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Teaching Applied Positive Psychology:

Character Strengths Only or Strengths and Relative Weaknesses?

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Abstract

When teaching applied positive psychology in the classroom, should professors focus only on developing students' highest character strengths, or should they address both strengths and relative character weaknesses? After completing the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), seventy-six psychology students were randomly assigned to develop 2 character strengths or to work on developing 1 strength and 1 relative weakness. Combined, these groups showed significant gains on the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) compared to a no-treatment group. There was, however, no significant difference between the two-strengths and the one-strength, one-weakness groups. Therefore, a focus on either character strengths only, or on strengths and relative character weaknesses, appears warranted.

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Most of the literature that has emerged in positive psychology in the last decade has emphasized the importance of focusing on developing the *strengths* of clients in both clinical and non-clinical populations, rather than a sole focus on their problems and weaknesses. A variety of positive psychology authors, at some point in their texts, appear to advocate exclusively working on strengths (Carr, 2004, pp. 1-2; Hodges & Clifton, 2004, p. 256; Kauffman & Scoular, 2004, p. 293; Seligman, 2003, p. xv). In the context of teaching courses on positive psychology, Baylis (2004) notes, “There is mounting support for the idea that giving full rein to such strengths [signature strengths from the VIA-IS] would be a far more productive and personally rewarding strategy than focusing on trying to shore up your weaknesses” (p. 211). Although the general emphasis in positive psychology is on strengths, the need for balance in regard to developing both established strengths *and* weaknesses is often recommended (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003, p. 7; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006, p. 7; Lopez, Snyder, & Rasmussen, 2003, p. 5; Peterson, 2006a, p. 46; Peterson & Park, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 4).

We strive to model effective positive psychology interventions when teaching our courses. We also aim to develop our students’ psychological lives through our course activities. Over the last few years we have asked students to complete the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and have used the information from that inventory to tailor strength building exercises for some of the top 5 strengths of each student as part of our course methodology. As one might expect, perhaps due to fundamental negative bias

(see a review of this and related concepts in Wright & Lopez, 2002), our students are generally at least as eager to know their relative character weaknesses as their strengths on the VIA-IS. These reactions led us to wonder if our students' life satisfaction would increase more by focusing only on their already established character strengths, or would they gain more from working on both their established strengths *and* relative character weaknesses? After surveying the literature, we could find no studies that answered this question in regard to working with the character strengths identified in the VIA-IS, and thus we designed and carried out the study described below.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were undergraduates enrolled at Lewis-Clark State College. The intervention group began with N = 81 students (77% female; 81% euroamerican; 71% Christian) and constituted one sophomore and two junior level classes (PSYC 205 Developmental Psychology, PSYC 305 Adult Development, and PSYC 321 Educational Psychology; all taught by the first author). The comparison group began with N = 50 (64% female; 94% euroamerican; 64% Christian) and comprised two sophomore classes (PSYC 205 Developmental Psychology and PSYC 226 Biological Bases of Behavior; taught by the second author). Based on the pre-tests, *t* tests showed there was no significant difference between the students in the comparison group and the intervention group on the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985).

We randomly divided *each* of the three courses of students that constituted the intervention group into two experimental groups: an N = 37 two-strengths group, and an N = 44

one-strength, one-weakness group. These two experimental groups showed no significant difference in their pre-test *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) scores;  $t(74) = .272$ . There was attrition of two participants from the two-strengths group and three participants from the one-strength, one-weakness group.

The comparison group classes began with 50 students, and 32 completed the SWLS post-test (attrition was due to dropping courses or missing the post-test class day); however  $t$ -tests showed no significant difference between SWLS pre-test scores of the 18 who dropped out and the 32 who completed ( $t(48) = -.02, p = .98$ ). The attrition in the intervention group included 5 of the 81; those who dropped had significantly lower SWLS pre-test scores than the 76 who completed their weekly strength logs and the SWLS post-test ( $t(79) = 2.41, p = .02$ ).

### *Measures*

*Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman 2004; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson, 2006a). The VIA-IS is a self-report questionnaire with 240 items using a 5-point Likert scale. The VIA-IS taps 24 different character strengths, which are derived from 6 universal virtues (Wisdom & Knowledge, Courage, Humanity/Love, Justice, Temperance, Transcendence); each strength is represented by 10 items on the questionnaire; and provides the participant with a ranking of their 24 strengths. The 24 subscales all have decent internal consistency ( $\alpha > .70$ ), and temporal stability (4 month test-retest correlations  $r \sim .70$ ). A variety of studies using the VIA-IS are revealing its promising usefulness and validity (e.g., Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, 2006; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006).

*Satisfaction With Life Scale* (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS consists of five items scored on a 7-point Likert scale, created to reflect life satisfaction

and well-being as a whole; it has good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and temporal stability (2-month test-retest  $r = .82$ ), and has been validated through a wide range of studies (Pavot & Diener, 1993). In the current study the SWLS had an  $\alpha = .84$ . Our  $N = 131$  participants were in the average range on the SWLS for American college students, with a pretest mean of 23.6 ( $SD = 6.3$ ) (viz. Pavot and Diener, 1993).

### *Procedure*

Participants in the intervention group completed the *VIA-IS* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the SWLS (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) at the beginning of the Spring semester 2006. The on-line *VIA-IS* provided a ranking of the 24 character strengths for each participant. The intervention participants were randomly assigned to develop either two strengths or one strength and one relative weakness. Members of the two-strengths group then chose 2 strengths from their top 5 character strengths to focus on for 12 weeks. Members of the one-strength, one-weakness group selected 1 strength from their top 5 character strengths and also selected 1 character strength from their lowest, or weakest, 5 character strengths to focus on for the 12 week intervention.

The next 12 weeks the participants wrote “strengths logs,” one group focusing on the use of two strengths, and the other group on a strength and a weakness. Once a week the participants would write four short paragraphs. They would respond with two short paragraphs to the following two prompts for one of their strengths: a) “Describe an event or occurrence in **the past** when you used this strength successfully; or describe hearing about or seeing someone else use this strength successfully (friend, relative, movie, book, etc.)”; and b) “Describe a plan or situation for **the upcoming week** in which you will apply this strength.” Then, if they had been

randomly assigned to work on two of their strengths, they would write two more paragraphs about their other strength, using those same two prompts. If they had been randomly assigned to work on one strength and one weakness, then their second two paragraphs would address these same two prompts in regard to the weakness that they had chosen to work on during the intervention. All members of the intervention group were invited to complete these four paragraphs every week for twelve weeks; both intervention groups completed the logs at a rate of 97%. The first author of this study read these weekly logs, wrote encouraging comments, and returned them weekly. Ten points of assignment credit was given for each completed log (all three courses required 950 points for an A). At the end of the semester,  $N = 35$  of the group working on two strengths completed the SWLS post-test;  $N = 41$  of the group working on one weakness and one strength also did so.

Students in the comparison group simply completed the SWLS at the beginning and the end of the semester, during the same weeks that the intervention group completed them, and did not write any weekly strength logs.

### Results

The two-strengths group showed an average gain of 1.26 points on the SWLS ( $SD = 4.27$ ), and the one-strength, one-weakness group showed a gain of 2.10 points on the SWLS ( $SD = 4.06$ ); this difference was not significant:  $t(74) = -.88$  ( $p = .382$ ).

The intervention group in general ( $N = 76$ ) showed 1.7 points of gain on the SWLS ( $SD = 4.15$ ), whereas the comparison group ( $N = 32$ ) lost an average of .78 points on the SWLS, with  $t(106) = 2.86$ , which was a significant difference ( $p = .005$ , two tailed; effect size medium,  $\eta^2 = .07$ ).

## Discussion

In regard to the main question this study addressed, it appears there is equal advantage to our students' life satisfaction in assigning them to either work only on their established strengths, or on their strengths *and* relative weaknesses. Based on this study, working on weaknesses is not a disadvantage to life satisfaction, at least when coupled with working on a character strength as well. In terms of teaching applied positive psychology we now have some evidence that, at least in terms of life satisfaction, it does not seem to matter whether we assign positive psychology exercises to focus only on strengths or on strengths and weaknesses. Philosophically there may be some wisdom to addressing both strengths and weaknesses (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Lopez, Snyder, & Rasmussen, 2003; Peterson, 2006a; Peterson & Park, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), even though empirically there appears to be no advantage, at least in terms of life satisfaction as measured by the SWLS. Performing a similar study, but using a happiness scale, instead of the SWLS, may be worthwhile. Peterson (2006b), however, when reviewing happiness and satisfaction with life scales, including the SWLS, considered life satisfaction scales to be both stable and "sensitive enough to capture changes in life circumstances" (pp. 84-85).

The two combined intervention groups showed significantly more gain in life satisfaction than a comparison group that was not assigned to work on their character strengths or weaknesses. However, this must be interpreted cautiously – we cannot attribute the result to working on the strengths or weaknesses per se. It may have been due to a Hawthorne effect of the intervention group students receiving more personal attention than the comparison group. Additionally, as there was no random assignment to the intervention and comparison groups,

causal claims are not possible.

In future studies of this kind it would benefit the research design to include an intervention group that only worked on their relative character weaknesses. It would also be beneficial to include a placebo group that wrote something not-about-strengths weekly and got warm comments from a professor, once a week for twelve weeks, to see if simply writing and receiving encouragement increases life satisfaction as much as working on character strengths (cf. Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, about simply writing childhood memories as the comparison condition).

We have learned that our students will gain as much life satisfaction from working on strengths and weaknesses, as working only on strengths. We have also learned that it appears that students who write logs about past and future use of weaknesses and/or strengths, receive encouraging feedback on those logs, and earn course credit doing so, may make significantly more gain in life satisfaction than those who don't.

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Notes

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