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STRENGTHS OF CHARACTER AND WELL–BEING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TABLE 1. Criteria for a Character Strength

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

individual strengths of character are associated with indices of well–being, but the variety of operationalizations—both of positive traits and of well–being—make comparisons across strengths all but impossible.

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

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

TABLE 2. VIA Classification of Character Strengths

Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience.

Bravery [valor]: *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.

Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share.

Creativity [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it.

Curiosity [interest, novelty–seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience; finding all subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering.

Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; *not* letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.

Forgiveness and mercy: Forgiving those who have done wrong; giving people a second chance; *not* being vengeful.

Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks.

Hope [optimism, future–mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about.

Humor [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes.

Integrity [authenticity, honesty]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.

Judgment [open–mindedness, critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; *not* jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly.

Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them.

Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintaining good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people.

Love of learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add *systematically* to what one knows

Modesty and humility: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; *not* seeking the spotlight; *not* regarding oneself as more special than one is.

Persistence [perseverance, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks.

Perspective [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people.

Prudence: Being careful about one's choices; *not* taking undue risks; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted.

Self–regulation [self–control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions.

Social intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit in to different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick.

Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.

Zest [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

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

MEASURES

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

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

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

TABLE 3. Partial Correlations Between Strengths of Character and Satisfaction with Life

	Sample 1 (n = 3907)		Sample 2 (n = 852)		Sample 3 (n = 540)	
VIA Character Strength	[a]Scale	[b]Rank	Scale	Rank	Scale	Rank
Hope	.53*	–.37*	.48*	–.31*	.59*	–.45*
Zest	.52*	–.36*	.47*	–.28*	.53*	–.33*
Gratitude	.43*	–.26*	.41*	–.27*	.41*	–.17*
Curiosity	.39*	–.18*	.34*	–.14*	.38*	–.09
Love	.35*	–.23*	.40*	–.18*	.46*	–.19*
Perspective/wisdom	.35*	–.07*	.32*	–.08	.40*	–.10
Persistence	.30*	–.03	.32*	–.08	.36*	–.15*
Self–regulation	.29*	.00	.29*	–.01	.31*	.01
Spirituality	.29*	–.12*	.23*	–.12*	.25*	–.11
Forgiveness	.28*	–.02	.15*	.05	.23*	.04
Social intelligence	.26*	.05*	.24*	.04	.37*	–.01
Humor	.26*	.00	.26*	–.04	.21*	.06
Leadership	.24*	.08*	.21*	.04	.34*	–.01
Bravery	.23*	.03	.21*	.03	.21*	.16*
Citizenship	.23*	.08*	.23*	.03	.32*	.05
Integrity	.23*	.10*	.19*	.11*	.36*	–.04
Kindness	.21*	.09*	.19*	.09	.24*	.06
Fairness	.19*	.14*	.12*	.19*	.22*	.15*
Prudence	.16*	.17*	.15*	.16*	.20*	.12
Love of learning	.15*	.11*	.11*	.09	.09	.18*
Judgment	.14*	.20*	.16*	.14*	.15*	.17*
Appreciation of beauty	.12*	.16*	.02	.20*	.03	.26*
Creativity	.12*	.13*	.11*	.11*	.06	.17*
Modesty/humility	.05*	.22*	.02	.21*	.07	.16*

Note. Partial correlations control for age, gender, and U.S. citizenship. [a]Scale refers to partial correlations with VIA scale scores. [b]Rank refers to partial correlations with VIA scales scored ipsatively (1 = top through 24 = bottom). *$p < .002$.

samples, the scale was highly reliable ($\alpha = .90$). Scores were negatively skewed ($M = 22.3$) but variable ($SD = 7.5$); the coefficient of variation for the SWLS was .34, implying excellent variability (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2001). The demographic variables we measured were not related to life satisfaction in the present samples.

PROCEDURE

All measures were placed online at www.authentichappiness.org and www.positivepsychology.org/strengths along with demographic questions. The VIA–IS was presented first, followed by demographic

questions, and finally the SWLS. On the first page of the Web sites, a short description of the study was provided, including its approximate time commitment. These Web sites provide individualized feedback upon completion of measures. The feedback feature is apparently attractive to potential respondents and may explain why we did not need to advertise the surveys. To preserve respondent anonymity, we did not track how individuals came across our surveys on the Internet. They may have learned about it by reading Seligman's (2002) *Authentic Happiness*, by following a link on the Positive Psychology Web page, by following links on other Web pages, or by hearing about it from previous respondents or from our media interviews.

RESULTS

Here are our main findings: Hope and zest were substantially related to life satisfaction. Also related substantially to life satisfaction were several other strengths: gratitude, love, and curiosity. Modesty and various intellectual strengths (appreciation of beauty, creativity, judgment, and love of learning) were only weakly associated with life satisfaction. There was no evidence that "too much" of a character strength was ever associated with lower life satisfaction.

Because of our very large samples, we opted for a conservative strategy in identifying the individual character strengths most robustly and consistently associated with life satisfaction. Within each sample, we computed the partial correlations between each of the 24 VIA strengths and life satisfaction, controlling for age, gender, and U.S. citizenship (yes, no). Because of the large number of tests, we adjusted our level of significance to $p = .05/24 = .002$. The results are summarized in Table 3. Most strongly and consistently correlated with life satisfaction were the character strengths of hope, zest, gratitude, curiosity, and love.

Next, VIA strengths scores were computed by rank, ipsatively, rather than by absolute magnitude. That is, for each respondent, we ranked his or her character strength scores from 1 (top) to 24 (bottom). Because someone who is high on one strength must be lower on other strengths, ipsative scoring builds dependencies into the data. However, ipsative scoring reduces concerns about response bias and by definition identifies what we have described as an individual's "signature strengths" (Peterson et al., in press; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2002). Each of the 24 strengths was ranked first for some respondents as well as last for others, although there was a considerable range (see Table 4).

We again controlled for age, gender, and US citizenship in computing correlations, with life satisfaction as our criterion. Again, we adjusted

TABLE 4. Top and Bottom Strengths (collapsed across samples; n = 5,299)

VIA Character Strength	Top–Ranked Strength %	Bottom–Ranked Strength %	Mean Rank
Curiosity	7	< 1	9
Fairness	4	< 1	9
Integrity	1	< 1	9
Judgment	7	< 1	9
Gratitude	6	< 1	10
Kindness	5	< 1	10
Love of learning	12	3	10
Humor	8	3	11
Love	4	2	11
Appreciation of beauty	5	4	12
Perspective/wisdom	2	< 1	12
Forgiveness	3	6	13
Social intelligence	2	2	13
Leadership	2	1	13
Citizenship	2	2	13
Creativity	6	7	13
Hope	1	4	14
Persistence	2	5	14
Spirituality	11	13	14
Bravery	1	5	15
Zest	1	4	15
Prudence	< 1	8	16
Modesty/humility	1	16	17
Self–regulation	1	14	18

the significance level to p = .002 and looked for convergence across all three samples.

As Table 3 shows, the results of these analyses are mostly consistent with those based on the absolute scores. Having hope, zest, love, and/or gratitude among one's top strengths was consistently associated with more life satisfaction, and having modesty, creativity, judgment, appreciation of beauty, love of learning, and/or prudence among one's top strengths was consistently associated with less life satisfaction.

To answer our second question—whether character strengths in the extreme take a toll on well–being—we categorized the individual scale scores within each sample into 20 groups (according to magnitude) separately for each character strength and computed one–way ANOVAs with this grouping as the independent variable and life satisfaction as the dependent variable. Except for appreciation of beauty, creativity,

and modesty, all of these ANOVAs were significant (ps < .05), as would be expected given the significant correlations reported in Table 3: The more intense the strength, the more life satisfaction.

But what about the life satisfaction of individuals who scored most extremely with respect to a given strength? Using the Tukey procedure for pairwise comparisons, we looked at whether scores in the most extreme group (top 5%) of a strength were ever significantly lower than those in any of the other groups ($p < .05$). We do not report the details of these analyses because they were completely uniform, across strengths and across samples. In not one case among 1,368 tests (3 samples × 24 strengths × 19 comparisons) did respondents in the highest group score lower on the life satisfaction measure than respondents in any other group. Indeed, the linear trends for all the character strengths (except appreciation of beauty, creativity, and modesty) were significant in all three samples (ps < .05).

We also tested the quadratic component in each ANOVA. Only two cases (hope and zest) yielded significant results in all three samples (ps < .05). Figures 1 and 2 depict the association between life satisfaction and the groupings of respondents for these two strengths (collapsed across samples for economy of presentation). As is evident, departures from linearity occurred for Group 1 (the extreme low end), indicating that very low zest and very low hope were associated with notably low life satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The character strengths in the VIA Classification are on the whole associated with life satisfaction, as expected given their definition as psychologically fulfilling (Peterson & Seligman, 2004): The higher a given character strength, the more life satisfaction reported. Some strengths nevertheless appear to be more satisfying than others. This conclusion follows whether the VIA strengths were computed in absolute or relative (ipsative) terms.

Among the strengths that best predicted life satisfaction, it is not surprising that zest was strongly associated with life satisfaction. This finding is a virtual tautology because other than the irritably manic, we cannot imagine zestful people who are unhappy. Perhaps the curiosity finding is a psychological tautology as well.

However, the robust associations between life satisfaction and the strengths of love, hope, and gratitude are not tautological and thus more intriguing. An explanatory structure for high life satisfaction may lurk here. Gratitude connects one happily to the past, and hope connects one happily to the future. Zest and curiosity, of course, reside in the here and

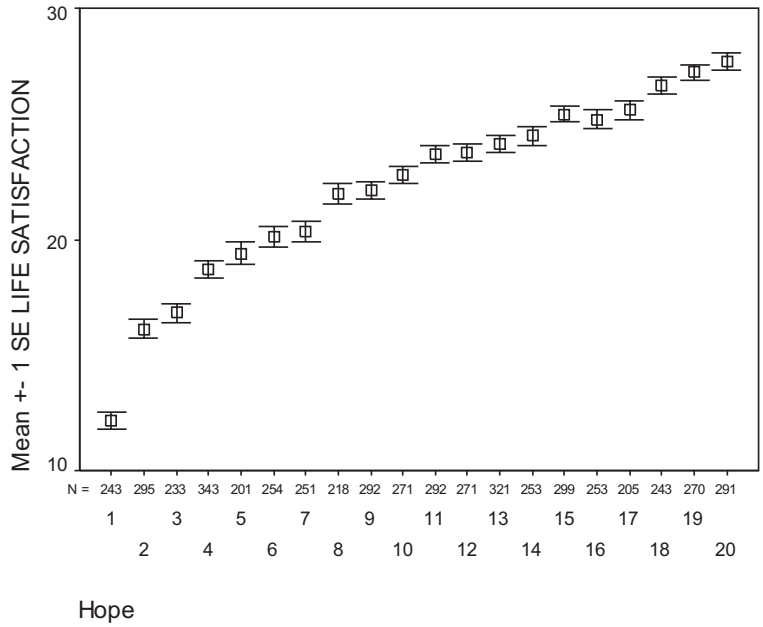

FIGURE 1. Life satisfaction as a function of VIA hope scores, from bottom 5% (= 1) through top 5% (= 20), collapsed across all samples (total n = 5,299). Subgroup sizes vary because of tied scores.

now. Love—manifest in reciprocated close relationships—is the domain in which ongoing life plays itself out in the most fulfilling way (cf. Diener & Seligman, 2002).

Other character strengths were less associated with life satisfaction. In particular, in all three samples, the least fulfilling character strength was modesty. This finding might be interpreted as an artifact of the individualism of our mainly U.S. samples, but a parallel investigation of Japanese adults, using translated versions of the VIA–IS and various life satisfaction measures, found exactly the same result (Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2003).

Other strengths less associated with life satisfaction were appreciation of beauty, creativity, judgment, and love of learning—mental or intellectual strengths. Apparently, a strength can be socially valued without translating itself into life satisfaction for the individual possessing it. These strengths are highly esteemed, especially in educational and cultural arenas, but they may add little to life satisfaction.

In general, these findings are consistent with the conclusions of other researchers who have surveyed the relationship between personality

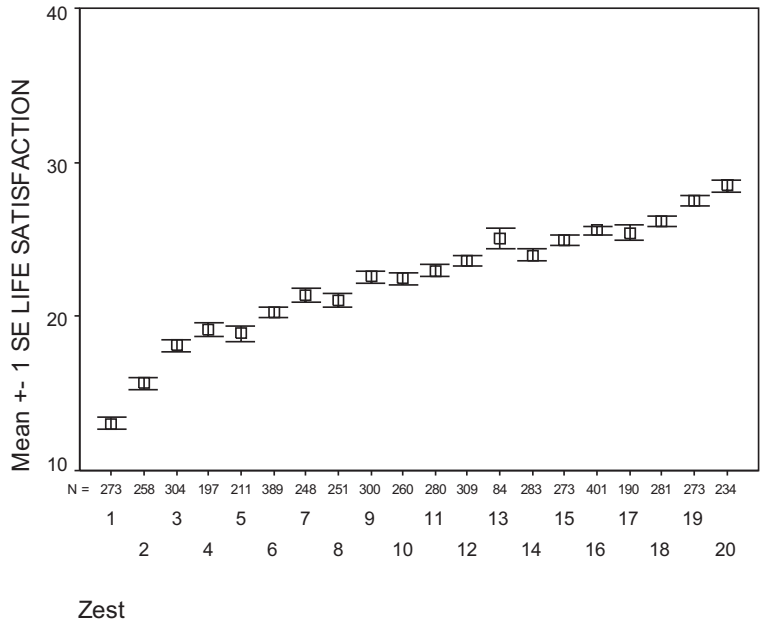

FIGURE 2. Life satisfaction as a function of VIA zest scores, from bottom 5% (= 1) through top 5% (= 20), collapsed across all samples (total n = 5299). Subgroup sizes vary because of tied scores.

and subjective well–being (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wilson, 1967). For example, among Big Five personality traits, agreeableness and extraversion are positively associated with life satisfaction; these broad dispositions relate to the VIA strengths of love and gratitude (in the case of agreeableness) and curiosity and zest (in the case of extraversion). Neuroticism—characterized by the absence of hope, among its other facets—is negatively associated with life satisfaction. Openness to experience—which includes some of the intellectual strengths in the VIA classification—is not consistently associated with life satisfaction. So our results agree with these Big Five correlates but go beyond them to add specific content to the character strengths most and least related to life satisfaction.

The question arises about the association between the VIA strengths and the Big Five. We did not include a Big Five inventory in the present studies, but in a separate sample we were able to ascertain the empirical correlations between our measures of character strengths and Goldberg's (1999) Big Five measures. Correlations were sensible but rarely so high as to suggest redundancy. Of particular relevance to the

present research, in this separate sample we also correlated character strengths with life satisfaction while simultaneously partialling *all* Big Five indices, including neuroticism (which correlated $r = -.50$ with life satisfaction and thus makes these stringent tests). Each of the character strengths we have identified as robustly associated with life satisfaction (curiosity, zest, hope, gratitude, and love) remained strong predictors of life satisfaction at the .001 level or beyond, which suggests that the VIA scales reflect something beyond the reach of typical Big Five measures.

The distinctiveness between the VIA measures and the Big Five measures is probably not all that surprising. Lexical approaches to personality began with the 18,000 trait terms in the English language identified by Allport and Odbert (1936), who deliberately excluded "moral" trait terms from their original list, which means that they have never been incorporated into Big Five measures (cf. Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000).

What about excess? Is a character strength displayed to the extreme associated with reduced life satisfaction? We consistently found the opposite pattern: The more, the better. It is possible to think of scenarios in which, for example, "women who love too much" are bedeviled by this excess, but our data suggest that these are mawkish fictions, at least when a character strength is interpreted in dispositional terms. Indeed, in a parallel construct–validating project, we interviewed people about their signature strengths and asked them whether those strengths ever "got them into trouble" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). More than 90% of the respondents said yes, but 100% of them then added that they would not want to change because the strengths were "who they are." They were willing (dare we say happy) to pay the occasional penalty of a signature strength because the benefit was being true to themselves. As actress Mae West reportedly said, "Too much of a good thing is wonderful," and we suggest that if there is a concern about those who score extremely on our character strength measures, it should be reserved for those with "too little" of a strength. They are patently dissatisfied with life

Let us consider further the most robust and consistent finding of this study: The more intensely a strength is endorsed, the more life satisfaction is reported. That is, the absolute scores for strengths were intimately associated with life satisfaction. Although part of our concern was with the rank of the strengths (is it better for individuals to have one strength or another as their top strength?), such ipsative scoring ignores the absolute numbers. So viewed absolutely, some people said that any given strength and many strengths were "a lot like me," whereas others tended to say that any given strength and many strengths were only "somewhat like me." The people who said "a lot like me" more frequently and for more strengths were much more satisfied than those who did not.

We do not know with certainty whether this finding is fact or artifact. If artifact, it may simply reflect a response set or common method variance. People who are more extreme in their response biases report more strengths as well as more life satisfaction. Counting against this possibility are the differential (and interpretable) associations between various character strengths and life satisfaction as well as the results of our ipsative analyses, which removed extremity as a confound and furthermore showed considerable variability in the strengths most and least frequently endorsed. Accordingly, our findings might be fact, and if so, important fact.

Another limitation, or at least peculiarity, of our research was our strategy of obtaining research participants. Although increasingly common in psychological research (Birnbaum, 2000), samples obtained from the World Wide Web can be criticized. Individuals need to have access to a computer and the ability to use it. Different websites may attract people with special characteristics. We cannot accurately judge how "representative" our sample is to whatever target population might matter. However, current participants ranged across the adult years. Males and females were well represented. Considering that 70% of the U.S. population now uses the Internet (Lebo, 2003), we believe that our findings may generalize as well as those from studies using typical psychology subject pool samples.

A more serious criticism of our particular research strategy is that the website yielding Sample 1 was explicitly linked to Seligman's (2002) trade book on positive psychology, which means that this sample of respondents was likely familiar with positive psychology and specifically with the VIA Classification. However, Seligman (2002) offered no specific hypotheses about the relative associations between different strengths of character and life satisfaction, which argues against an interpretation of the present results in terms of explicit demand characteristics. In any event, the same results were found in the other samples reported here as well as in several other samples recruited in more conventional ways (through schools) and responding to paper–and–pencil versions of our measures (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2003; Shimai et al., 2003).

Do the strengths *cause* life satisfaction? Our cross–sectional data do not allow this question to be answered, but one possible interpretation of the relationship between character strengths and life satisfaction is guided by Aristotle's (1962) notion of eudemonia. According to this idea, well–being—happiness or fulfillment—is not an eventual consequence of virtuous action but rather *inherent* in such action. When we do a favor for someone, our act does not cause us to be satisfied with ourselves at some later point in time. Being satisfied is a necessary aspect of being helpful, of

"right action," just as grace is a property of the dance done well, not an outcome or effect of the dance or a separable emotional gloss. Aristotle told us that life satisfaction is a property of the life lived well, in accordance with certain strengths of character. Accordingly, we think the question of whether good character causes high life satisfaction is at best a sticky one. To be sure, strengths such as hope or love may produce circumstances that lead to higher life satisfaction (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004), but we think it unlikely that longitudinal research could begin with samples of hopeful or loving individuals initially low in life satisfaction.

The results of the current study have implications for interventions that prevent problems or promote well–being. Deliberate attempts to cultivate the good life—such as those embodied in character education, life coaching, or afterschool youth development programs (e.g., Berkowitz, 2002; Kilburg, 1996; Roth & Brooks–Gunn, 2003)—should probably choose certain character strengths as initial targets rather than others. We already know how to nurture gratitude (Miller, 1995) and hope (Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox, & Seligman, 1995; McDermott & Snyder, 1999). Less clear is how to teach love, zest, or curiosity, although we do know some of their naturally occurring precursors: secure attachments with caregivers in the case of love, physical health and safety for zest, and knowledge in a given domain for curiosity about that domain (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In any event, a study we have done with adolescents mostly replicates the findings reported here for adults (Park & Peterson, 2003), which means that the links between certain character strengths and life satisfaction may be established rather early in life (cf. DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Accordingly, interventions should take place sooner as opposed to later.

This is a preliminary study of which character strengths are most strongly linked to fulfillment, a question left previously to armchair speculation. We find that hope, zest, gratitude, curiosity, and love are most strongly associated with life satisfaction, and modesty and intellectual strength least so. To the extent that interventions strive to build life satisfaction, the strengths most robustly associated with well–being might be considered prime targets.

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