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Robert E. McGrath

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Refining our understanding of the VIA Classification: Reflections on papers by Han, Miller, and Snow

Robert E. McGrath
School of Psychology, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, NJ, USA

ABSTRACT
Han, Miller, and Snow have written three thoughtful critiques of the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues. In this response, I emphasize five points. First, I suggest the concept of practical wisdom may be understood in terms of three VIA strengths: prudence, judgment, and perspective. Second, recognizing that the VIA Classification is a structural model of individual traits, rather than a moral theory, can address some concerns about the model, including its failure to account for the unity of the virtues. Third, I review a three-virtue model that has emerged in recent research on the VIA strengths may provide essential elements for a taxonomy of virtue. Fourth, I raise several issues associated with the application of the VIA Classification to moral education. Finally, though the model demonstrates substantial generalizability across Westernized populations, research in traditional indigenous cultures remains insufficient. I conclude with a series of questions for future research.

The development of the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) was a major milestone in the psychological study of character strengths and virtues. As with any complex model, its continued vitality depends on regularly challenging and testing the set of hypotheses that comprise the model. In some cases, these efforts merit rethinking elements of the model. In others, they can also require that we reconsider long-held beliefs about the nature of virtue. Hyemin Han, Christian Miller, and Nancy Snow’s articles raise a series of important questions about the model. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to reflect on and respond to their thoughtful comments.

In thinking about how to respond to those comments, I realized my primary goal should be to clarify what the VIA Classification is, what it can and cannot do, and the ways in which it can be misused. In pursuit of this goal, I found myself returning frequently to the very first sentence in the very first article that outlined in detail the goals of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Their abstract began by describing positive psychology as ‘a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions’ (p. 5). The VIA Classification was the ultimate product of the effort to found ‘a science of … positive individual traits.’ That article is now 18 years old, but their phrase still conveys essential information about what the VIA Classification was intended to achieve.

Specifically, at least four propositions follow from the concept of a science of positive individual traits that will help to address the issues raised by the three commentators:

(1) Traits in psychology are constellations of behaviors, motivations, and attitudes. These are relatively stable but not invariant in an individual. Though the VIA Classification was informed by concepts in moral philosophy and other fields, the primary goal of the Classification has always been the characterization of people. It is a structural model, not a model of moral functioning.

(2) The structural integrity of traits is demonstrated by their tendency to have reliable relationships with each other. These reliable relationships allow for the description of hierarchical structures, in which more global latent constructs are used to understand the relationship patterns among the more specific observed variables (e.g. Mõttus, Kandler, Bleidorn, Riemann, & McCrae, 2017).

(3) The model is intended to capture the entire domain of socially positive individual traits. This domain includes a number of traits that are
considered moral, as well as socially facilitative traits that are not strictly moral. This is positive psychology, not moral psychology.

(4) The Classification is intended as the starting point for a scientific model. It encompasses a set of interrelated hypotheses, each of which is open to corroboration or modification.

I will start with two themes that emerged across the papers. The first is one of the most common criticisms that has been leveled against the model by critics, the omission of the concept of practical wisdom.

Shared themes

Practical wisdom

Phronesis, often translated as ‘practical wisdom,’ is the Aristotelian virtue having to do with the ability to balance competing moral principles and situational factors in deciding on an appropriate behavioral choice. All three commentators follow Aristotle’s lead in assuming that practical wisdom is an important regulatory factor in applied ethics. Snow calls it an ‘executive virtue’; Han suggests practical wisdom might be added to the hierarchical VIA Classification as a ‘second-order virtue,’ by which he seems to mean a virtue that rests in a superordinate position to the current virtues (see Banicki, 2014, for a similar argument); Miller cites two prior authors who noted its absence from the model, but they are not alone (e.g. Fowers, 2008; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

The VIA Classification was an attempt to generate a comprehensive list of basic constructs that can be used to characterize positive functioning, so it is not surprising to find that advocates of an Aristotelian framework would criticize the omission of practical wisdom. However, before grafting practical wisdom onto the model, I would suggest an alternative approach should be considered. This approach suggests the existing model is capable of accounting for practical wisdom, and can do so in a way that contributes to our understanding of what practical wisdom entails.

Aristotle treated practical wisdom as a discrete virtue, and subsequent discussions of the concept have tended to consider that decision uncontroversial. The effort to develop a model of basic positive attributes creates the opportunity to ask a question that probably has not received as much attention as it should have: Is practical wisdom in fact homogeneous, or is it better to think of it as a combination of more elemental concepts?

Thinking about this latter question in terms of the 24 VIA strengths, I would suggest that practical wisdom could be conceptualized as the convergence of at least three more basic skills. The first and most fundamental is prudence, the ability to delay action for purposes of deeper reflection in spite of one’s emotional reactions to events. In fact, the term prudence has sometimes been translated as prudence rather than as practical wisdom (e.g. Bartlett & Collins, 2011).

Once action is delayed, two other strengths must be employed before the resulting decision is likely to demonstrate practical wisdom. The first is judgment, the ability to identify critical details in a situation necessary for making an optimized decision. The second is the ability to see the larger context for one’s actions, including the moral background to the situation. This ability is represented in the VIA Classification by perspective.

This analysis suggests that practical wisdom requires the ability to pause even in the face of strong emotions, and then to evaluate both the micro and macro issues of importance in a situation before acting; all three are necessary for practical wisdom. The person who moves deliberatively but deliberates poorly; the person who has a great capacity for evaluating situations when calm but acts impulsively when the passions are aroused; the person who thinks in big terms but misses the specifics, the person who gets caught up in the small details – none of these individuals is likely to be perceived as strong in practical wisdom. It may have been an error to omit practical wisdom from the VIA Classification. However, it may also be the case that the error is in assuming practical wisdom is best conceived as a homogeneous skill.

One possible response to this alternative formulation is that the model still fails to account for practical wisdom because the constellation of prudence, judgment, and perspective has never emerged as a coherent structure in any latent structural analysis of the VIA strengths, as one might expect given the importance of the concept to moral functioning. There are at least two possible explanations why this triad does not hang together empirically.

The first possibility is that we have not conducted the appropriate statistical tests to detect practical wisdom. Perhaps the presence of practical wisdom tends to encourage a generally virtuous approach to the world. This would suggest that all or almost all of the strengths would be present to a high degree in practically wise individuals so that a discrete practical wisdom factor represented by just those three strengths would never emerge. However, in a previous publication, I
evaluated the general factor underlying the complete set of VIA strengths (McGrath, 2015b), which I referred to as good character. Across three samples, the triad of prudence, judgment, and perspective never emerged as the strongest markers of that first factor. To date, we have no empirical evidence to suggest practical wisdom.

The second possibility, and the one that I think applies, follows from my proposition (1) above. The VIA Classification was intended as a structural model of character traits in individuals, not as a model of moral functioning in society. The model is comprised of a set of descriptive rather than normative claims; it attempts to describe what is, not what ought to be. Even if the three strengths comprising practical wisdom are an important constellation in the philosophy of ethics or the understanding of moral behavior, that does not ensure its empirical emergence as a common combination of traits, or as an executive or overarching virtue in latent structural analyses. The failure to see a pattern consistent with practical wisdom emerge in studies of the VIA strengths in no way mitigates the potential importance of practical wisdom as a moral concept, nor does it represent a shortcoming of the classification as a structural model. These goals are distinct, and the model should not be criticized for failing to match expectations based on philosophical considerations.

This distinction between the structural VIA Classification and a true moral theory is an essential one for understanding where psychologists and moral thinkers are likely to diverge in their emphases. To cite another example not raised in the three papers to which I am responding, several authors have considered the model incompatible with the proposition often called the unity or reciprocity of the virtues (Banicki, 2014; Fowers, 2008; Vaccarezza, 2017). This proposition suggests that all the virtues must be present to a substantial degree for a person to be considered ‘virtuous’ (a word I put in quotes for reasons that will be addressed in my discussion of Miller’s threshold concern). However, the unity of the virtues as a hypothesis about the nature of morality is in no way incompatible with the hypothesis that the virtues can be relatively independent attributes of a person. Contrary to claims that the model is inconsistent with the unity of the virtues, the VIA Classification as a structural model has nothing to say about the unity of the virtues as a moral concept.

**The hierarchy of virtues and strengths**

The failure to account for the unity of the virtues is not the only criticism that has been leveled against the Classification’s virtue model. Snow (footnote 2) raised concerns about the equation of the variables used to cluster the strengths with virtues, which she correctly noted is unique to the VIA Classification. Miller (the ‘eliminating virtue concern’) suggested eliminating the virtue component from the VIA Classification entirely.

As indicated in proposition (2), one of the important features of trait models in psychology has to do with clarifying the hierarchical structure of those traits. The hierarchical model of the VIA Classification is distinctive in two ways. The first is the association of the higher-order structures with virtues. The second is the use of conceptual analysis to both identify the virtue and to cluster the strengths according to those virtues.

In terms of the latter, as the commentators note, the evidence to date has not been promising. Prior studies with adults suggest 3–5 latent factors underlying the VIA strengths (see McGrath, 2014), and solutions were inconsistent with the six-virtue model. To be fair, though, Peterson and Seligman (2004) were clear the conceptual classification of the strengths according to the six virtues was intended only as a starting point for empirical investigation:

> We urge the reader not to be too concerned about the details of how we classified the 24 strengths under the six virtues. … if the data suggest – for example – that playfulness belongs elsewhere because of its co-occurrence with other strengths, we will gladly move it (p. 31).

Their approach to the six-virtue organization was clearly pretty casual. It was primarily intended as a starting point for the development of an empirically based model describing the hierarchical structure of positive functioning, because we had no prior information on this matter, rather than as a defining hypothesis for the Classification (M. E. P. Seligman, personal communication, 25 May 2018).

While the specifics of the hierarchical model have not held up well, the hypothesis that the clustering of strengths should reflect more abstract categories of socially valued behavior – and that these categories are therefore likely to be identified as virtues across multiple cultural traditions – may well be one of the most innovative aspects of the VIA Classification. Furthermore, subsequent research, while still in its infancy, has emerged that supports the hypothesis. Disappointed that research with the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) did not generate results consistent with cultural concepts of the virtues, I (McGrath, 2015b) explored whether this finding might be idiosyncratic to the VIA-IS. In fact, it turned out that a reliable three-factor model emerged across multiple measures of the VIA Classification (see
also McGrath, Greenberg, & Hall-Simmonds, 2018). What was particularly intriguing was that the three factors – labeled Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Control – are also implicit or explicit in various perspectives on the nature of virtue (e.g., Curren, 2013; Worthington & Hampson, 2011; Wright, 1907), in several accounts of key skills for personal success (e.g., National Research Council, 2012), and in accounts of how we are judged by others (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). That is, these three variables are consistent with Aristotle’s characterization of virtues as attributes that contribute to both social and personal flourishing. The hypothesis that these three dimensions provide a particularly useful foundation for a model of virtue probably would never have been proposed without Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) remarkable equation of the latent structure of strengths with the social concept of virtue.

Miller also suggests the elimination of the virtue component in the VIA Classification because no measurement tools were developed specific to the virtues. It is true that Peterson and Seligman (2004) elected not to create virtue scales. However, the absence of measurement instruments would seem to be a weak justification for eliminating a portion of a model; it would make more sense to develop such measures and then evaluate whether the resulting variables serve useful purposes. The VIA-IS has recently been revised (McGrath, 2017b), and now includes measures of both the Peterson and Seligman (2004) six-virtue model and the McGrath (2015b) three-virtue model. These virtue scales can also be administered as standalone instruments, creating the potential for future studies to focus specifically on VIA virtues. Such studies could provide a more objective basis for decisions about the practical value of the virtues in the psychological study of positive traits.

**Christian miller’s wide-ranging concerns**

Miller raises a number of other well-considered methodological and philosophical concerns about the VIA Classification. Because of the number of issues, each will have to be addressed only briefly.

**The incompleteness concern**

Miller raises the question of whether the model is complete, a question that clearly deserves further investigation. However, it is important to consider the degree to which completeness is a reasonable goal. Scientists have become more sophisticated about the limitations of taxonomies in recent years. For example, Doolittle and Bapteste (2007) have argued that an exact representation of a tree of life on Earth is probably impossible, and substantial disagreement remains among biologists about the number of domains and kingdoms needed to build that tree. Objections have frequently been raised about the completeness of the five factor model of personality (e.g., Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2004; Paunonen & Jackson, 2000), perhaps the best validated taxonomy in psychology. For concepts that are psychological, cultural, and semantic such as character and virtue, the potential for a true and complete model is vanishingly small. Rather than striving for completeness, the appropriate goals for the VIA Classification is more accurately represented in the wording of proposition (3) above: the model is ‘intended to capture the full breadth of positive individual traits,’ with no claim that it has achieved or could achieve that intention. As with most taxonomies, the inability to assure complete accuracy need not undermine the model’s practical and scientific usefulness.

**The missing vice concern**

It is true that the model does not include vice, but I have to wonder why that is a problem. The model was always about positive traits, though Peterson (2006, Seligman, 2015) did introduce the hypothesis that psychopathology could be understood in terms of misuse of the strengths (see Hall-Simmonds & McGrath in this same issue for more details). I turn again to proposition (1) above: the VIA Classification is a way to describe people’s patterns of positive social functioning; it is not intended to provide a comprehensive model of moral functioning. Furthermore, if vice is defined primarily by the misuse of a virtue, then a dimensional account of the strengths should be able to handle the issue of vice effectively without dramatically expanding the number of concepts. An example is recent research on the extent to which people overuse and underuse strengths (Freidlin, Littman-Ovadia, & Niemiec, 2017; Hsee & Ruan, 2016; but see also Wiese et al., in press).

**The conflict concern**

The concern that strengths (and virtues) can sometimes be in conflict also seems beside the point for a structural model. This is no different than saying sometimes it is best to act one way and sometimes it is best to act another, a proposition implicit to Aristotle’s concept of practical wisdom. What matters for the VIA Classification as a model of individual traits is whether you can characterize someone as ‘generally’ one way or another.
The unclear connection to virtue concern

Miller attempts to parse how Peterson and Seligman (2004) intended virtues and strengths to be related to each other. It is interesting to see a non-psychologist struggle with this issue, because psychologists generally find the nature of the relationship between latent and manifest variables, or between subordinate and superordinate variables, uncontroversial. Psychosocial perceptions of ourselves and others frequently occur at multiple levels of specificity. Within the five factor model, individuals can be described in terms of broad domains (e.g. conscientiousness) and more specific facets of those domains (e.g. orderliness or self-discipline), recognizing that different levels of specificity in description tends to be useful in different contexts. Most psychologists would probably agree with Miller that the relationship between hierarchically arranged constructs is best understood in terms of his explanation (vi): virtues exist in the model as aggregates for the character strengths. However, where Miller suggests the simultaneous existence of virtues and strengths raises ‘tricky philosophical questions,’ psychologists tend simply to accept their existence as useful constructs in person perception and description.

The misclassification concern

The development of the VIA Classification using conceptual methods undoubtedly created the potential for errors in the hierarchical structuring of the strengths. When the VIA Classification was developed, there was little empirical guidance on what would be an optimal model of strengths and how those strengths cluster. As noted in the discussion of the VIA hierarchy above, the VIA Classification was intended only as a starting point to allow for empirical investigations into the structure of character. Earlier comments on the potential for a perfect model in my response to the incompleteness concern apply here as well.

The factor analysis concern

The concern about inconsistencies and unexpected findings in factor analytic results may potentially have been resolved by the emergence of the three-factor model. McGrath (2015b) concluded that those inconsistencies are potentially an artifact of the original VIA-IS, and other measures of the 24 strengths have tended to converge on a three-factor solution. Even data from the VIA-IS matches this pattern when constrained to three factors (McGrath et al., 2018). The newly revised version of the VIA-IS (McGrath, 2017b) was developed with greater homogeneity in item content and greater discrimination between the scales in mind. It will be interesting to see whether the three-factor model emerges more strongly in this newer version. Research is underway to test this possibility.

The neglect of motivation concern

It is true that the VIA-IS items generally do not address issues of motivation. However, Miller acknowledges the potential limitations of a self-report instrument that attempts to gauge the motivations for prosocial behaviors. It is inherent to the nature of strengths and virtues that personal sentiments, social approval, and regulatory bodies will all tend to point to similar behavioral choices. Under these circumstances, can we really say how much we are acting out of love for the good over less worthy motivations? Miller cited Batson (2011) as a guide to how to sort out motivations, but Batson’s own conclusion (Chapter 4) is that self-report cannot be trusted as a methodology for measuring prosocial motivation.

The magnitude of agreement with statements reflecting each strength on the scale from Very Much Like Me to Very Much Unlike Me can also be considered a proxy, albeit a very indirect one, for level of motivation. First, the degree to which each item characterizes the respondent is information likely to be more readily available to the respondent than the motivations for those actions, so this type of rating should tend to be more accurate than ratings of motivations. Second, it is reasonable to assume that judgments of an item on the scale Very Much Like Me to Very Much Unlike Me are formulated at least partially on the basis of the degree to which that item describes the respondent across situations. Cross-situational generality in turn is likely to be driven more by intrinsic motivators than by external considerations. This line of argument illustrates the potentially tenuous connection between the VIA-IS items and motivation, but it may well be the best available option for drawing conclusions about what is actually driving the respondent’s behavior.

The threshold concern

It has been a common convention in the philosophy of virtue to talk about people as ‘virtuous’ or ‘vicious,’ so it is not surprising to see that Miller raised the question of how to define thresholds. Addressing his concern provides a good example of the value of having tools such as the VIA Classification and VIA-IS that, while not perfect, can support an empirical perspective on long-standing philosophical questions. We have completed two studies evaluating whether there is evidence of a
category of people who can be considered virtuous (Berger & McGrath, 2018; McGrath, Rashid, Park, & Peterson, 2010). Both studies failed to provide support for the hypothesis. It is important to appreciate that these studies have a number of limitations, and are not sufficient in themselves to conclude a hallowed belief in the existence of virtuous individuals is invalid. However, they do indicate a stronger case needs to be made for the meaningfulness of thresholds before treating it as an essential feature of virtues. This is why I enclosed the word ‘virtuous’ in quotes earlier, because it is possible there is no such thing as ‘the virtuous person.’ Commenting on the implications of these findings, Berger and McGrath suggested ‘rather than seeing it as a status achieved, perhaps it would be better to think of virtue as an ideal that must be continuously pursued, an aspiration rather than a destination’ (p. 17).

Hyemin Han and moral education

The potential contribution of the VIA Classification to moral education is an intriguing topic. Han’s article raises some interesting questions on this topic, such as the degree to which the encouragement of strengths that are not purely moral would contribute to the development of a moral person. I recently discussed two additional considerations in thinking about the implications of the VIA model for moral education that I think clarifies some of Han’s comments (McGrath, 2017a).

The first again emerges out of the VIA Classification’s status as a descriptive/structural model rather than a normative/moral model. Characterizing the individual using the VIA strengths can be a very useful component of moral education. It allows students to consider the extent to which they demonstrate moral strengths versus other types of strengths, to identify strengths they may choose to build, and to track that development (e.g. Bates-Krakoff, McGrath, Graves, & Ochs, 2017). However, morality in action is about process rather than structure: it is about weighing such alternatives as loyalty-based versus universalist morality, sentiments versus objectivity, social responsibility versus self-protection, potential consequences versus moral principles, among others. The VIA Classification is at best an ingredient in moral education; as a structural model is has little to offer in terms of teaching youth how to navigate these waters.

Second, proposition (3) at the beginning of this article identified the model as a comprehensive evaluation of positive traits, not just morally positive traits. This broader perspective is shared by virtue theory, and provides one of the reasons that the developers of the VIA Classification aligned the model with virtue theory more than other approaches to moral philosophy. Virtue as conceptualized by the Greeks was always about the entirety of human social excellence, a concept closely aligned with but not equivalent to the morally good.

Furthermore, the hypothesis of the unity of the virtues mentioned earlier is relevant when talking about action as a moral agent. A reasonable corollary to draw from this hypothesis is that moral education alone is insufficient for developing a good person, partner, and citizen; the individual must also demonstrate intellectual virtues, for example.

This line of argument suggests the VIA Classification, and virtue theory in general, is more consistent with what has been called character education (McGrath, in press) or positive education (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009) than with moral education. Returning to the three-factor model underlying the VIA strengths, it suggests the potential value of programs that combines reflections on moral issues, concepts reflecting productivity such as grit, and encouraging intellectual curiosity. In fact, the value of these three dimensions as foci for non-cognitive learning in education has been echoed in various publications (e.g. Baehr, 2013; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; National Research Council, 2012; Park, Tsukayama, Goodwin, Patrick, & Duckworth, 2017).

Nancy Snow and cross-cultural generalizability

Of the three commentators, only Snow raises the cross-cultural generalizability of the VIA Classification, but this has been a common criticism of the model. Snow cites several examples in her article (e.g. Banicki, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2013), and given the goals of the Classification, it is an important issue. She raises a series of concerns about the capacity for the methodology Peterson and Seligman (2004; see also Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005) described for identifying the virtues to generate a universally viable model. Among her issues: The attempt to identify commonalities across moral traditions inevitably minimized cultural differences, decisions were often subjective, various important and distinctive documents in the history of moral theory were omitted from the review, and the heavy reliance on ancient texts neglected the possibility of evolution in these concepts over time. Similarly, she raises several concerns about the degree to which the cross-cultural validity of the strengths has been established by research using the VIA-IS, the most serious of which is the reliance on largely Westernized samples even in developing countries. These are valid concerns, and I
agree with her conclusion that advocates of the model at times may have used language that overestimates the degree to which the model's universality has been established.

I would raise five points in response, none of which is intended to invalidate her fundamental concerns. First, Peterson and Seligman (2004) deserve credit for attempting to define a cross-culturally valid model of positive functioning. Few taxonomies of virtue have been developed with more than a nod to cross-cultural considerations before. Their efforts have created the very dialog about what would constitute a universal model of virtue that inspired Snow and others who share her concern.

Second, the consistency across Westernized cultures is really quite remarkable. Snow reviews my article on measurement invariance briefly (McGrath, 2016), but for those unfamiliar with the complexities of invariance, a little more detail would be helpful. In that study, I found metric but not scalar invariance for the VIA-IS across 16 countries. In plainer language, this finding suggests there were differences across residents of the 16 countries in terms of mean scores on the strengths: residents of one country tend to rate themselves higher on some strengths than do residents of another country. However — and this is the key finding for the present purposes — residents of the 16 countries tended to interpret the items in the same way. This is particularly striking because the non-U.S. residents were completing translations of the VIA-IS, increasing the potential for cultural variation in the interpretations of the items.

Two other studies used less stringent criteria than measurement invariance to test for consistency across national samples, but examined a larger array of nations (McGrath, 2015a; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). Both studies correlated mean strength scores for the United States with those for other nations. For 53 countries, Park et al. found no correlation was less than .64. For 74 countries, McGrath found only one correlation below .60, for Paraguay. In both studies, the large majority of these correlations exceeded .70, indicating a substantial overlap in the ordering and spacing of the mean strength scores across many cultures.

Third, the three-factor model already introduced may provide a more cross-culturally useful virtue model that that proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). McGrath et al. (2018) found the model emerged across 12 samples. While seven samples were exclusively or primarily American, four were from Switzerland, Brazil, and China, and one was a multinational sample of non-U.S. residents.

However, most of the participants in these studies completed the VIA-IS online, and it is reasonable to assume that they were largely Westernized, educated, and fairly well-to-do. A truly universal model of virtue would require extending the evidence to encompass more traditional cultures. My fourth point is that, unfortunately, such research is extremely difficult to conduct, as illustrated by the literature on the five factor model. More than 10,000 articles have been published on the five factor model. To my knowledge, so far it has been investigated in only two truly indigenous settings, in a very small Senegalese sample (Alvergne, Jokela, & Lummaa, 2010) and a much larger Bolivian sample (Gurven, von Rueden, Massenkoff, Kaplan, & Lero Vie, 2013). Neither provided at best limited support for the generalizability of the five factors to these populations.

Finally, Snow cites two studies as exemplars of how to understand the meaning of virtue terms (Bright, Fry, & Cooperrider, 2006; Sandage, Hill, & Vang, 2003). These authors had very different goals — the characterization of forgiveness in a specific cultural group — than did the developers of the VIA Classification. These differences call to mind the longstanding distinction between emic (culturally specific) and etic (culturally universal) approaches to studying cultural concepts (Berry, 1969). Emic research attempts a deep understanding of the shared beliefs or traditions of a single culture; etic research takes the ‘big picture,’ trying to understand different cultures from a common framework. The VIA Classification is clearly a product of etic interests; Snow’s choice of exemplars suggests a personal preference for the emic. Social scientists and linguists are generally agreed that they are complementary, and both are essential to understanding cross-cultural differences and similarities. I do not think research demonstrating local norms exist for the practice of forgiveness diminishes the methodology of the VIA Classification; what matters from the etic perspective is whether all cultures have norms for forgiveness.

Looking forward

Miller, Han, and Snow have raised a number of important questions about the nature and purposes of the VIA Classification. Through their comments, and my reflections on their comments, it is possible to outline a program of research that could potentially advance the understanding of character and virtue as a topic of scientific study in a number of ways. Here is my list of research questions that emerges from the articles in this special section. I invite you readers to think of others:
(1) Does the list of strengths merit revision? Addressing this question will require considering candidates not included in the original list, and testing whether the strengths each contribute to the prediction of important outcome variables (see McGrath, Hall-Simmonds, & Goldberg, in press).

(2) Is the person who is simultaneously high on prudence, judgment, and perspective likely to be perceived as practically wise? Is the social, personal, and moral functioning of such individuals distinctive? Research on this topic would create the potential for linking the topics of character and virtue from the VIA perspective with the burgeoning literature on the nature of wisdom (e.g. Baltes & Smith, 1990; Grossmann, 2017).

(3) Do the three dimensions of Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Control provide a model for the essential elements in a taxonomy of virtue? Research on this topic will be enhanced by the development of scales for the measurement of these virtues, as well as the six virtues described by Peterson and Seligman (2004).

(4) Are improvements in behavior best achieved by characterizing behavioral failures as vices or deficits, or as the misuse of strengths (Hiemstra & Van Yperen, 2015)? Is this misuse best characterized in terms of overuse and underuse, as the Aristotelian tradition would suggest?

(5) Is the newly revised version of the VIA-IS more consistent with the three-factor model that emerges with other measures of the VIA Classification? Do scores reflecting these factors converge with the recently developed virtue scales?

(6) Does the encouragement of strengths that are not strictly moral in character contribute to the formation of a moral individual? Does the encouragement of moral deliberation contribute to the formation of an individual who also displays self-control and inquisitiveness?

(7) Will stronger tests of measurement invariance, as suggested by Snow, support the cross-cultural validity of the instrument with the revised version of the VIA-IS?

(8) Does the VIA model generalize to culturally non-Westernized populations? In particular, do the three dimensions emerge in these populations?

It is an ambitious agenda. If the outcome is a model that can be widely accepted as a framework for understanding the structure of positive functioning, though, it will be well worthwhile.

Notes

1. This line of thinking is not intended to imply that the purpose of the VIA Classification was to identify a set of elemental or homogeneous strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 15) were clear they were more interested in whether the strengths reflected the ‘natural’ level of categorization (Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson, & Boyes-Braem, 1976) – i.e. the level at which people tend to organize their perceptions of positive qualities – than whether they were fundamental categories.

2. It should be noted that Ng, Cao, Marsh, Tay, and Seligman (2017) empirically replicated the six-factor structure, but only by eliminating items that did not match that structure. Ruch and Proyer (2015) attempted a conceptual cross-validation of the model, but similarly assumed the validity of the six-virtue model.

3. The term taxonomy is sometimes used to imply a categorization scheme comprised purely of naturally occurring classes. However, the term is often used by taxonomists and others to encompass any system of classification no matter how arbitrary, and that is how I use it here.

4. Another is the emphasis on the functioning of the actor in Aristotle’s virtue theory, an emphasis that makes the theory exceptionally relevant to the study of psychological traits. Other dominant perspectives in Western moral theory, deontology and utilitarianism, focus more on the morality of the act. That said, some previous critics have objected to the VIA Classification simply for failing to represent Aristotelian thinking accurately. There can be no doubt that Aristotle was one of the major inspirations for the model, but at no point that I could find did Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest the model was intended to be strictly or even primarily Aristotelian.

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