

Values in action scale and the Big 5: An empirical indication of structure

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Abstract

Within this study we used self-report measures completed by 123 undergraduate students from an Australian university to investigate the validity of Peterson and Seligman's [Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P (2004). *Character strengths and virtues*. New York: Oxford.] classification system of 24 character strengths and six virtues. We also looked at how the 24 character strengths relate to the Five Factor Model of personality and to a measure of social desirability. Using a second order factor analysis of the 24 character strengths, we found that these 24 character strengths did not produce a factor structure consistent with the six higher order virtues as proposed by Peterson and Seligman [Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P (2004). *Character strengths and virtues*. New York: Oxford.]. Instead, the 24 character strengths were well represented by both a one and four factor solution. Patterns of significant relationships between each of the 24 character strengths, the one and four factor solutions and the Five Factor Model of personality were found. The results have implications for [Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P (2004). *Character strengths and virtues*. New York: Oxford.] classification. Crown copyright © 2007 Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The field of positive psychology has the goal of helping people achieve an above normal or optimal level of functioning, leading to a happier existence (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Wallis, 2005). Wallis (2005) suggests that this is because much of psychological practice and theory has focused on helping people to recover from a diminished level of functioning, and has largely neglected helping people achieve a higher level of functioning.

Two of the main proponents of positive psychology are Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), who see positive psychology encompassing subjective experience, individual traits, and societal interactions. With regard to the area of individual differences, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have developed a hierarchy of positive psychological character strengths. The hierarchy consists of 24 specific character strengths that are seen as

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Table 1
 Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification of character strengths and virtues

Virtue	Character strengths
Wisdom and Knowledge	Creativity Curiosity Open-mindedness Love of Learning Perspective
Courage	Bravery Persistence Integrity Vitality
Humanity	Love Kindness Social Intelligence
Justice	Citizenship Fairness Leadership
Temperance	Forgiveness and Mercy Humility/Modesty Prudence Self-control
Transcendence	Appreciation of Beauty Gratitude Hope Humour Spirituality

Adapted from Table 1.1 in Peterson and Seligman (2004), pp 29–30.

the psychological ingredients that make up six “virtues”. These virtues are situated at a higher level of abstraction than character strengths, and are likened to constructs proposed by philosophers and religious figures over many centuries. These six virtues and their associated character strengths are displayed in Table 1.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) analysed different religious, cultural and legal texts from around the world in an attempt to achieve a universal classification for character strengths, and only included character strengths and virtues that were found to be ubiquitous (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005).

To measure and assess the 24 character strengths, Peterson and Seligman (2004) also developed the Virtues In Action Scale (VIA). The VIA is a self-assessment measure of character strength requiring respondents to rate how likely they are to participate in certain behaviours that are representative of the different character strengths. It is important to note that the scale does not directly measure the six virtues they describe; these are only linked conceptually to the character strengths by Peterson and Seligman (2004).

In addition to developing their classification system, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have also suggested how their classification of character strengths and virtues is related to, but distinct from, already established theories of values. For example, Peterson and Seligman (2004) see their classification of character strengths and virtues as being related to Maslow's (1973) idea of self-actualised individuals, the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality (McCrae & John, 1992; Costa & McCrae, 1994), Cawley's virtue factors (Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000), Buss' evolutionary ideas about what is attractive in a mate [i.e. what character traits are essential for survival and propagation, (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005)], and Schwartz's (1992) Universal Values.

Some research into establishing the validity of these claims has begun. Haslam, Bain, and Neal (2004) found that both Schwartz's (1992) Universal Values and the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality were conceptually linked to the 24 character strengths. However, as these constructs were defined and subsequently measured by only one or two terms that were ranked and grouped together by participants on the basis of conceptual likeness, more thorough research is needed before we can draw any firm conclusions.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) acknowledge that there are some clear correspondences between their classification and the FFM. For example, Neuroticism could be seen as the conceptual opposite of Hope,

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