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Appendix: Literature Review of Positive Psychology and Character Strengths

History—The Pursuit of Happiness

Seemingly for eons, the search for happiness has been as fickle as a hapless lover. In the time of Aristotle, the road to happiness was thought traveled by living the virtuous life (McMahon, 2013; Melchert, 2002). By the time of the emergence of Christianity, the virtue of suffering was espoused (McMahon, 2013). Humanity was advised to accept unhappiness in this world and to not expect it until the hereafter. The age of enlightenment ushered in a sense of entitlement—people deserved to be happy, to the point of feeling guilty if unhappy. Since 1776, The Declaration of Independence of the United States only guarantees the *pursuit* (McMahon, 2013, p. 15) of happiness, not its realization. As modern society advanced with fancier technological toys, people could not keep up with their desires and happiness remained elusive. If one pays attention to the lessons of history, the singular and direct pursuit of happiness results in endlessly spinning wheels. Perhaps a better concept is a term from Aristotle—*eudaimonia*, referring to overall flourishing—rather than the evanescent state of happiness (Aristotle, 2000). Perhaps in pursuing purpose and meaning for its own sake, a person may end up living with more subjective happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

The Emergence of Positive Psychology

Aristotle may have had the first recorded glimmer of positive psychology, but Martin Seligman—as the President of the American Psychological Association—fired the starting pistol in 1998 (Seligman, 2011). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) define positive psychology as the scientific study of what makes life worth living; that is, the strengths and virtues that help both individuals and the community to thrive. These two pioneers envisioned three pillars of positive emotions, positive individual traits of character, and positive institutions. Positive

psychology is more than a yellow smiley face, and happiness is more than the absence of unhappiness—it is experienced in the presence of well-being.

Well-being is a dyad composed of hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions (Park, n.d.). Hedonic well-being—or subjective well-being—*feels good*, and is what most people refer to when they use the word “happiness” (Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). This state is characterized by high positive emotions (joy, excitement, contentment) and low negative emotions (sadness, anger, fear)—with a sense of life satisfaction. Eudaimonic well-being, on the other hand, is characterized by *high functioning*: character strengths, mental engagement, and a sense of meaning or purpose (Seligman, 2002; Waterman, 1993). The two arms of well-being are distinguishable, yet reinforce each other (Park, n.d.). However, the distinction is important between the two: subjective well-being is a more transient state of feeling good, while the eudaimonic is psychological well-being, with personal growth and a life with purpose (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002).

Positive psychology can help the world turn in a positive direction—a eudaimonic turn. Much as the eudaimonic turn in medicine resulted in focusing its lens on more on health rather than only curing disease, the eudaimonic turn in psychology—positive psychology—now focuses its lens on flourishing rather than only treating mental illness (Pawelski & Moores, 2013). Thus, positive psychology began as a strengths-based and evidence-based science, building competencies rather than concentrating on disabilities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

PERMA—The Model for Well-Being

A predominant model of well-being is Seligman’s (2011) **PERMA**, with the five pillars of **P**ositive emotions, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning and **A**chievement as the foundations

of a flourishing life. Each is independently sought for its own sake, and each is measurable. The beauty of this model is that each person can concentrate on the components that work for him; one now can reach the promise of well-being even if not blessed with a preponderance of smiley-face emotions. As Christopher Peterson (2013) alludes, living the good life can be available to each and every one.

Positive Interventions

Positive interventions are specific and evidence-based exercises that are focused on helping people get more of what they want—from themselves and for or from their organization. Just as positive interventions are intentional positive activities that increase well-being for the individual, positive organizational interventions are intentional positive activities that increase well-being for the organization. Positive interventions are rendered most effective by optimizing the modifying factors of: the activity, the participants, or the participant-activity dyad; person-activity fit is crucial to success. (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013).

However, perhaps people need tools for both how to flourish from opportunities, *and* how to hone skills to cope with problems (Pawelski, 2014). As Pawelski suggests, it is optimal for positive psychology to focus on both constructive and mitigative methods to enhance flourishing. Therefore, applications need to offer both sorts of exercises (Pawelski, 2014); there may be a logical instability to using solely one or the other. People need interventions not just to increase hope and love, but also to develop coping skills—such as resilience and perseverance—to deal with the ever-present negative events that may be around the corner. Again, if happiness is not simply the absence of unhappiness—then the flourishing life will be optimally cultivated by applications that increase the former, decrease the latter, or do both. These tools can be

successfully applied to the character strengths, which are foundational to flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Character Strengths

Classification/derivation. The character strengths are like routes to the virtues, and they are integral contributors to well-being. Peterson and Seligman (2004) classified 24 character strengths, stratified under the six virtues of Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance and Transcendence. Each person has a constellation of strengths, unique to oneself. These strengths have been stable over time and across cultures—that is, universally valued (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Culture-bound strengths have been excluded.

VIA Institute on Character (formerly referred to as Values in Action Institute). The above classification is known as the VIA classification, and this project was funded by the Mayerson Foundation in 2000. The VIA Institute on Character, a non-profit organization in Cincinnati, Ohio, was created to support this scientific work (www.viacharacter.org).

Characteristics of character strengths. Each character strength is morally valued, contributes to one's well-being and is generally representative—or, “characteristic”—of a person (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Like other personality attributes they are stable, yet can change over the lifespan; they can be measured and cultivated. The strengths may be utilized differently in different contexts, or domains—the strength of humor may be exhibited differentially whether at work, home or social domains (Niemiec, 2013b). Some strengths are tonic—meaning always present, and used almost daily. Some tend to be more phasic and may be utilized only when a situation calls for it rather than on a daily basis. Which strengths are more tonic and which are more phasic will be different for each individual.

Measurement of character strengths. Character strengths are measured by the VIA Survey, or VIA Inventory of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A survey for youths age 10 to 17 years—VIA Youth Survey—has already been validated (Park & Peterson, 2006). Differences of 1.0 are regarded as very likely to be *meaningful* differences in strength expression, while differences of 0.5 are only moderately likely to be *meaningful* differences of expression (R. Niemiec, personal communication, January 12, 2014).

Self-report/internal. The VIA Survey is reliable and validated, has been taken by more than 2.6 million people, and strengths are ranked after self-report online. Pronin and Kugler (2007) issue one caveat: the introspection illusion. This refers to the potential of the self-report method to reflect internal thoughts rather than actual behavior.

External. Multiple lenses give a richer discussion. Biswas-Diener, Kashdan and Minhas (2011) admonish that blind spots may exist, because a person may not see a strength as more than ordinary—as in courage, thinking that anyone would have done what they did. Therefore, strengths noted by others are illuminating, especially when paired with concrete examples. Strengths noted on self-report but not echoed by external reviewers may be potential areas of opportunities to develop (R. Niemiec, personal communication, January 12, 2014).

Signature strengths. The signature strengths are a person's top strengths, the strengths that most define one's true self—and were originally considered to be five to seven in number (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Subsequent research by the VIA Institute has supported the existence of a construct called signature strengths although the quantity of signature strengths that people believe they have is higher than Peterson and Seligman's original hypotheses (Mayerson, 2013). Signature strengths seem like the "real you," are particularly energizing, feel more natural than effortful, and others frequently note them as well. The VIA Survey ranks

character strengths, and researchers believe that the top strengths act as an accurate proxy for “signature-ness”. However, there may be some interpretation of the test questions that influences the rankings; therefore, one’s own input does matter.

Middle and lesser strengths. It is important to relate lower strengths to those that are less expressed, rather than defining them as weaknesses. The lower strengths are not weaknesses, but rather character strengths that are less strong, or less representative of a person. The best way to think about this is Niemiec’s (personal communication, January 12, 2014) analogy of Starbucks’ cup sizes: Venti, Grande and Tall. Each person’s top signature strengths; those that are most integral, or most representative; these are equivalent to the Venti size. The middle strengths are more like the Grande size, while the lower strengths are equivalent to the Tall size. Notice that the size is Tall, and not Small. All strengths matter, and strengths may be exercised whether they are high or low.

Overuse/underuse. In life, any strength can be overused or underused. In general, most of the character strengths are best utilized in the middle—the “golden mean” spoken of first by Aristotle (Aristotle, 2000; Melchert, 2002). For example, courage in excess can result in recklessness, and when in short supply cowardice. Niemiec (2013b) admonishes that this balance is critical; it is a strength only when expressed as a strength—that is in the right amount in the appropriate situation. Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) recommend using practical wisdom; regarding honesty, for example, more is not necessarily better.

Character strengths versus talents, skills, values, traits. Character strengths are not the same as skills (such as typing), which are likened to proficiencies that can be acquired. They are more like the things that make you “you!” Personality traits, such as gregariousness or shyness, are not generally imbued with moral connotations (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and values may

be driving beliefs or the ideals of a society—with both positive and negative valences. Talents may be a proclivity for a particular skill or behavior, such as music or athletic prowess. For example, StrengthsFinder 2.0 (Rath, 2007) is a strength survey, but measures talents and skills rather than character strengths.

Exercises/positive interventions to build character strengths. Character Strengths can be practiced and bolstered to increase well-being (Niemiec, 2013b). Regarding young people, the goal is to provide students a language with which to discuss character strengths, to spot strengths in others, to be aware of their own strengths, and to use them (Linkins, et al., 2014). Gillham et al. (2013) attest that rather than solely addressing the desired character skills or goals individually, an overall and broad character strength-based approach to well-being may be just as essential to achieve those individual skills/goals. Targeting interventions that develop relationships, positive emotions and meaning are a complimentary, alternative and just as essential approach to foster individual character strengths.

Aware, explore, apply model. This three-step model offers a simple process by which practitioners and clients can take action with strengths (Niemiec, 2013a). The first step is to become aware, by understanding the language of strengths, finding out one's own strengths, and noticing strengths when they are being used. Exploring is to reflect on past and present uses of strengths, delineate which strengths resonate most, and which help move one forward when stressed. The last step, apply, is the action step. Here one moves from thinking about strengths to actually and consciously practicing them.

Use signature strengths in a new way. Operating out of one's signature strengths is correlated with overall well-being, or flourishing. Only two positive interventions have been shown to reap either improvements in life satisfaction or a decrease in depressive symptoms: one

of the two uses character strengths—*Using a Signature Strength in a New Way* (Seligman, et al., 2005). This study was fully replicated by Gander et al. (2013), and similar results have been found in a number of additional studies (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011; Mitchell, Stanimirovic, Klein, & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012; Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009). Once one knows one's signature strengths, this involves mindfully choosing to use a signature strength in a new way, a way that one does not routinely use it. This may also facilitate strength mastery.

For example, if a person has creativity as a signature strength, he can use it in a new way by painting if he is not a painter, or sculpting if he is not a sculptor. Rashid and Anjum (2005) recommend similar strategies in *340 Ways to Use VIA Character Strengths*. Niemiec (personal communication, January 12, 2014) asserts that bolstering even non-signature strengths may still confer benefits to well-being. Let them all paint!

Strengths-spotting in others. Spotting character strengths in others helps increase awareness and build one's own strengths. Recognizing and thinking about strengths in others helps one recognize and think about one's own strengths (Linkins et al., 2014). A person may work with a partner, or work independently with characters in literature and movies (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). One may record, and then reflect on: which strengths were used, how they were used, in which settings or context, and what positive outcomes resulted. After some familiarity and experience, one may also spot overuse and underuse (or missed opportunities) of specific strengths.

360 degrees. Character strengths observed and labeled by others (when accompanied by concrete examples or rationale) are more reflective of actual day-to-day behavior. This is best acquired as direct feedback from several people who know a person well, in different settings

(Linkins et al., 2014). These observers are asked to describe three VIA strengths that they see in a person, with examples. As discussed above, self-report may be more reflective of internal values or beliefs than behavior. In youths, it may be more beneficial to receive such reports from peers and known adults—especially with specific examples—before receiving one’s own self-reported VIA-Youth Survey results (M. Linkins, personal communication, March 01, 2014).

Strengths across settings. This exercise involves choosing a signature strength that one would like to use more often in a particular setting; for example, at work, at home or at school (Linkins et al., 2014). First, a plan is created for specific applications of the strength per setting for a designated length of time. A person may predict positive outcomes, and then compare actual positive outcomes. In addition to increasing the use of signature strengths, this exercise also helps increase awareness of the positive benefits of using one’s VIA strengths.

Sum of strengths/teams. A person does not exist in isolation, but interacts with others. How do individuals’ strengths relate to and contribute to a group or institutions (and vice versa)? Individual VIA strength data is aggregated to determine the strengths of a group (Linkins et al., 2014). A group strength audit is then performed, noting which group strengths are already in use, and which could be cultivated or used in new ways to benefit the group.

ROAD-MAP for all strengths. The ROAD-MAP model can serve as positive interventions for all strengths (Niemic, 2012b): Reflect, Observe, Appreciate, Discuss, Monitor, Ask and Plan.

Reflected best self. A person may ask or email 10-15 people to write down three examples of times when he made a positive contribution (Fredrickson, 2009). Then, the stories are compiled and analyzed for common themes and insights. Summarize and create a Best Self Portrait, and share the result with significant others.

Clusters of character strengths. Five character strengths have stood out in repeated studies as having a strong correlation with life satisfaction: hope, zest, gratitude, curiosity and love (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Shimai et al., 2006). Three-fourths of people have at least one of these strengths in their top five. In youth, love, gratitude, hope and zest are most correlated with life satisfaction (Peterson & Park, 2009). The character strengths least associated with life satisfaction are humility, creativity, appreciation of beauty & excellence, judgment and love of learning (Park, et al., 2004). This suggests that strengths of the “heart” may be more correlated with well-being than strengths of the “head.”

Various character strengths have been associated with satisfaction in college, resilience in the face of physical and psychological disorders, sexual health and general health benefits (Niemi, 2013b).

Heckman (2001) asserts that to predict success in school (and other domains), non-cognitive skills such as character strengths are at *least* as important as cognitive skills. Peterson and Park (2009) have identified that the five strengths of character: love, hope, gratitude, perseverance and perspective predict which students are most likely to achieve high grade point averages. Character strengths may be even more important for achievement in school than IQ! Self-discipline and perseverance help sustain effort in the face of difficult tasks, and empirically predict higher grades and achievement test scores (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; 2006).

Character strengths in positive education. These interventions can be utilized in business, medicine, schools, psychotherapy, coaching and the military; the example of positive education is used here to demonstrate utilization in one field—as an example. Rather than an external, prescriptive enforcement of rules to instill character strengths, Peterson and Park (2009)

propose describing and nurturing existing strengths in the child, to build upon the positive that is intrinsically present. Thus, the goal of character education is to assist students to identify and use their “unique constellations” (p. 4) of character strengths (Linkins, et al., 2014). These traits and potentials might otherwise not be expressed. The educator’s role is to facilitate favorable conditions for growth. Research so far has found character strengths-based educational practices sound, with a range of positive outcomes (Linkins, et al., 2014). The Positive Psychology for Youth and the Strengths Gym (Proctor et al., 2011) programs demonstrated significant effects on social skills, engagement and learning strengths in the former, and life satisfaction in the latter. Linkins and his colleagues (2014) document a framework for VIA strengths-based education

There are two methods of education: teaching and cultivating strengths and skills, and providing a supportive school culture, in which they can be practiced. (Gillham et al. 2013). Multiple evidence-based programs have demonstrated a good amount of evidence that interventions in schools to promote resilience, as one area of character strengths, does indeed benefit the children. Gillham et al. (2013) go on to assert that it is important to teach all the children, not solely those at high risk: all children need resilience and strengths to overcome everyday stressors (conflicts, homework, life transitions).

These benefits for the students include significant improvements in emotional competence, social skills and academic achievement. The benefits extend across socioeconomic, racial and cultural divisions. In the U.S., about two-thirds of adults think that schools *should* be responsible for children’s emotional, social and behavioral needs in addition to academic learning (Rose & Gallup, 2007). Common concerns that delegating school time to teach socio-emotional skills may detract from academic achievement are unfounded; indeed, the opposite is found—promoting socio-emotional skills in schools not only does not detract, but may even

improve academic achievement (Seligman, et al., 2009). These investigators define positive education best: there is synergy between positive emotion and learning. Happiness skills can be taught. Schools should teach skills for happiness along with academics. Positive education is a scientifically validated approach to ensure that outcomes such as confident, successful and responsible learners are developed (Waters, 2011).





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