Strengths of Character and Virtues:

What We Know and What We Still Want to Learn

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In the movie *The American President*, President Andrew Shepherd (played by Michael Douglas) responds to attacks from a political opponent by saying,

> [He] …has suggested that being president of this country [is] …to a certain extent about character… I've been here three years and three days, and I can tell you without hesitation that being president of this country is *entirely* about character.

Good character matters, we can all agree. Good character is important in the daily lives of individuals and families, in the workplace, in school, and in the larger community. Good character is what citizens look for in their leaders, what we seek in a spouse, what friends and colleagues look for in each other, and what parents wish for and try to encourage in their children. Strengths of character are foundation of optimal life-long human development and thriving (Baumrind,1998).

Centuries ago, the Athenian philosophers—Socrates, Plato, and especially Aristotle—framed morality in terms of good character and in particular virtues, traits of character that make someone a good person (Rachels, 1999). This tradition is also found in Eastern cultures in the writings of Confucius (1992), who similarly enumerated virtues that made people morally praiseworthy and allowed them to contribute to the good society (Smart, 1999). He discussed such virtues as *jen* (benevolence), *yi* (duty), *li* (etiquette), *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (sincerity). Although specific definitions of good character may vary across different times and cultures, emphasis on the importance of character and virtues for personal and societal well-being has been a constant.

Despite the importance of good character, psychology neglected the topic throughout much of the 20th century. At one time character was a popular topic within psychology. There

was even a professional journal titled *Character and Temperament,* which boldly if inexactly divided the ways that people differ, into character—which could be changed—and temperament—which could not be changed. But Gordon Allport (1921), the premier personality theorist in the United States, banished the term character from scientific scrutiny, and many followed his lead (Nicholson, 1998). Allport believed that character was too value-laden to be amenable to empirical study and suggested instead that psychology study traits, which he defined "scientifically" as neuropsychic entities. Interestingly, the journal *Character and Temperament* is alive and today, known as the *Journal of Personality.*

However, people's interests in character did not go away. It has figured in public discourse throughout human history, and remains a major societal concern today (Aristotle, 2000; Hunter, 2000). During every election cycle, there has been no shortage of discussion on character. We often hear stories in the media about highly successful people -- in sports, politics, business, journalism and so on -- who fell from grace due to misconduct associated with lack of character.

Positive Psychology and Character

The new field of positive psychology has refocused scientific attention on character, unabashedly calling it one of the pillars of this new field and central to the understanding of the psychological good life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Among the pillars of positive psychology, character may occupy the most central role. In their introduction to positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) described the study of positive traits (e.g., character) as a central pillar of this new field, and Park and Peterson (2003) proposed that character links together the other central topics of positive psychology: positive experiences, positive social relationships, and positive institutions. Thus, positive experiences like pleasure and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and close relationships with others are enabled by good

character. Positive institutions like families, schools, and communities make it easier or harder for individuals to have and display good character, but these institutions are only positive in the first place when comprised of people with good character.

What is good character, and how can we measure it? There has been a deliberate effort to answer these questions scientifically (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2006a, 2006b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). Since 2000, a group of researchers led by Christopher Peterson have worked from the positive psychology perspective on a project that first identifies important components of good character and then devises ways to measure individual differences in these components. This research program is sometimes identified as the *Values in Action (VIA) Project.*

Character refers to those aspects of personality that are morally valued. Here, character strengths are defined as a family of widely-valued positive traits that are reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They exist in degrees and can be measured as individual differences. They are malleable across the life span and subject to influences of numerous contextual factors. It has been speculated that they are grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these predispositions toward moral excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species (cf. Bok, 1995; Schwartz, 1994).

The resulting project—the *VIA Classification of Strengths*—focuses on what is right about people and specifically about the character strengths that make the good life possible (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Classification includes 24 character strengths organized in terms of the six core virtues (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Virtues are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (see details in Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These six broad categories of virtue appear consistently from historical surveys (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2002). *Character strengths* are the psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define the virtues. They are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues.

Our measurement work has been deliberately broad to study character strengths comprehensively (Park & Peterson, 2006b; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The *VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth)* is a self-report survey that allows for a comprehensive assessment of the 24 character strengths among youth ages 10–17. Those who are aged 18 or older can use *VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS).* These surveys are available online at no cost. Once individuals complete the strengths survey, feedback is given about one's top strengths- "signature strengths." To date, more than 2 million people from around the world have completed these surveys.

One of many unique aspects of the VIA strengths measure is that this is a systematic approach to study character in multidimensional terms. Most existing research on character has focused on one aspect of character at a time, leaving unanswered questions about the underlying structure of character within an individual. Some individuals may be wise and have integrity but may be neither courageous nor kind, or vice versa (Park, 2004). Furthermore, measuring the full family of positive traits may even reduce concerns about socially desirable responding by allowing most research participants to say something good about themselves. There is the possibility that some people may lack all of the strengths in the classification when compared to

others; however, the data show that virtually everyone has some notable character strengths within themselves. These are called *signature strengths*, and they are akin to what Allport (1961) identified decades ago as personal traits. Signature strengths are positive traits that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises. A study suggested that identifying their signature strengths and using them in their everyday lives may lead to a psychologically fulfilling life (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

The VIA measure is also unique in that it not only allows the comparison of character strengths across individuals but also can be scored ipsatively—identifying an individual's "signature strengths" relative to his or her other strengths (Park, 2004). For each respondent, we rank his or her character strength scores from 1 (top) to 24 (bottom). Ipsative scoring also reduces concerns about response biases, including social desirability and undue modesty. External correlates of ipsatively-scored strengths, such as subjective well-being, are much the same as the correlates of the strength scores per se, implying that our surveys tap something more than artifact.

In addition to self-report questionnaires, several different methods have been devised and evaluated (Park & Peterson, 2006b, 2006c; Peterson & Seligman, 2004): (a) *focus groups* to flesh out the everyday meanings of character strengths among different groups; (b) *structured interviews* to identify what we call signature strengths; (c) *informant reports* (e.g., by parents, teachers or peers) of how target individuals rise to the occasion (or not) with appropriate strengths of character (e.g., open-mindedness when confronting difficult decisions or hope when encountering setbacks); (d) *case studies* of nominated paragons of specific strengths; and (e) a *content analysis* procedure for assessing character strengths from unstructured descriptions of self and others. Each of these methods allows researchers to study a broader range of people in

different age and situations which complements limitations of popular survey method. For instance, in order to study character strengths of young children 3-9 years old, we used content analyses method of parental description of their children (Park & Peterson, 2006a).

What We Know about Strengths of Character

Evidence concerning the correlates, consequences, development, and cultivation of the VIA strengths is accumulating. Here is a summary of some of what we have learned to date.

First, *character strengths are structured and there are tradeoffs*. The classification of character strengths under core virtues is a conceptual scheme and not an empirical claim. The question remains of how the strengths in the VIA Classification are related to one another. One answer comes from an exploratory factor analysis of data from an adult sample, in which we first standardized subscale scores within individual respondents, thereby removing response sets like extremity (Peterson, 2006). Oblique factor analysis (which allows factors to be correlated) revealed a clear two-factor solution, shown in Figure 1 along with our interpretation of the two factors: heart versus head and self-oriented versus other-oriented. Strengths of the "head" are intellectual (e.g., creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning) and strengths of the "heart" are emotional and interpersonal (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, love, kindness, teamwork). This is a circumplex model, meaning that strengths close together are more likely to co-occur, whereas those more distant are less likely. Figure 1 implies that tradeoffs do occur and that people make them in characteristic ways. All things being equal, some of us will tend to be kind, and others of us will tend to be honest. The structure of these tradeoffs might reveal something about how the real world allows good character to present itself.

Insert Figure 1 about here

It seems that no one can have all of the character strengths. There are always soft tradeoffs, although there are exceptions. It means that certain character strengths tend not to co-occur. A study found that some people have notable strengths of the "head," and these are usually not the same people who have notable strengths of the "heart" (Peterson & Park, 2009). Additional analyses suggest that respondents with a high school degree tend to score higher than those with college degrees on many of the "focus on others" strengths, and those with a college degree tend to score higher than those with a high school degree of many of the "focus on self" strengths (cf. Snibbe & Markus, 2005). The mechanism for this finding is unclear. Note that the "focus on self" label does not imply selfishness, but, rather, seeing the self as the agent of change and valuing independence. Meanwhile, the "focus on others" label implies valuing and pursuing community or a group-oriented life.

Second, *character strengths have a developmental trajectory*. The components of character are moderately stable over time but not set in stone. Character strengths can and do change in response to specific events or as the result of maturation. Character strengths among youth and among adults are relatively stable across time, in keeping with our view of them as trait-like. Character strengths show an interpretable developmental trajectory. Similar to adults, among youth, interpersonal, humanity strengths (e.g., kindness, fairness, gratitude, love) are more frequently developed and displayed than are the temperance strengths (e.g., prudence, modesty, self-regulation). Although there is a degree of convergence when comparing the relative prevalence of strengths among youth and adults, there are also interesting differences.

The most common strengths among youth are gratitude, humor, and love. The least common strengths among young children and adolescents are those that require cognitive maturation: e.g., appreciation of beauty and excellence, authenticity, forgiveness, modesty, and open-mindedness (Park & Peterson, 2006a, 2006c; Peterson, 2006).

Third, *character strengths are distributed sensibly across sociodemographics*. A study with 111,676 adult respondents from 54 nations, and all 50 U.S. states found surprising convergence in the relative prevalence of the 24 different VIA strengths (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). In almost all nations on all continents, the most commonly-endorsed strengths were kindness, fairness, authenticity, gratitude, and open-mindedness, and the lesser strengths included prudence, modesty, and self-regulation. Except for religiousness, comparisons within the U.S. sample showed no differences as a function of state or geographical region. These results may reveal something about universal human nature and/or the character requirements minimally needed for a viable society (Bok, 1995). According to Bok (1995), kindness, love, and gratitude reflect what she identified as *positive duties* of mutual care and reciprocity; the strength of authenticity enables what she called *negative injunctions* against deceit and betrayal; and the strengths of open-mindedness and fairness underlie *norms for fairness and procedural justice* in cases of conflict regarding positive duties and/or negative injunctions.

We also looked at demographic correlates of the VIA strengths within the U.S. sample (Peterson & Park, 2009). There were some modest and sensible differences. Females scored higher than males for the interpersonal strengths of gratitude, kindness, and love. Older adults scored higher than younger adults on strengths of temperance. Respondents with more education loved learning more than those with less education. Those who were married were more

forgiving than those who were unmarried. African Americans and Asian Americans were more religious than European Americans.

Fourth, *character strengths differ across cities*. Although, few differences in character strengths were found across larger geographical units such as countries, U.S. regions, or U.S. states, meaningful differences across cities were observed (Park & Peterson, 2010). We looked at character strengths among residents in the 50 largest U.S. cities and related these aggregated measures to city-level features like entrepreneurship and voting patterns. Differences in character strengths that were found to exist across cities, were robustly related to important city-level outcomes such as entrepreneurship and presidential election voting, and were associated in theoretically predicted ways with city-level features. Cities whose residents had higher levels of "head" strengths were those rated as creative and innovative. Differences in city residents' character strengths were also associated in theoretically predicted ways with city-level features. Residents in cities with greater strengths of the heart reported more positive affect, a greater orientation to positive emotions, and more meaning in life.

Fifth, *character strengths have important consequences that vary depending on the strength*. Certain character strengths are linked to flourishing and their absence to problems. Among adults, several strengths in particular show a robust relation with life satisfaction, happiness, and psychological well-being measured in different ways: love, gratitude, hope, curiosity, and zest (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004a). Among youth, the robust predictors of life satisfaction are love, gratitude, hope, and zest (Park & Peterson, 2006c; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004b). And among very young children between three to nine years of age, those described by their parents as showing love, zest, and hope are also described as happy (Park & Peterson, 2006a). Thus, the character strengths of love, hope and zest are consistently related to

life satisfaction for individuals across all ages. Gratitude is associated with life satisfaction for individuals with seven years of age and older, suggesting that perhaps strengths such as gratitude may require cognitive maturation. Although cross-sectional, these data considered together imply a developmental sequence to the most fulfilling character strengths. The strengths that contribute to well-being at younger ages continue to be important, but additional strengths enter the picture with maturation.

Important aspects of healthy and flourishing life are also related to the character strengths (Peterson & Park, 2009). For example, academic achievement among school children one year later was predicted by strengths such as perseverance, love and gratitude among others above and beyond their IQ scores; love was the strongest predictor for military performance among West Point cadets evaluated by their commanding officers and peers in a one-year longitudinal study; popular students were more likely to score highly on civic strengths such as leadership and fairness and temperance strengths such as self-regulation, prudence, and forgiveness; the strengths of hope, zest, and leadership were significantly related to fewer internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety disorders, whereas the strengths of persistence, honesty, prudence, and love were substantially related to fewer externalizing problems such as aggression; life satisfaction among children was related by self-regulation of their parents, although this strength was not strongly related to parents' own life satisfaction; people with high zest perceive their job as a calling and have higher satisfaction at work.

Furthermore, the consequences of character in which we are most interested are often associated with several character strengths, implying considerable complexity. For example, good leaders possess not only social intelligence but also the capacity to form close emotional relationships with others. Medal of Honor winners are not only brave but also capable of

exceptional self-regulation (Park, 2005). In many cases, character strengths of perseverance, self-regulation, teamwork, and leadership are evident as well. There is additional evidence that Medal of Honor recipients exhibit humility (Collier, 2003).

Sixth, *character strengths are influenced by genetics, but also by family, friends, and teachers*. While we know little about the origins of character strengths, it seems that a variety of influences contribute to the development of good character—genetics, family, schools, peers, and communities. Not surprisingly, the character strengths of parents and children converge, especially between fathers and sons and between mothers and daughters. A twin study that compared similarities in the VIA strengths in identical versus fraternal twins showed that strengths are moderately heritable, as are many individual differences (Steger, Hicks, Kashdan, Krueger, & Bouchard, 2007). The study also showed that shared family environment influenced some of the strengths (e.g., love of learning), an unusual finding in this type of research, which rarely finds any influence of growing up in a given family once common genetics are controlled (Dunn & Plomin, 1992). Perhaps family influence is more relevant for positive characteristics than for the negative characteristics, which are usually the focus of twin studies. And for virtually all of the VIA strengths, non-shared family environment (e.g., peers and teachers) proved to be the most important influence.

Seven, *character strengths are changed and/or revealed by challenge*. 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 modest 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). 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). Furthermore, higher levels of these strengths are related to greater life satisfaction. These results suggest that in the wake of negative life events, certain character strengths may work as a buffer and help to maintain or even increase well-being despite challenges (Park, 2012).

What We Still Want to Learn About Strengths of Character

The field of character strengths has made significant scientific progress over the last decade, as was described in the previous section. However, further work, both conceptual and empirical, needs to be done to continue to advance our understanding of the structure and nature of character strengths and refine our research and applied efforts. Additionally, advancements in measurement and statistical techniques could help further the study of character strengths. In this section, we would like to discuss several important considerations that require careful attention from the scientific community in light of conceptual and methodological issues in studies of character.

1. Issue of Conceptualization of Character Strengths as Positive Traits

Theodore Roosevelt said "A vote is like a rifle; its usefulness depends upon the character of the user." There has been a nagging question that we have about studying character strengths as positive traits. Does having positive traits such as love of learning, curiosity, creativity, humor, zest, and leadership make someone a necessarily morally good person? Although character strengths are generally defined as morally valued traits, several character strengths in the VIA Classification are positive traits but not moral traits. If we have to qualify a positive trait by

saying its moral value depends on the character of the person displaying it, that positive trait, in and of itself, is not a character strength. We dubbed this the *Hitler problem.* That is, leadership is one of the positive traits on which we have focused, but leadership *per se* is not character strength. This is because the moral worth of being a leader depends on how one behaves as a leader. There are leaders who do morally praiseworthy things, like Lincoln, Gandhi, and Mandela, but there are also leaders who do reprehensible things, like Pol-Pot, Gadaffi, and of course, Hitler. But the evil leaders are still leaders, and whatever else we may think about Hitler, most of us would agree that he was an effective leader, morality aside.

So maybe leadership should not be considered as character strength, at least not without appropriate and heroic qualifications. The same point can also be made about some of the other positive traits included among our ostensible character strengths, those which can be morally good or bad depending on how they are manifested. Consider humor, which can bring people together or drive them apart. Other positive traits included among our ostensible character strengths like zest and creativity are best described as morally neutral.

In general, people assume that having positive traits makes someone a better person. For example, a positive trait such as emotional intelligence has been popularized in the media as a requirement for moral conduct (Goleman, 1995). Some studies have supported these assumptions. Emotional intelligence has been linked to more prosocial behavior (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005), being less critical to others (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006), being less aggressive toward others (Brackett & Mayer, 2003), and helping others more (Lopes, Salovey, Côté, & Beers, 2005). However, there have also been studies that reported the opposite findings. Contrary to our assumption, a study found that school bullies were good at understanding others' emotions (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). More recently, an

interesting research by Côté, DeCelles, McCarthy, Van Kleer, and Hideg (2011) found that the trait of emotional intelligence, akin to what we describe as social intelligence, is not only associated with prosocial behavior, but also with antisocial behavior. It all depends on the personality trait, which means that social intelligence, certainly a desirable trait in the abstract, is not necessarily a character strength. In the first study, they found that people with a higher moral identity were kinder to others and they were even more so if they also had a higher emotional intelligence. In the second study, people who were found to be more Machiavellian tended to treat their coworkers badly; furthermore, having a higher emotional intelligence made them behave even worse.

Our point here is not the same as the argument that there can be too much of a good thing (Grant & Schwartz, 2011), although it is related. Aristotle's *doctrine of the mean* proposes that all virtues reside between two extremes, each of which can be considered a vice. So, too much humor (or wit as Aristotle termed it) is buffoonery, and too little humor is dourness (Peterson, 2006). Our point is a more general one: other things being equal, not all positive traits (meaning dispositions that are desirable) are necessarily character strengths.

This does not mean that the empirical research people have done on positive traits is invalidated. The research results remain important. By all means, we should continue to study positive traits, not just those on which our research team has focused but others as well. Positive traits are those which are admired in the abstract and typically lead to desirable outcomes. However, we would like to suggest that researchers and practitioners need to be conceptually careful. We should reserve the term character strengths for positive traits that are morally praiseworthy, without obvious qualifications.

We believe that some of the 24 strengths are cut from a different moral cloth than the others. Strengths like humor and zest are not morally valued in their own right but become morally valued when coupled with other strengths in the classification. So, a humorous person is simply funny, but a humorous person who is kind is very special and morally praiseworthy. We call these value-added strengths and intend to study them further.

2. **Issue of Tonic versus Phasic Character Strengths**

Not all strengths of character show its characteristics equally across settings. Certain character strengths such as bravery can be observed on rare occasions. If researchers are interested in various character strengths, they cannot always study typical behavior. Some character strengths are observed at the high points of a person's life. These are the psychological equivalents of the personal bests tracked by athletes at all levels of ability. Muscle physiology distinguishes between *tonic activity* (the baseline electrical activity when muscles are idle) and *phasic activity* (the burst of electrical activity that occurs when muscles are challenged and contract) (Park & Peterson, 2006b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Most of psychology is about tonic activity—typical thoughts, feelings, and actions. For example, introversion, intelligence, and hope are all measured in the absence of any real-world challenge, with the assumption that these summary measures will predict what a person actually does when challenged. At best, tonic measures are moderate predictors of phasic action, $r = .30$ upper limit (the so-called personality coefficient). Although for many purposes, moderate correlations are useful, they may miss what is most exceptional about people. Therefore, different strategies of assessment should be considered for *tonic* (e.g., kindness) vs. *phasic* character strengths (e.g., bravery).

The imperfect prediction of optimal action from tonic characteristics has been called the *Harry Truman effect* (Peterson & Seligman, 2001). After a largely undistinguished life, Harry

Truman rose to the occasion after the death of president Franklin D. Roosevelt during the final months of World War II to become one of the accomplished Presidents of the United States. What made it possible for him to do so? Psychology has not yet provided clear answers to this question. Besides work on resilience (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001), psychology has few accounts of rising-to-the-occasion, even though evolution has no doubt shaped people to respond well to challenges. We may all possess strengths that we do not display until we are truly challenged. Crises do not forge character, but they reveal it. If we are interested in studying people at their best when they display certain character strengths, it is necessarily a phasic psychology.

Therefore, we must be cautious about relying solely on summary measures. We must be interested not only in variation across people but also within people. No one wins multiple Congressional Medals of Honor. Researchers must consider that character strengths vary along the tonic-phasic continuum. The study of the more phasic character strengths requires different research strategies than the investigation of the more tonic character strengths.

3. **Issue of Universal versus Culture-bound Character Strengths**

VIA classification is not an exhaustive classification of character strengths. There are many more than those on which past studies have focused. VIA classification includes positive traits that seem to be universally recognized and acclaimed, an assumption we are systematically confirming in studies around the world. Our original focus was on understanding what is common across respondents from different groups and not what is unique, and we believe that the commonalities we have discovered are both striking and real. In addition to using our internet surveys, we have sought to establish the cross-cultural generality (or lack thereof) of our constructs by deliberately surveying people from different nations and cultures about their

recognition and valuing of different strengths of character, using focus groups for non-literate samples and written surveys for literate samples (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Peterson, Boniwell, Park, & Seligman, 2003). Furthermore, our colleagues around the world have translated our inventories into Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, and Urdu. Preliminary data are consistent with the premise of universality. However, these projects are in progress.

In a culturally diverse society like the contemporary United States, there is good reason for researchers interested in character and its components to focus on widely-valued positive traits and not those that some people have dubbed culture-bound (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Culture-bound strengths of character are positive traits valued in some places but not others such as ambition, achievement, and autonomy in the contemporary United States and solemnity, filial piety, and interdependence in East Asian countries. Measuring character in a way that privileges culture-bound traits to the exclusion of more universally-valued traits is likely to lack generality and, thus, validity. However, depending on the interests and purposes of a researcher or practitioner, attention to these culture-bound strengths may be important.

In some cases, what is meant by the good life will prove to be thoroughly situated in time and place, but in other cases, generalization will be possible. Consider investigations like those by Bok (1995) or Schwartz (1994) into the universality of values. Depending on the level of abstraction, given values can be described either as culture-bound or as universal.
The ubiquity of positive psychology constructs is partly an empirical issue and positive psychologists should use the research strategies of cross-cultural psychology to map out their boundaries. Samples of research participants from different cultures should be studied, the equivalence of measures should be demonstrated, and constructs of concern should not just be

exported (from Western cultures to elsewhere) but imported (from elsewhere to Western cultures). Our own research on character strengths has emphasized cross-cultural commonalities. From conceptual and methodological perspectives, it was a more sensible decision to take the universal-commonality approach in the study of character at the initial stage of the project. However, as we learn more about this topic, it is time to expand our efforts to include culture-bound positive traits. The investigation of what is culturally unique is just as important and needs serious attention.

4. **Issue of Longitudinal and Multivariate Research Designs**

The development and consequences of character strengths unfold over time, and researchers must, therefore, undertake longitudinal studies. We need more research that will elucidate development, correlates, consequences and mechanisms of good character within a comprehensive framework that emphasizes its dynamics and interactions across cultures, social contexts, outcomes, and stages of life span development.

Most character research thus far has been cross-sectional correlational studies or short-term longitudinal studies. These studies can provide important insights into the topics of concern by providing snapshots of phenomena, but it must eventually be placed in larger perspective. We need ambitious longitudinal studies that start with young people and follow them over time to reveal the processes that promote flourishing.

We currently know something about the cross-sectional correlates and short-term consequences of character; however, we know relatively little about the origins of positive traits, their development and long-term consequences. Our research that compared the relative frequencies of character strengths among youth and adults (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004b) (Fig.1) indicated that there were developmental differences in character strengths described

earlier in this chapter. Some strengths, such as authenticity, open-mindedness and appreciation of beauty, were less common among youths than adults. These strengths may require cognitive and emotional maturation in order to appear. However, we do not know how these transitions occur during the developmental process.

Another study on parental descriptions of character strengths among very young children revealed that even very young children possess various character strengths (Park & Peterson, 2006a). However, there is still much that is not yet known, including the early manifestation of each character strength, the precursors of certain character strengths in different developmental stages, and how strengths change and are maintained throughout life. Some character strengths may be rooted in temperament differences like sociability, and may take on moral meaning very early in life. For example, the infant-mother relationship may set the stage for the character component we identify as love (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), and early sibling relationships may be the crucible for the character strength of kindness (Dunn & Munn, 1986). Other components of good character—like open-mindedness and fairness—require a degree of cognitive maturation, as developmental psychologists have long documented (cf. Kohlberg, 1981, 1984; Piaget, 1932). These are empirical questions that need to be answered.

Future studies on the natural history of good character might profitably be patterned on the Terman (1925) study of adolescent geniuses, and the Grant Study of the best and brightest of Harvard University undergraduates (Vaillant, 1977) in the sense that they be large scale—large samples, longitudinal designs, and multiwave assessments—not because they start with the most fortunate or the most privileged in our society. Studies of individuals in difficult circumstances—so-called “at-risk” samples—might be especially interesting if the focus were on

how they rise to the occasion and flourish despite adversity. Strengths of character do not belong just to the ‘haves’ of the world. They are also found among the ‘have-nots’.

Because of its complex nature with a multidimensional structure, this is quite a challenging task with traditional statistical techniques. However, with advances in the field such as Latent Growth Modeling technique (Curran & Muthén, 1999), longitudinal studies will help shed light on the normative developmental process of character strengths, the predictors and correlates of individual differences in growth pattern and growth rates of different components of character strengths, and the short-term and long-term psychosocial and behavioral consequences of different character strengths. Hopefully, this method will help us identify people with outstanding specific character strengths and give us insight into how the development of their strength is different or similar from that of others. This will also give us valuable information for developing youth intervention and prevention programs.

Furthermore, we know nothing about the dynamic processes of character strengths in a healthy and thriving life and the potential neurobiological, emotional, behavioral, social, environmental, and cultural mediators and moderators of those processes. With the progress of studies of character, research attention should turn to understanding the mechanisms and processes that underlie positive phenomena and go beyond mere description. In addition, there are multiple routes to building and sustaining good character. We speculate that there is no single right way to good character, but rather there exist various routes to good character. We do not back off from endorsing good character as a goal for all, but we must recognize that character strengths can develop in different ways and show themselves in different forms. Good character is not only plural but diverse. Multivariate studies are therefore demanded in studying character strengths.

5. **Issue of Measurements of Character Strengths**

With a few exceptions, most studies of character to date have heavily depended on self-report on-line survey methods with a more educated adult sample. We need to utilize more diverse samples and research methods to generalize findings. But more importantly, character strengths are not found only in what people say and how it is said, although they are good places to start. If we truly want to understand anyone's strengths of character, we also really need to look at what a person actually does.

Most philosophers emphasize that moral activity involves choosing virtue in light of a justifiable life plan (Yearley, 1990). This characterization means that people can reflect on their own strengths of character and talk about them to others. Self-report surveys are, therefore, one reasonable way to assess the components of character. However, there are also legitimate concerns about the pitfalls of self-report and the validity threat (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). There is the possibility that some strengths of character lend themselves less readily to self-report than do others. For example, strengths like authenticity, humility, and bravery are not the sorts of traits usually attributed to oneself. But this consideration does not preclude the use of self-report to assess other strengths of character. In order to improve the validity of assessment, additional or alternative strategies are needed, such as reports from knowledgeable informants (family members, friends, and teachers), *in vivo* observations, and scenario methods. Different strategies of assessment should converge.

In addition to self-report, researchers must additionally turn to knowledgeable informants as well as more objective indices of thriving. There is a temptation to treat multiple sources of information as idiosyncratically fallible but substantively interchangeable (Campbell & Fiske,

1959). Certainly, different research strategies provide checks on one another, and we would not expect different sources of information to be routinely orthogonal in what they convey. But it is also important to appreciate that each source of information can provide a unique vantage on a topic. We, therefore, like the metaphor of 360° methodology, meaning that different sources of information are not automatically combined into a single composite; rather, they are used to create a picture with breadth and depth (Hedge, Borman, & Birkeland, 2001). For example, in our studies of character strengths, we have found that observers (friends, parents, teachers) usually agree with research participants about the presence or absence of traits like kindness and humor that are displayed interpersonally—that is, publicly—but not necessarily about more private strengths like spirituality.

Although we anticipate that these different methods will converge in the strengths they identify within given individuals, each method will also provide unique information about good character.

In addition, the good character is one that has significance to the person who owns it. Positive psychologists must tackle meaning head-on in their research, which means it cannot be modeled on natural science approaches that study phenomena solely from the outside. Beside quantitative methods, researchers must take seriously stories, narratives, and accounts, the typical starting points for qualitative research. Case histories of exceptional individuals should be encouraged, historical archives and cultural products should be consulted, and the sociocultural context should always be kept in mind.

6. **Issue of VIA classification as a Work in Progress**

The VIA classification is a work in progress. At the beginning of the VIA project, it was not wedded to a given theory. An impetus for the project was the need to know more about good

character, and no consensual theory had emerged within psychology or elsewhere up to that point. The classification was best described as aspirational, meaning that it attempted to specify mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories of moral traits without claiming finality or a deep theory (Bailey, 1994).

The hierarchical organization of the VIA classification—strengths under virtues—is a conceptual scheme and not a hypothesis to be tested with data. Indeed, several empirical investigations of the structuring of character strengths (Gilham et al., 2011; Mcgrath, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2005a; Park & Peterson, 2009a) yield a coherent picture but not exactly the one implied in Table 1. Future studies could help us establish a conceptually-driven but empirically-validated VIA classification system and character strengths measure.

The classification should not be a locked system, and iteratively changed as empirical data accumulate. Some existing strengths may be dropped, others may be combined, and still other strengths may be added. Exiting criteria provide the guidelines for changing the VIA classification (Park & Peterson, 2005b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Studies to date have demonstrated that strengths of character can be specified and measured as a multidimensional construct. Given this success, challenging but exciting tasks are ahead of us. With the help of the-state-of-art quantitative as well as qualitative research methods, we will know more about strengths of character and how to cultivate them. The new studies of character strengths require new perspectives on both conceptualization and measures. As much as traditional approaches can contribute to the study of character, there are methodological issues and new approaches that must be considered when the subject matter of research entails good character (Park & Peterson, 2003).

Implications for Practice

Cultivation of Character Strengths

Given the important and desirable consequences of character strengths, questions, of course, arise about how they might be cultivated and strengthened. We do not know the exact process by which strengths of character develop, since the VIA Classification is deliberately descriptive and not based on a single theory. However, we have some ideas about how character strengths are created, increased, and sustained.

We regard character strengths as habits, evident in thoughts, feelings, and actions (cf. Aristotle, 350 BCE/2000). They are not latent entities. When we describe character strengths as trait-like, we mean only that the habits to which they refer are relatively stable across time and relatively general across situations. The fact that character strengths, as we have measured them, are moderately heritable does not mean that they are immutable or that they are singular things (Peterson, 2006). According to Aristotle, virtues—a reflection of the individual's character—can be taught and acquired only by practicing them. He argued that a virtue is a habit that a person can develop by choosing the good and consistently acting in accordance with it. Other scholars have similarly emphasized that character must be developed by action and not merely 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.

Character programs. Character development programs should teach specific activities of strengths and encourage young people to keep using them in their daily lives (Park & Peterson, 2008, 2009b). Young people need to be instructed to choose target strengths on which they want to focus, to set the specific and measurable goals and to devise concrete action plans to achieve these goals. For example, if kindness is the target strength, saying hello to at least one new

person each day at school is an effective goal and action plan. Likewise continuous monitoring and journaling of progress and making a lifestyle change are critical. Also, individualized programs for cultivating character based on each individual's character strength profile may be more effective than a general program for everyone. Chanting slogans, putting up banners, or holding monthly school assemblies will not be as effective as creating an individualized program for each young person that encourages him or her to behave in different ways.

Role models. Positive role models are also important for character development (Bandura, 1977; Sprafkin, Liebert, & Poulos 1975). Important adults in young people's lives may play roles as character mentors. If adults value and want to teach young people good character, they should start by showing them how to do so, through their own actions. James A. Baldwin famously said "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them". The power of modeling over preaching in cultivating character strengths has been well documented. In a classic experimental study (Rushton, 1975), 140 7-11 year old children played a game to win tokens, where they were given the option to either keep all of them for themselves or donate some to a child in poverty. First, they observed an adult playing the game either selfishly or generously, and then they were preached to about the value of taking, giving or neither. The results showed that actions spoke louder than words. When children watched the adult behave generously, the children acted the same way regardless of whether the adult verbally advocated selfishness or generosity. When the children watched the adult act generously, they donated 85 percent more than the norm whether generosity was preached or not. Even if the adult preached selfishness, after watching the adult act generously, children still donated 49 percent more than the norm. This experiment had lasting effects even two months later.

We assume that the situation matters not only in the acquisition of character strengths but also in their use. It is easier to display certain character strengths in some settings than in others. In the community where sharing and helping behaviors are valued and recognized, these prosocial behaviors can become a natural part of everyday life. In contrast, in a setting where genuine attention and gestures of aid are seen with suspicion, it discourages people to engage in such behaviors. It is important to create a society where it is easy for individuals to be and do good.

Strengths vocabulary. Change does not occur in a vacuum, and the first step in cultivating character strengths is to legitimize a strengths vocabulary in whatever settings people happen to be. Here the VIA Project can be extremely helpful by providing the words with which we can describe our own strengths and those of others, strengths that already exist, and strengths that we want to build. With a strengths vocabulary in place, one needs to start using these words often enough so they become a natural part of everyday language.

Good character is not simply the absence of deficits, problems, and pathology but rather a well-developed family of positive traits. Schools and programs should start to measure young people's assets, such as character strengths, as much as deficits. Measures of problems, deficits, and weaknesses have a long lineage within education and mental health, whereas measures of positive assets such as character strengths are neither as numerous nor as well developed (Park, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2005). Good character is not singular, but plural, and must be measured in ways that do justice to its breadth. Good character can only be captured by a set of components that vary across people. The VIA classification provides a vocabulary for people to talk about character strengths in an appropriately sophisticated way (Park, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2008). Simply saying that someone has good character (or not) does not lead anywhere useful. In

contrast, using the VIA classification, people can describe the *profile* of character strengths that characterize each individual. The VIA measures not only allows the comparison of character strengths across individuals but also within individuals (e.g., rank ordered for the individual)—to identify one's signature strengths relative to his or her other strengths. We believe that everybody has strengths regardless of where they stand compared to others.

It has been said that one measures what one values and that one values what one measures (Park & Peterson, 2009b). If society really values good character, especially, among young people, we should start assessing character strengths and paying attention to how they develop. All educators, parents and policy makers are busy measuring young people's academic abilities and monitoring their progress of learning. We hope that someday schools will assess the character strengths of students and record the progress of their development in addition to academic achievement. We hope more families, schools, workplaces and communities will recognize, reward, and celebrate good character among its members.

Strength-based Approach

Problem-focused approaches can be useful only in reducing and treating the specific targeted problems, but they do not necessarily prepare people to have healthy, fulfilling and productive life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In contrast, strengths-based approaches may pay much greater dividends, not only in preventing or reducing immediate problems, but also in the long run, in building moral, healthy, and happy people who can overcome challenges and enjoy a good and fulfilling life (Cowen, 1998; Park & Peterson, 2008). We have hypothesized that the exercise of signature strengths is particularly fulfilling. Consider a study with adults who completed a VIA survey, identified their top strengths, and were then asked to use these strengths in novel ways (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Relative to a

comparison group without this instruction, these individuals showed significant increases in happiness as well as decreases in depression at a six month follow-up. Not surprisingly, these changes were evident only if research participants continued to use their strengths in new ways. Finding *novel* ways to use strengths every day is therefore critical and reflects the importance of ongoing personal effort in producing a flourishing life.

A strengths-based approach can be used with people at any level. Because signature strengths are the ones people already possess, it is often easier and more enjoyable to work with them and on them. Once people build their confidence by using their signature strengths, they can be taught how to use these strengths to work on less-developed strengths. It is frustrating and difficult to work solely on weaknesses and problems because often people give up or become defensive about their problems. However, if discussions and interventions start with the strengths of individuals—things at which they are already proficient—rapport can be built, and motivation increased.

This strength-based approach may be particularly useful for working with people with a history of disability, poor achievement, and other troubles (e.g., Resnick & Rosenheck, 2006). When we compare these individuals against the norm, as often we do, it may be difficult to find anything at which they are good. However, if we compare the 24 VIA strengths *within* an individual, we can identify those strengths that are stronger than others for that person, enabling educators, parents and professionals to help people use these strengths in their lives, in relationships, at play, and in school.

Most people want to do well and to live in happy and fulfilling ways. These goals are fundamental human desires and rights. But more often than not, people do not know how to find happiness and meaning in the right place and in the right way. Perhaps, identifying character

strengths is where we can start. Everyone has strengths. They need to be recognized, celebrated, strengthened, and used.

Conclusion and Future Directions

What is the good in a person? How can we cultivate good character in individuals and in a society? Although these are age-old questions that have captured attention from philosophers, theologians and educators from the East to the West over centuries, scientific answers to these questions lie at the heart of contemporary positive psychology (Peterson, 2006). Positive psychologists have reclaimed good character and virtue as an important topic of study central to the understanding of what makes life worth living. Research has shown that character strengths have important consequences in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Strengths of character buffer against negative outcomes, as well as enable positive outcomes in life (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson et al., 2008).

Two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson wrote that "happiness is the aim of life, [but] virtue is the foundation of happiness". In his 2009 inaugural address, US President Barack Obama eloquently stated that

> Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new, but those values upon which our success depends—honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism—these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history.

He reminded us that virtues can help us survive and, indeed, thrive. He reminded us that cultivating character should be an important goal for all individuals and societies. He reminded everyone that virtue is, and always will remain, the foundation of a flourishing nation. Indeed, character matters -- then and now.

The field is hugely indebted to Christopher Peterson for his pioneering work and dedication to the study of character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) [1]. Largely due to his leadership and scholarship, significant progress has been made in the study of character strengths regarding their definition, classification, measurements, correlates, and consequences. However, the study of character strengths is far from complete. A lot more work is needed to address gaps in the field and make meaningful strides in research and practice. Research on character is increasingly spreading outward to several areas, including how character relates to hard outcome measures (such as health, work productivity and educational achievement), cultural differences and similarities of character, character development, character-based interventions, and the biological processes by which strengths of character give rise to actual behavior. Future studies will continue to refine measures and use empirical findings to understand the structure of character, its development, its long-term consequences, effective interventions, and the processes by which strengths of character give rise to healthy outcomes.

Five decades ago, Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist (who actually used the phrase “positive psychology” to describe his own approach), made a distinction between “safety science” and “growth science” (Maslow, 1966). He viewed “safety science” like a “security system” – an approach that is ordering, stabilizing, cautious, and timid. This is in contrast with “growth science” – an approach that is more bold, courageous, discovering, and innovative. “Safety science” would be more attractive to the likeminded, on guard against critics and defensive, whereas “growth science” is open to opposing ideas and criticism, open to questioning its own work and willing to be wrong. Maslow cautioned against science becoming too much of a “safety science”. He suggested that a good scientist should be able to be both daring and cautious, and to know when each is called for.

Researchers and practitioners need to learn from history and continue their efforts in finding answers to important questions of the discipline, all the while being informed by good science. Inspired by Maslow’s “growth science”, to discover truth about the good life we need to constantly challenge ourselves, ask big questions, and take bold approaches. If it is worth doing, it is worth doing right. If we can muster the courage to take this “growth-based approach,” we will be well on our way to achieving one of the most important goals we all share -- cultivating and sustaining a happy, healthy, and morally good life, which is to say, the life most worth living.

Footnotes

1. Christopher Peterson (1950–2012) was a Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan who helped to found the field of positive psychology. He guided this discipline through the first decade of the 21st Century until he passed away in 2012. When asked for a concise definition of positive psychology, Peterson coined the phrase "other people matter." One of his most influential works was the creation of a coherent classification of character strengths and virtues with reliable and valid strategies for assessing them- the Values in Action (VIA) Project. Subsequently, he extensively studied the conceptualization, correlates and consequences of character strengths and virtues in a variety of populations and settings. His seminal works became a foundation of the field of character and virtues and he paved the way for scholars to study these topics utilizing a more scientific approach.

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Table 1

VIA Classification of Strengths

1. wisdom and knowledge- cognitive strengths entailing the acquisition and use of 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 – emotional strengths involving the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
    - 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 – interpersonal strengths that involve "tending and befriending" others
    - 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 – civic strengths underlying healthy community life
    - 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 – strengths protecting against excess
    - 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 - strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning
    - 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

Figure 1

The Structure of Character