



The Character Course for Churches: Adapting Character Strengths Interventions for a Faith-Based Context

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Definition of Terms

This paper highlights the requirement for cultural contextualisation when applying ostensibly universal taxonomies of virtue to local sub-cultures. It reports the initial research and development phase of a character strength intervention with the working title 'The Character Course for Churches' (CCC), developed as part of a three year project funded by the John Templeton Foundation. The Character Course for Churches aims to contextualise, disseminate and evaluate character strengths interventions with church-based small groups across the UK.

For the purposes of this paper the term Character Strengths and Virtues, under the acronym CSV (or CS), refers to the overall taxonomy of 24 character strengths proposed by the VIA Institute for Character, and published in Peterson and Seligman (2004). The author also occasionally draws on insights from other strengths-based schemes, such as Strengths-finder (Rath, 2007) and Realise 2 (Linley, Willars, Biswas-Diener, Garcea & Stairs, 2010); from Aristotelian virtue ethics (MacIntyre, 1985; O'Rourke, 2013); and from other models of character development and education (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue-JCCV, 2015). The author is equally aware of the critical literature on the VIA CSV classification (Kristjánsson, 2013; Brown, Lomas & Eiroá-Orosa, 2017), to which the project leader has contributed (Bretherton, 2015; Bretherton & Niemiec, 2017). Use of the VIA classification should not therefore be taken as an uncritical endorsement of the entire pre-suppositional background it inhabits. CSV is used as shorthand for the VIA Classification of twenty four psychological strengths and the synonyms contained therein, as an accessible common language (Niemiec, 2017) with which to discuss the development of positive qualities of character.

It should also be noted that using the word 'strength' with regard to character is in itself often problematic within the church context. The CSV literature is deeply indebted, in its original formulation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and more recent empirical work (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan & Minhas, 2011; Linley, Nielsen, Gillett & Biswas-Diener, 2010) to the psychology of goal attainment, in which CSs are seen as the means by which individuals attain goals. This contrasts, for example, with the strand of Christian thought which, drawing on New Testament imagery (Matthew 7:15-20; John 15:1-8; Galatians 5:22-23) prefers to view positive qualities of character as fruit (karpos): the outcome of grace, faith and practice rather than an instrumental means of goal attainment. This means-end distinction is not conceptually irreconcilable, and theological exploration has gone some way to addressing it (Charry, 2010; Collicutt, 2015; Hauerwas, 2018; Strawn, 2012; Wright, 2010), but it should be noted that the use of the term character strength in this paper is not an attempt to beg this conceptual question. For the reasons stated above, the notion of character 'strength', presented without qualification, may not be an immediately appealing concept to a Christian audience. The arguably ubiquitous CSs of the VIA inventory therefore require considerable contextualisation to be acceptable and useful to many Christians. The resolution of how best to conceptualise and present psychologically-informed character development to a church audience is the central concern of the Character Course project.

Potential Benefits of Character Strengths Interventions for Churches

Underlying the CCC is the assumption that CSV psychology could be enormously useful in helping Christian individuals and groups to live out the virtues of character they aspire to embody. It could address the perceived inconsistency between professed and lived Christianity, in which virtues of character such as love, kindness, gratitude, self-control, and forgiveness, are referenced in sermons and Christian discourse, but evidence of their growth in church populations is questioned (e.g. Batson, Floyd, Meyer & Winner, 1999). This apparent inconsistency features prominently in psychological (Teehan, 2010) and popular (Dawkins, 2006) critiques of religious belief, and is sometimes felt keenly by believers themselves as a deficit between theoretical and practical knowledge, a gap between head and heart (Watts & Dumbreck, 2013).

Furthermore the CCC assumes that interventions based on CSV psychology will enhance the psychological wellbeing of those who practice them. Life in all its fullness is a central concern of both Christianity and positive psychology. One of the foundational claims of CSV psychology since the publication of Peterson and Seligman (2004) is that practicing CSs is associated with improvements on various measures of psychological wellbeing. In empirical studies, at least three approaches to CS practice have demonstrated efficacy:

1. **Practicing Signature Strengths.** Using the VIA-IS psychometric to identify a person's top ranked strengths, and then offering various exercises designed to use them differently each day. This has been found to be one of the most effective ways of increasing life satisfaction (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). This approach to character development has generated an extensive set of ideas for using each of the VIA strengths (Rashid & Ajum, 2014). It demonstrates enhanced effectiveness when combined with the setting of SMART goals (Butina, 2016), and when combined with mindfulness practice, it is the underlying theory behind Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP- Niemiec, 2014). A meta-analysis of fourteen studies, provisionally suggests the effectiveness of signature strengths interventions to increasing happiness and reduce depression (Schutte & Malouf, 2018).
2. **Practicing Individual Character Strengths.** Other research emphasises wellbeing benefits associated with exercises aimed at developing particular character strengths, such as: kindness (Chancellor, Margolis & Lyubomirsky, 2016), forgiveness (Worthington, 2003), humility (Lavelock, Worthington, Davis, Griffin, Reid, Hook & Van Tongeren, 2014), curiosity (Kashdan, 2009), gratitude (Emmons, 2013), compassion (Neff, 2011), humour (Wellenzohn, Proyer & Ruch, 2016), and hope (Lopez, 2013). These strengths interventions, and others like them, report increases in wellbeing, work engagement, personal growth and group cohesion (Ghielen, van Woerkom & Meyers, 2018). Practicing particular strengths can lead to positive outcomes, whether or not that strength is familiar to the person practicing it.
3. **Practicing Strengths Associated with Life Satisfaction.** This approach, sometimes referred to as 'the scatter gun' approach, targets the VIA CSs most often correlated with life satisfaction in international studies (Proyer, Ruch & Buschor, 2013). There are some differences in these findings, but the top character strengths usually include five of the following: hope, curiosity, love, gratitude and zest (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Assigning a cluster of exercises that targets these strengths has been shown to increase psychological wellbeing.

The CCC therefore draws upon elements of all three approaches, to construct a series of exercises which, if practiced successfully, should lead to measurable increases in wellbeing and life satisfaction for participants.

The Requirement for Contextualization

In spite of the potential value of CSV however, churches have remained largely unaware of the usefulness of this psychology. For example, the VIA Institute for Character, which monitors all CSV developments globally, notes significant ongoing work with Jewish Rabbis, and extensive collaborations with Buddhist leaders, but is unaware of any major CSV programmes being conducted in churches (Niemiec, *personal correspondence*). From the church perspective, CSV psychology is largely unknown. In small doses, the author has presented CSV to thousands of Christians across the UK, who report it to be helpful, but were previously unaware of its existence.

This is not attributable to a lack of scholarship on the issue. Academic theology has kept pace with the field, addressing both CSV in general and specific CSs in particular. Recent examples covering CSV in general, include Christopher Kaczor (2015) from a Roman Catholic perspective, the edited volume of Plante (2012) including various Christian contributions, the volume on vocation emerging from a conference at Lambeth Palace (Yaden, McCall & Ellens, 2015), and the work of Joanna Collicutt (2015) on the psychology of Christian character formation. Ellen Charry's (2010) 'Asherism' approach established the theological validity of *eudaimonia*, and the edited volume by Brent Strawn (2012) incorporated several chapters related to the theology of CSV. An entire special edition of the Journal of Positive Psychology was given over to articles from a Christian perspective, several of which addressed CSV (Kinghorn, 2016; Roberts, 2016; Titus, 2016). Furthermore, the work of Mark McMinn (2017) and Jonathan Pennington (2017) have directly addressed Christian approaches to CSV from the perspective of empirical psychology and New Testament Studies respectively.

With regard to particular character strengths, numerous authors either integrate or reference Christian sources. Everett Worthington's model of forgiveness has proven both elegant and effective (Worthington & Scherer 2004), with other authors contributing further to the forgiveness literature (Watts & Gulliford, 2004). Numerous publications on humility also draw extensively from Christian sources (e.g. Worthington, 2007; Krause, 2012). Bob Emmons' academic and popular texts on gratitude reference numerous Christian sources in making the case for the practice of gratitude and thankfulness (Emmons, 2013; Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Interdisciplinary scholar, Tom Oord has developed an elegant model of love which weaves together psychological, philosophical and theological thinking on the subject (Oord, 2010a, 2010b). Scioli's network view of hope refers in passing to numerous aspects of Christian theology (Scioli & Biller, 2009). While not a comprehensive listing, all of the above attest to the work being done in bringing CSV-related psychology to bear on understanding and living the Christian life.

There are therefore, many volumes that integrate Christian thought with a variety of CSV concerns, but this knowledge has not consistently filtered down to the person in the pew. A situation not helped by the fact that certain quarters of secular psychology have not been particularly positive about Christianity. Even a casual reader of the first few chapters of Peterson & Seligman (2004), will not fail to note several dismissive comments concerning the weaknesses and limitations of the Christian approach to CSV. Similarly, other leading volumes on CSV-related practices such as compassion, are peppered with unsympathetic swipes at Christian belief (Gilbert, 2010). Even CSV texts which cast traditional Christian sources in a positive light, may be difficult for some Christians to learn from due to their broad array of

spiritual influences (Niemic, 2014). While these issues pose no obstacle to the academic scholar, the lay Christian could be forgiven for failing to spot the underlying value in CSV.

This project therefore disseminates an approach to character development which draws on the CSV psychology literature, in a form that is theologically acceptable and easily accessible to Christian individuals and groups, without compromising the integrity of the psychological science that lies behind it. It combines biblical rationale with illustrations and applications drawn from psychological science.

Summary and Rationale of Character Course Content

To this end therefore the CCC has been designed in the light of interdisciplinary scholarship drawing from positive psychology, philosophy and biblical studies. It involves:

1. A systematic review of relevant empirical psychological literature concerning the strengths covered in the Character Course, with special attention paid to work that has overtly synthesised CSV psychology with Christian theology.
2. Lexicographic analysis of every biblical occurrence of a given strength, the Hebrew and Greek words translated as such, and narrative or thematic allusions to strengths, leading to an interpretative summary of these occurrences.
3. A review of exercises designed to develop psychological strengths accessed from a variety of sources: writers on spiritual disciplines, psychotherapeutic and coaching handbooks, websites of leading scholars, and the wider positive psychology literature.

These three strands provided the scholarly foundation from which the scripts and materials for the CCC were developed. The content covers eight character qualities: learning, hope, love, forgiveness, gratitude, humour, persistence and curiosity. The eight character strengths have been selected due to their strong association with wellbeing (Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2006), their theological significance (Worthington, 2003), and the existence of evidence-based interventions (Niemic, 2017). A summary of session content, lexicographic focus and selected interventions is provided in the table below.

#	Strength Focus	Session Content	Theological Focus	Strengths Intervention
1	Learning	The course begins by laying foundations for what is to follow. Learning is a lesser appreciated characteristic of Christian discipleship, yet both Jesus and Paul invite people to learn (<i>manthanō</i>) from them and the word disciple (<i>mathete</i>) shares this root. Difficulties in life also offer unsought but valuable opportunities for learning (<i>paideuō</i>). According to Peterson & Seligman (2004), lovers of learning feel that they are mastering a skill or filling	μανθάνω (manthanō) παιδεύω (paideuō)	Growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) Self-transcenden

		in gaps in knowledge. This strength sets the context for the rest of the course.	γυμνάζω (gymnazō)	ce (Yeager et al., 2014)
2	Hope	Hope is highly valued biblically, with over a dozen Hebrew words used to refer to the concept, and 90+ occurrences in noun or verb form in the NT (<i>elpis/elpizō</i>). It has been the subject of extensive CSV research (Lopez, 2013; Snyder, 1994; Scioli, 2009) and its practice is consistently linked with increased life satisfaction (Park et al., 2004). Hope is the belief in a better future either immediately or ultimately. There is a tension between psychological and theological concepts of hope (Bretherton, 2016; Watts, 2016), this session presents models and exercises related to both.	ἐλπίς (elpis)	Best possible life (Peters, 2010) Many pathways (Snyder, 1994; Lopez, 2013)
3	Love	This session covers Oord's (2010b) distinctions between ancient Greek terms for love mentioned or implied in the NT: <i>agape</i> (loving in spite of...), <i>eros</i> (loving because of...) and <i>philia</i> (loving with...). Fredrickson (2009) has presented the emotional quality of love as the ultimate form of positivity, and conducted extensive research on the benefits to psychological wellbeing of Lovingkindness Meditation (LKM- Fredrickson, 2013). Furthermore, Kaczor (2015) has offered useful advice on how LKM can be adapted as a form of intercessory prayer, which will be presented in this session.	ἀγάπη (agape) φιλέω (phileō)	Lovingkindness Prayer/Meditation (Oord, 2010; Fredrickson, 2013)
4	Forgiveness	The REACH model of Forgiveness (Worthington, 2003) represents a fully integrated approach to teaching forgiveness that combines biblical and psychological sources. This session will be largely devoted to presenting and practicing this model with additional material drawn from the insights of Forgiveness Therapy (Enright & Coyle, 1998), and interdisciplinary sources (Watts & Gulliford, 2004).	ἀφίημι (aphiēmi) χαρίζομαι (charizomai)	Compassionate reappraisal (Worthington, 2003; Witvliet et al., 2011)
5	Gratitude	Gratitude research is undoubtedly one of the success stories of CSV science so far, given the well-established relationship between relatively simple thankfulness exercises and increased physical, psychological and spiritual wellbeing (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Emmons & Kneezel, 2005). For	εὐχαριστέω (eucharistēō)	To whom, for what; Worst day vs today (Emmons, 2013)

		practical exercises this session will draw upon elements of the 21-day gratitude programme proposed by Emmons (2013). The biblical rationale will emphasise the crucial role of thankfulness in the psalms, at critical turning points in the gospels (at the feeding of the multitude, and the last supper), and in the epistles of Paul (50+ overt occasions of thankfulness).		
6	Humour	Humour, joy and playfulness are not always viewed as characteristically Christian and yet they occur often in the biblical canon. Irony and absurdity are well-used devices in the Hebrew wisdom tradition in Proverbs and the sayings of Jesus. Rabbinic scholars view the patriarch Abraham not just as a figure of faith, but also as a figure of fun, with whom God had the last laugh (Koestler, 2016). Christian writers like G.K. Chesterton and Soren Kierkegaard have stressed the importance of humour in the spiritual life. Psychologically, interventions designed to increase humour (Wellenzohn et al., 2016) have registered an increase in happiness in participants for up to six months. This session will aid Christians to view humour not just as a conversational hazard but as a worthwhile virtue (Beck, 2010).	ἀγαλλιάω (agalliaō) ἰλαρότης (hilarotēs) χαίρω (chairō)	Three funny things (McGhee, 2010) Intentionally playful, (Gander et al., 2013)
7	Persistence	Peterson and Seligman (2004) define persistence as 'finishing what one has started, keeping on despite obstacles... achieving closure' (p. 202). Similarly Angela Duckworth has written extensively on how persistence counts twice: turning talent into skill, and skill into achievement (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007). Persistence is therefore an appropriate strength to address towards the end of the course, as participants start to think beyond the programme. This session will combine psychological approaches to persistence with an examination of the four associated terms in NT Greek (<i>makrothymia</i> , <i>hypopherō</i> , <i>anechō</i> , and <i>hypomenō</i>), which taken together encourage patience and persistence in the face of internal and external pressure to give up.	ὑπομένω (hypomenō) ὑποφέρω (hypopherō) μακροθυμία (makrothymia)	Positive reappraisal (Diener et al., 2006; Duckworth, 2016) Obstacles are opportunities (Niemiec, 2014)
8	Curiosity	The final session intentionally looks to life beyond the programme by addressing the strength of curiosity. This is not traditionally viewed as a Christian virtue, but is detected in various parts of	ἐξετάζω (exetazō)	3 novel features

the gospel narratives in which questioning or exploration leads to deeper knowledge of Jesus (e.g. the Magi in Matthew 2:1-12, the disciples in John's Gospel). According to Kashdan (2009) curiosity is a positive attitude and a willingness to explore that which is unknown. It is empirically linked to personal growth in knowledge and relationships (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009). As a positive cognitive elaborative process, it is opposed to worry- a negative cognitive elaborative process. This contrast is paralleled in Matthew 6: 25-34, in which Jesus contrasts worry (*merimnāō*) with considered reflection (*katamanthanō*), an intensification of the word for learning (*manthanō*) encountered in session one. The course therefore ends where it began with an invitation to continue exploring and growing in the Christian life.

ζητέω
(zēteō)

(Langer,
2006)

πυνθάνομαι
(pynthano
mai)

Active
exploration
(Kashdan,
2009)

Each session is 90-minutes long and involves a short film, a discussion of relevant biblical passages and a practice (usually a ten-minute prayer exercise) for participants to perform daily between sessions. They are delivered in weekly small group meetings of 7-12 people, by an experienced and established small group leader in the participant church congregation, trained by the author. Accompanying materials for each session include a) a guidance sheet for group leaders to direct the discussion, b) the film script annotated with further relevant biblical and psychological material, and c) handouts for group participants summarising the session with details of home work exercises. All materials are made available online for participating churches.

The Dissemination and Evaluation Process

The Character Course is being evaluated and disseminated in three phases. Nine local groups overseen and supervised by the author, participated in a pilot version of the course in late 2018, allowing the identification of teething problems in the material and improvements in its delivery. Relatively small numbers of participants in the local pilot allowed the PL to observe the groups closely, and make adjustments to any aspects of the course that were found to be problematic or unclear.

For evaluation purposes all participants in the pilot completed online questionnaires to measure changes that occurred while participating in the course. In addition to ID code and demographics, participants completed pre-, post-course and six-week follow- up outcome measures of spiritual and psychological wellbeing. Relative changes in the character qualities practiced were assessed by the 96-item VIA Inventory of Strengths- mixed keyed (VIA-IS-M, McGrath, 2017). Reported changes in various functional aspects of spirituality were assessed by 30-items from selected subscales of the Spiritual Transformation Inventory (STI, Hall, 2012). Alterations in psychological wellbeing (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, achievement and health) was assessed by the 23-item PERMA-Profiler (PERMAH, Butler and Kern, 2016). In addition, given the potential social desirability bias inherent in completing questions about virtue, participants also completed the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale-Form C

(M-CSDS-C, Reynolds, 1982) as a control measure. The pilot groups are completing follow-up testing at the time of writing and analysis is about to begin.

The second phase of the evaluation, will disseminate the CCC to partners across the UK, in the first half of 2019. Between 30 to 50 UK church congregations have been informed of the study and have expressed an interest in taking part. In the first instance church leaders were approached with full briefing information, and participant information for the members of their congregation. The call for participants was then communicated to the congregation, and those who wished to join a group are given full briefing and consent information. It is estimated at present that each participating congregation will deliver between 1 and 20 groups, with a likely total of 100 groups and an overall estimate of 1000 participants nationally. Participating groups will be assigned to intervention or waiting-list control conditions. Some groups will allocated to 'business as usual' church-based groups while others complete the programme, with all participants having undergone the programme by July 2019. Psychometric measurement will be conducted online with all participants at pre- and post-intervention, and at follow-up intervals of 6-weeks, 6-months and 12-months.

In summary then this paper presents the initial research and development of The Character Course for Churches' (CCC), an attempt to contextualise and adapt psychological character strengths interventions for use with church-based small groups across the UK. It all too briefly summarises extensive interdisciplinary scholarship designed to integrate psychological and theological understandings of particular character strengths, with the intention of making them acceptable, poignant and useful to a Christian audience. The next phase of the project involves psychometric evaluation of the course when implemented with its target sub-culture. Consequently the theoretical considerations reported here form the underpinning of further empirical work yet to come.

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