – it could be improved self-consciously and deliberately with practice
• But, since one of his highest strengths was humor, you can never take what he wrote or said entirely literally…
Franklin’s idea

- Franklin created a system to monitor his progress on 13 character strengths
- Each time he failed to exercise a strength, he gave himself a mark
- Self-monitoring (e.g., food diaries) is an effective step in behavior modification
### KIPP Character Report Card

**Jane Smith**  
**Grade: 8**  
**KIPP Imagine**  
**Date: 01/28/11**

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#### Zest
- Actively participates: 4.50  
- Shows enthusiasm: 4.17  
- Invigorates others: 4.17

#### Grit
- Finishes whatever he or she begins: 4.00  
- Tries very hard even after experiencing failure: 4.17  
- Works independently with focus: 4.17

#### Self Control – School Work
- Comes to class prepared: 4.50  
- Pays attention and resists distractions: 4.50  
- Remembers and follows directions: 4.17  
- Gets to work right away rather than procrastinating: 4.17

#### Self Control - Interpersonal
- Remains calm even when criticized or otherwise provoked: 4.50  
- Allows others to speak without interruption: 4.83  
- Is polite to adults and peers: 4.50  
- Keeps his/her temper in check: 4.33

#### Optimism
- Gets over frustrations and setbacks quickly: 4.33  
- Believes that effort will improve his or her future: 4.17

#### Gratitude
- Recognizes and shows appreciation for others: 4.17  
- Recognizes and shows appreciation for his/her opportunities: 4.33

#### Social Intelligence
- Is able to find solutions during conflicts with others: 4.17  
- Demonstrates respect for feelings of others: 4.50  
- Knows when and how to include others: 4.33

#### Curiosity
- Is eager to explore new things: 4.17  
- Asks and answers questions to deepen understanding: 4.50  
- Actively listens to others: 4.17
How Children Succeed

GRIT, CURIOSITY, AND THE HIDDEN POWER OF CHARACTER

PAUL TOUGH
Character education

• Of 93 studies of 41 character education programs, only 7 met evidence standards for empirical rigor
• Only 1 program (Positive Action K-12 curriculum) had substantive and statistically significant positive results
• But see characterlab.org
Final words

• Do you see any strengths that are missing from the VIA? Anything that should be removed?