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Bridging the Gap between Psychological and Cultural Perspectives on Virtue and Strength

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Abstract

One of the fundamental insights underlying Peterson and Seligman's (2004) explorations into the nature of character and virtue was that these concepts can be studied as both cultural and psychological phenomena. The initial development of the VIA classification of strengths and virtue was based largely on cultural studies, but subsequent work has focused primarily on the study of strengths as a set of psychological variables. These efforts have been advanced by the development of the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). Subsequent latent structure studies of the VIA-IS suggest a five-factor model that does not correspond well to cultural ideas of virtue. This presentation will outline limitations of the VIA-IS that may contribute to the lack of correspondence between self-reported virtue and cultural perspectives. Plans for revision of the VIA-IS to generate a psychometrically more defensible instrument will be discussed. In addition, this presentation will describe the development of a three-virtue model using three different psychological measures of character strengths in four samples encompassing 1,070,549 cases. It will be demonstrated that the same three-component model emerged across all data sets. In each case, evidence was generated suggesting caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control. Various aspects of the findings will be discussed in relation to the nature of moral action and character strengths. The three-virtue model of Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Control is proposed as a particularly intuitive basis for conceptualizing cultural virtues and the social task of encouraging their development. The implications of this model for bridging the gap between cultural and psychological perspectives on character and virtue will be discussed.

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Robert E. McGrath

One of the key insights underlying Peterson and Seligman's (2004) explorations into the nature of character and virtue was that these concepts can be studied as both cultural/moral entities and as psychological/individual difference constructs. From a measurement perspective, the importance of this duality has often been neglected. For example, it is a key attribute that distinguishes strengths and virtues from other individual difference variables such as the Five Factor Model of personality. Interventions that encourage the enhancement of personal strengths similarly must be understood both in terms of their contribution to flourishing and their contribution to the evolution of an optimal social system.

The initial development of the VIA classification of strengths and virtues was based largely on cultural studies (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), but subsequent work on the structure of this model has focused primarily on the study of strengths as a set of psychological variables. These efforts have been advanced by the development of the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), which is the most widely used measure of strengths and virtues having now been completed by over 1 million individuals around the world. Subsequent studies of the latent structure of the VIA-IS suggest a five-factor model that does not correspond well to cultural ideas of virtue (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010; Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012; Macdonald, Bore, & Munro, 2008; McGrath, in press; Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Andrea, & Seligman, 2008; Ruch et al., 2010; Shryack, Steger, Krueger, & Kallie, 2010; Singh & Choubisa, 2010). For example, McGrath conducted extensive factor analyses involving 458,998 U.S. residents who completed the VIA-IS online between 2005 and 2011 and found convergence on a five-factor solution reflecting Interpersonal Strengths, which overlapped

primarily with Peterson and Seligman's Humanity and Justice virtues; Emotional Strengths, which did not correspond well to any of the six virtues; Strengths of Restraint, which primarily encompassed strengths Peterson and Seligman associated with Courage and Temperance; Theological Strengths, corresponding to Transcendence; and Intellectual Strengths, which overlapped mainly with the Wisdom & Knowledge virtue.

This model was considered disappointing from the cultural perspective in that it corresponds poorly with common-sense, culturally shared preconceptions about the primary categories of virtuous functioning. Two primary hypotheses can be suggested for explaining this lack of correspondence between the cultural and psychological conceptions of virtue. The first, and more troubling, is that cultural and psychological models of virtue are distinct. The second is that the VIA-IS does not provide an ontologically accurate representation of the ways that individuals perceive their strengths cluster together.

This 40-minute presentation will address both of these hypotheses. The potential limitations of the VIA-IS will be addressed first. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), the only criterion for VIA-IS item selection was that the item did not compromise internal reliability for the scale. While this represents a desirable criterion, it is insufficient to assure adequate discriminant validity for the scales. In particular, item analyses have revealed that 45 (18.75%) of the 240 VIA-IS items correlated more highly with another scale than the scale on which they are scored. As a result, item-level factor analysis of the VIA-IS generated a model that differed from the intuitive model of virtues in a number of respects, including the emergence of a global positivity factor and a number of variations from expectations in the clustering of the items. In addition, some of the scales demonstrate insufficient variability in item difficulty. For example, across the 24 scales an average of 44.75% of respondents obtain a score of 4 or greater

on the 1-5 scale score range (items are averaged for purposes of producing scores), and on 8 scales more than 50% of respondents obtain a score of 4 or more. The presentation will include additional results from item response theory including test information. Both of these flaws could result in excessive correlation between the scales, and []. As a result of these investigations, I will be undertaking a revision of the VIA-IS in 2014-2105 in conjunction with the VIA Institute. In addition to the original criterion, items will be evaluated for reading level and comprehension, item difficulty, and prototypicality for the target scale. It will also introduce reverse-keyed items to the scoring of the VIA-IS.

The second portion of the presentation will focus on additional analyses conducted to evaluate whether the unintuitive five-factor solution is in fact specific to the VIA-IS. The study involved 1,069,451 adults who completed the VIA-IS online. A sample of 385 adults also completed a questionnaire called the Essential-Natural-Uplifting Inventory (ENUI) online. This involved participants reading brief descriptions of each strength and rating themselves on (1) how essential that strength is to who they are, (2) how natural and effortless it is to express that strength, and (3) how uplifting and energizing it is to express that strength. Finally, a sample of 713 adults completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire called the Perceptions of Personal Qualities that included a set of items based on the VIA-IS item set but with substantial revisions (3-4 items on each scale were rewritten in the negative, 39 items were deleted, and 12 were added).

The samples were analyzed Instead of using established traditional methods for setting the number of factors to retain, such as the scree test or parallel analysis, Goldberg's (2006) "top down" approach was used instead in order to look for consistencies across the samples. This approach involves conducting a series of PCAs, each using the same set of variables. The first

analysis estimates the first unrotated principal component. Each subsequent analysis adds one component, with varimax rotation of multi-component solutions, resulting in a hierarchical set of solutions for the latent structure of the variables. The goal is not to identify the exact number of reliable factors, but to see how respondent patterns evolve as the dimensional representation of their ratings is increased. Component scores are generated for each solution, allowing for the computation of correlations between components at different levels of specificity, though these statistics are usually only reported between components from adjacent solutions (e.g., between components from the two-component and three-component solutions). Goldberg proposed continuing this process until a component emerges that is not associated with the highest loading for any item, but most studies employing the top-down approach have used a more conservative stopping rule (e.g., Rentfrow, Goldberg, & Levitin, 2011; Wright et al., 2012), to keep the analysis manageable and presumably to avoid retaining factors of questionable reliability. In the present case, dimensionality was increased until the maximum reliable level as indicated by parallel analysis and the minimum average partial procedure (O'Connor, 2000; Velicer, Eaton, & Fava, 2000).

As expected, these analyses suggested retaining five factors in the VIA-IS samples. The same analyses suggested retaining only three factors for the ENUI and PPQ, and the hierarchical analysis indicated exactly the same three-factor solution in all samples. In each case, a first component representing good character splits into two components reflecting moral Goodness and Inquisitiveness. The former divides further into components reflecting Caring and Self-Control. Various aspects of the findings will be discussed in relation to the nature of moral action and character strengths. The three-component solution consisting of caring/respect, inquisitiveness/learning, and endurance/commitment—which can also be referred to

metaphorically as strengths of heart, head, and guts—is proposed as a particularly intuitive basis for conceptualizing cultural virtues and the social task of encouraging their development.

The final portion of the presentation will focus on speculations concerning the differences and similarities between the three primary virtues in terms of their evolutionary background, cultural roles, and complementary social value. The resulting model provides what may be a valuable framework for integrating personal evolution towards a more virtuous life and cultural efforts to encourage the emergence of virtue.

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