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Strength-based interventions: Their importance in application to the gifted

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Abstract

Positive psychology has revived psychology's abandoned interest in the study of morally positively valued traits (so-called character strengths) and virtues. We review literature generated on strength based approaches and focus on strength based interventions. There seems to be great potential in this approach for research in the field of giftedness and, of course, also when practically working with gifted children and adolescents. We highlight some ideas for future research directions.

Keywords: character strengths; positive psychology; positive psychology intervention

Introduction

This contribution addresses the challenges and possibilities of a strengths-based approach in working with gifted children from a *positive psychology* (PP) perspective. In its broadest sense, PP aims at studying what is best in people and focuses on emotions, traits, and institutions that make our lives most worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). When Martin Seligman was elected as president of the American Psychological Association (APA), he argued that psychology should focus – again – on other aspects than mental illnesses and diseases. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) note “Before World War II, psychology had three distinct missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent” (p. 6). They refer to Terman’s seminal studies on giftedness (1939) as an example of an early positive psychology approach. We will focus on one specific area of research in PP, namely research on morally positively valued traits (*character strengths*). There are hints on the relevance of positive psychology variables in giftedness at many different levels. For example, gifted students seem to differ from others by higher levels of eagerness to learn and academic self-concepts, and lower levels of test anxiety (Rost, 2000). This may provide ground for the assumption that strengths such as a *love of learning* or *curiosity* are of particular interest in this area. However, Rost (2000) demonstrated for German 4th graders that gifted children did not differ from the others in many other aspects, such as being integrated in the class and having many friends. Comparable results were found for social aspects of Finnish A-level students (Salmela & Uusiautti, 2015). They highlighted the importance of their close relationships for sharing and encouragement, and kindness and care for others. In his classic American long-term study, Terman and colleagues (1925, 1947, 1959) prospectively followed high IQ-students and could further demonstrate that they were emotionally stable, had fewer emotional difficulties, and were well-adjusted when adults. Again, this could be translated

into a strengths-based framework. Nevertheless, research also outlined depressive moods as well as emotional and social problems in gifted children (Berk, 2005). They were described as very sensible to other people's expectations and, therefore, vulnerable when being criticized. Further, they were perceived as less cooperative and stubborn because of being focused and concentrated. Thereby, the highest adjustment problems were observed in students having an extraordinary high IQs (180 and beyond; Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2005) or extreme levels of giftedness (Winner, 2000). To help extremely gifted students to overcome or deal with their problems and related troublesome social circumstances, strengths-based interventions could be a promising option. For students in general, research has already demonstrated that supporting students to utilize their strengths leads to happiness and well-being along with school satisfaction (Huebner, Gilman, Reschly, & Hall, 2009).

Positive Psychology, Virtue, and Character

It should be mentioned that PP is a relatively new discipline within psychology, but has a comparatively long history. One important earlier contribution has already been mentioned with Terman's studies, but also other work (mainly conducted in the field of humanistic psychology) needs to be mentioned. For example, in 1958 Marie Jahoda published a report to the Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health entitled "Current concepts of positive mental health." There she reviews literature on mental health and identifies various criteria for positive mental health (e.g., attitudes of an individual towards his own self, growth, development, or self-actualization, autonomy etc.). One of the most remarkable statements in her book is the notion that "[...] the absence of disease may constitute a necessary, but not a sufficient, criterion for mental health" (p. 15). Thus, the plea for studying the conditions that make the life well worth living (e.g., Maslow, 1968), or studies on the (psychological) meaning in life (e.g., Frankl, 1959), of life or personal (optimal) development (e.g., Rogers, 1963) is much older than the introduction of the term

“positive psychology” as it is being used now, but it surely has regained strength and attention by recent developments.

Three topics are at the center of positive psychology: (a) positive subjective experiences (e.g., happiness or pleasure); (b) positive individual traits (e.g., character strengths or talents); and (c) positive institutions (e.g., families or schools; Peterson, 2006). Over the past years, techniques have been developed for strengthening positive individual traits. Peterson and Seligman (2004) propose a classification system (the *Values-in-Action classification*) of twenty-four strengths and six virtues. Each strength is assigned to one virtue and the idea is that a virtuous life can be pursued by living the respective strengths; e.g., the virtue of wisdom can be achieved through creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective. Each of the strengths had to fulfill ten criteria (e.g., it is fulfilling; it is morally valued in its own right; its display does not diminish other people; it should be trait-like; and so on) to be included in the classification. The strengths are expected to be universally positively valued and that they provide keys to the “good life.” The *Values-in-Action Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) and the *Values-in-Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth* (VIA-Youth; Park & Peterson, 2006) are the most frequently used instrument for the self-assessment of the twenty-four strengths.

There are numerous studies that have provided support for the notion of a positive relationship between the VIA-strengths and different indicators of (subjective) well-being (e.g., Buschor, Proyer, & Ruch, 2013; Khumalo, Wissing, & Temane, 2008; Martínez-Martí & Ruch, 2014; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Gander, Proyer, Wyss, & Ruch, 2012; Ruch, Proyer, Harzer, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2010). However, character strengths not only seem to contribute to different indicators of subjective well-being, but also to a broad range of other positive outcomes, such as academic achievement (Park & Peterson, 2008, 2009; Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh,

2009) physical well-being (Proyer et al., 2014); job performance, positive experiences at work, calling, positive work-related behaviors (Avey, Luthans, Hannah, Sweetman, & Peterson, 2012; Gander et al., 2012; Harzer & Ruch, 2012); or meaning, but also a pleasurable and eudaimonically-oriented life-style (Buschor et al., 2013; Peterson et al., 2007; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). Research conducted with children and adolescents also points at a stable relationship of character strengths with subjective well-being (e.g., Gillham et al., 2011; Park & Peterson, 2006). Additionally, character strengths have been related to several positive school-related outcomes, such as school achievement (i.e., grades), positive classroom behavior (Wagner & Ruch, 2015; Weber & Ruch, 2011; Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2015), popularity (Park & Peterson, 2006), and social functioning at school (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). These studies confirm that character strengths play an important role in educational settings in several respects—not only directly relating to academic success, but also to supporting factors, such as classroom behavior and social environments.

Character Strengths-Based Interventions

Aside from these mostly correlational approaches, there is also the idea of using the strengths in positive psychology interventions; these are “[...] treatment methods or intentional activities that aim to cultivate positive feelings, behaviors, or cognitions” (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; p. 468). While most of the literature generated in the study of character strengths is correlational in nature, there are also approaches that have tested the effects on a causal level. For example, Proyer, Ruch and Buschor (2013) were interested in testing the assumption that those strengths that typically correlate most with well-being (i.e., curiosity, gratitude, hope, love, zest, plus humor) should primarily be targeted in strength-based intervention studies—in comparison to strengths that usually have the comparatively lowest relationships (i.e., appreciation of beauty and excellence, creativity, love of learning, modesty, perspective, plus kindness). In short, findings suggest that a 10-week group-

intervention focusing on the highly correlated strengths led to an increase in life-satisfaction in comparison with a group that underwent trainings for low correlated strengths. However, participants in the latter group also seemed to benefit from the program. An interesting side-finding of this study was that those participants benefitted most from the interventions (in both groups) that demonstrated an increase in self-regulation over the course of the program. The authors have argued that the structure of the program (i.e., regular meetings, “home work” assignments, etc.) might have facilitated the development of self-regulation and, thereby, contributed to the participants’ well-being. Numerous other studies exist that address specific indicators of positive psychological functioning such as the appreciation of beauty (Diessner, Rust, Solom, Frost, & Parsons, 2006), gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006a), or kindness (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; see also Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). A recent meta-analysis provides strong support for the notion that positive interventions (including interventions that are not explicitly based on strengths) can enhance well-being and reduce depressive symptoms (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) and others (e.g., Gander, Proyer, Wyss, & Ruch, 2013; Mitchell, Stanimirovic, Klein, & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2013; Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015) have shown that strengths-based and other interventions could also be successfully conducted in web-based self-administered settings. A well-replicated finding is that identifying one’s signature strengths (i.e., one’s core strengths) and using them in a new way over the course of one week is beneficial in the sense of an increase of happiness and amelioration of depressive symptoms. One important aspect is the question for long term effects. Some of the placebo-controlled studies conducted online have demonstrated effects for up to six months for one-week interventions—in fact, this seems rather surprising given the comparatively short time needed

for achieving such effects (e.g., writing down “three good things”/“three blessings” each night for seven consecutive days). A recent study has also shown that the way people respond to these types of interventions (e.g., liking of the intervention, early reactivity, etc.) predicts a robust amount of the variance in happiness (6%) and depression (9%) after a time span of 3.5 years (after completion of the intervention; Proyer, Wellenzohn, Gander, & Ruch, 2015).

Overall, it seems as if such positive psychology interventions hold great potential for contributing to people’s well-being.

Character Strengths-Based Interventions for the Gifted

We argue this line of research also has potential for the work with gifted children and adolescents. In her seminal review on the *origins and ends of giftedness*, Winner (2000) reviews literature on the social and emotional aspects of giftedness. She refers to studies showing that extreme levels of giftedness may be associated, among others, with isolation, nonconformity, or the tendency to hide own abilities in order to become more popular. It is not surprising that “academics” (e.g., being nerdy) is one of the domains covering potential reasons for being teased in Storch et al.’s (2004) Teasing Questionnaire. Hence, one might argue that a strength-based approach in working with the gifted may help them using their strengths more efficiently—in general and at school in particular. Winner (2000) has argued that “We need to intervene for the happiness and mental health of gifted students” (p. 166) and it seems as if a strength-based approach may be promising. It is further argued that programs that help gifted children and adolescents to foster and cultivate their strengths can be a resource and provide a challenge for them appropriate to their desire for learning and presumably also a challenge appropriate to their needs. Furthermore, strengths-based approaches have a potential to increase the experience of positive emotions—a key contributor to well-being (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001). Overall, tailoring interventions not only to the relative weaknesses, but also the strengths of the gifted seems important.

To the best of the knowledge of the authors there is no study published thus far on whether specific strengths are more pronounced among the gifted in comparison with those that are not gifted. Earlier studies have shown that it was possible to identify group specific profiles (e.g., for people with different work habits, Gander et al., 2011; for people with Asperger's syndrome, Samson & Antonelli, 2013; or for class clowns, Ruch, Platt, & Hofmann, 2015). Furthermore, there are first hints that certain strengths of wisdom, such as curiosity, open-mindedness, and love of learning, are positively related to intelligence, whereas certain strengths of temperance (i.e., modesty and self-regulation) and transcendence (i.e., spirituality, gratitude, and appreciation of beauty and excellence) demonstrate negative relations to intelligence (Proyer, Gander, & Ruch, 2015). Although these relationships are usually small (in terms of effect sizes), it would be interesting to see whether there are differences in the strengths-profiles between those gifted and those non-gifted as well—and whether such differences are limited to strengths assigned to a specific virtue (e.g., wisdom), or of broader nature. This would also help tailoring programs better to the needs of those particularly gifted. Although there are no studies on the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions among the gifted, a recent study has suggested that interventions administered in group-settings are *more* effective for those with higher abilities (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015a). Thus, they may be particularly appealing to gifted students.

It should be noted that such an account would not violate the idea of individual differences among the gifted. Also, information about the *dissimilarity* of a students' profile with the profile of his/her peers would be of interest. In comparison with traditional methods of direct instruction, *cooperative learning* facilitates positive attitudes towards peers, school, and oneself in students in general, it fosters building positive and supportive relationships, decreases levels of stress and anxiety, and further helps students to be empathetic by being able to take other peoples' perspectives (Felder & Brent, 1994; for some caveats in this line

of research see Fuchs and colleagues, 1998). Additionally, it was shown that cooperative learning strategies, such as the jigsaw puzzle (Hänze & Berger, 2007) may have a potential for facilitating strengths. Cooperative learning strategies foster students' needs for competence, autonomy, and social relatedness as posited by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within this framework context factors supporting those basic needs facilitate the natural process of intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. Therefore, educational programs for teachers that help them to create context factors contributing to the development of those strengths in gifted students may be beneficial. This also fits a basic plea for research in positive psychology, namely that there is still a need to translate research to practice to replace the problem-solving approach and to strengthen the idea of optimal functioning for all children in teachers and other school related professionals (Huebner & Hills, 2011).

Challenges and Possibilities in Interventions for the Gifted

Winner (2000) lists four dangers that gifted students have to face; namely, "(1.) The danger of pushing so hard that the intrinsic motivation and rage to master these children start out with become a craving for the extrinsic rewards of fame. (2.) The danger of pushing so hard that these children later feel they missed out on having a normal childhood. (3.) The danger of freezing a prodigy into a safe, technically perfect but noninnovative way of performing because this is what he or she has been rewarded for doing so well. (4.) The danger of the psychological wound caused by the fall from being a famous prodigy who can perform perfectly to a forgotten adult who can do no more than perform perfectly" (Winner, 2000; p. 166). We argue that strengths-based approaches have a potential in preventing such dangers from occurring. For example, Peterson and Seligman (2004) posit that signature strengths are pursued for their own sake (i.e., intrinsically motivated), they are also associated with a steep learning curve regarding topics associated with the strengths. Hence, using signature strengths may not only be a path toward well-being, but may also help gifted

children and adolescents to stay intrinsically motivated over a longer period of time. Also, the identification and usage of one's own strengths may contribute to the impression of having a "normal childhood" in the sense of experiencing *authenticity* (a strength in itself), in the sense of being true to one's own personality traits—be it for the pursuit of one's talents, or in a broader sense when being oneself. Knowledge about and use of one's own signature strengths should also enable personal growth, but further contribute to the experience of positive emotions (when using these strengths). The latter have been found to broaden the action and thought repertoire, but also to facilitate building up more resources (personal, physical, and/or social; see Fredrickson, 2001). With respect to Winner's fourth danger, one might argue that strength-based approaches may also be helpful to use resources developed as a child or an adolescent in later life and may also be seen as a resource that can be used for joint personal development throughout one's life. We do not want to argue that strength-based approaches are a *one fits it all* approach to all dangers listed by Winner or other problems that the gifted may face, but that these approaches could be a contributor to their well-being and, more generally speaking, mastery of tasks in everyday life and for educational and professional challenges.

Paragons of Character

Many authors (e.g., Lubinski & Benbow, 2000) have argued that an individual-differences approach when thinking about giftedness in terms of academic and non-academic attributes is important. We argue that strengths should not only be seen as additional variables that might positively contribute to the development of giftedness (e.g., by facilitating learning or enabling creative productivity; Renzulli, 2012), but that there might also be paragons and highly gifted individuals with respect to *character strengths*. In fact, one of the criteria a trait had to fulfill to be included in the VIA-classification was the existence of paragons of the respective strength (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In similar vein

as it has been argued for other areas of giftedness (e.g., Pfeiffer, 2008; Renzulli, 2002; Sternberg, 1997) those excelling in one or more strengths should show their giftedness with no or minimal training of the respective strength(s) – yet their (signature) strengths may help them to keep (intrinsically) motivated to pursue their particular set of strengths. We might think of people that excel in their use of strengths by being exceptional leaders (e.g., leadership, teamwork, fairness), or that excel academically (e.g., by nurturing their curiosity, creativity, or love of learning), or that would be recognized for their humanistic engagement (e.g., kindness, love, or social intelligence). The question arises on how these people can be nurtured and supported—and what could be expected from such interventions. Programs such as the ones mentioned, but also single authors (e.g., Magyar-Moe, 2009; Parks & Schueller, 2014; Peterson, 2006) point to interventions for cultivating each of the strengths put forward by Peterson and Seligman (2004). Linkins and colleagues (2015) argue that traditional character education programs focus on a narrow subset of strengths (and virtues only), and note that “[...] the purpose of character education is not to enforce or impose, but rather to reveal, elicit, and nurture existing strengths” (p. 65). The *Positive Psychology for Youth Program* (e.g., Gillham et al., 2013; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; see also Linkins et al., 2015; Park & Peterson, 2009) seems to encompass such a broader approach. It has also been argued that fostering strengths contributes to well-being not only when focusing on one’s signature strengths, but also when focusing on one’s lesser strengths depending on overall virtuousness as a moderator of the effects (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015). Hence, there are programs that may be used for supporting, children, adolescents, but also adults in their development of strengths—not only for their personal benefit (e.g., well-being, flourishing, personal growth, their “social capital”), but also presumably for the good of a broader group of people (e.g., other pupils in the classroom,

work-colleagues, friends, partners), or even larger entities (e.g., schools, families, companies, communities).

Suggestions for Practice

Of course, the question emerges on how these ideas could be translated into practice. We propose a sequential strategy in four steps. In Step 1 (*knowing one's strengths*), all children in a class should get to know their strengths; this means completing subjective measures for character strengths, or conducting structured interviews for identifying the strengths profile and the signature strengths. Step 2 (*sharing common experiences*) should help the pupils and teachers to find a common language and increase the awareness of the strengths of everyone involved. Step 3 (*implementation of interventions*) might entail interventions aimed at the signature strengths of each individual (for further strengthening the strengths, increasing well-being and ameliorating depressive symptoms, and becoming more true to one's inner self), and/or addressing strengths that are particularly relevant in the classroom (see Wagner & Ruch, 2015; Weber, & Ruch, 2012; Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2015). Finally, Step 4 (*evaluation*) might consist of feedback circles that help evaluating the usefulness of these interventions and the strength-based approach in general.

Work of the Zurich-based group (e.g., Ruch et al., 2015; Wagner & Ruch, 2015; Weber, & Ruch, 2011; Weber et al., 2014) has shown that character strengths play a role in school; for example, when identifying positive classroom behaviors, or strengths that are of particular importance in school—for both, academic success, but also personal and social development. Taken together with research generated in other groups and work that has been done on strength-based interventions, the notion of considering character strengths in working with the gifted seems a promising approach for future research and practice.

Of course, this can only be seen as a rough proposal and a thorough investigation of the strength profile of gifted children and adolescents would be a first step in narrowing down

particular interventions tailored to their needs. We see a great potential in supplementing existing programs with a strengths-based approach and hope that this proposal increases interest in researchers and practitioners in the field. Given that positive psychology is a comparatively young discipline within psychology, first results seem promising and encourage further work in this field.

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