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Empirical study

A tripartite taxonomy of character: Evidence for intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intellectual competencies in children

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ABSTRACT

Other than cognitive ability, what competencies should schools promote in children? How are they organized, and to what extent do they predict consequential outcomes? Separate theoretical traditions have suggested interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intellectual dimensions, reflecting how children relate to other people, manage their own goals and impulses, and engage with ideas, respectively. However, very little work has examined character empirically. In the current investigation, we partnered with middle schools that had previously identified character strengths relevant in their communities. Across three longitudinal, prospective studies, we examined the factor structure of character, associations with intelligence and Big Five personality traits, and predictive validity for consequential outcomes like peer relations, class participation, and report card grades. In Study 1, teachers rated their students on behaviors exemplifying character strengths as they played out in students' daily lives. Exploratory factor analyses yielded a three-factor structure consisting of interpersonal (interpersonal self-control, gratitude, social intelligence), intellectual (zest, curiosity), and intrapersonal (academic self-control, grit) factors of character. In Study 2, children rated their own behavior and completed a test of cognitive ability. Confirmatory factor analyses supported the same three-factor structure, and these factors were only weakly associated with cognitive ability. In Study 3, teachers provided character ratings; in parallel, students completed measures of character as well as Big Five personality factors. As expected, intellectual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal character factors related to Big Five openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, respectively. Across studies, positive peer relations were most consistently predicted by interpersonal character, class participation by intellectual character, and report card grades by intrapersonal character. Collectively, our findings support a tripartite taxonomy of character in the school context.

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"Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education."
[Martin Luther King Jr.]

1. Introduction

Character strengths refer to dispositions to act, think, and feel in ways that benefit the individual and society (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Sometimes referred to by other terms—including character skills, virtues, life skills, soft skills, social and emotional learning competencies, learning mindsets, developmental assets, and non-cognitive skills—character strengths have long been considered an essential aspect of healthy human development (Aristotle, 1925; Damon, 1997; Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Kamenetz, 2015; Lerner et al., 2005). While relatively stable in the absence of exogenous forces, character is malleable (Heckman & Kautz, 2014). For instance, targeted interventions can increase perseverance (Eskreis-Winkler et al., in press; Yeager & Dweck, 2012), self-control (Duckworth, Kirby, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2013), emotional intelligence (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2012), and gratitude (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008) in youth.

Recently, character strengths have attracted the attention of educators who consider character development to be an important goal, both as an end in itself and also as a means of promoting other positive outcomes (Tough, 2011). In parallel, a growing body

of empirical research confirms that character strengths predict objectively measured life outcomes (Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & ter Weel, 2008; Heckman, Humphries, & Kautz, 2014; Jackson, Connolly, Garrison, Leveille, & Connolly, 2015). For example, the predictive validity of self-control rivals IQ and family socioeconomic status in predicting academic performance in adolescence, as well as health, wealth, and civic behavior in adulthood (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Moffitt et al., 2011). Moreover, character is arguably the most important determinant of the overall impressions people form of others (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998).

Increasingly, thought leaders and policymakers are asking educators to contribute to character development (e.g., Collaborative for Academic Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012; Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013; Tough, 2011). For many educators, the question is not *whether* they want to develop character in students but, instead, *which* aspects of character they should prioritize. The current investigation asks how character strengths are organized into broader factors and examines the extent to which these factors uniquely predict consequential outcomes in schools.

1.1. Taxonomies of character in school-age children

There is broad agreement that character is plural (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In other words, character comprises not one thing, but many. For instance, self-control is not the same thing as gratitude, which is in turn distinct from curiosity, and so on. Empirical studies have tended to focus on one character strength at the exclusion of others. As a result, it has been difficult—if not impossible—to aggregate and synthesize findings on character more generally. In response, several researchers have attempted recently to develop taxonomies of character strengths in children. We reviewed these proposed classifications and found striking commonalities. Independently, these proposals identified three separate dimensions of moral character: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intellectual character. Because these frameworks emerged from distinct theoretical traditions, similarities among them are all the more notable.

Character scholars Lickona and Davidson (2005) have conceptualized character as two related but distinct factors: *performance character* and *moral character*. Performance character refers to the "qualities needed to realize one's potential for excellence" (p. 18) including diligence, perseverance, work ethic, and self-discipline. Moral character, in contrast, refers to the "qualities needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior" (p. 18), including integrity, justice, caring, and respect (Berkowitz & Puka, 2009; Davidson & Lickona, 2008; Seider, Novick, & Gomez, 2013). In the social cognition literature, a similar distinction has been drawn between *value commitment* traits, such as dedication, drive, and commitment, and *core goodness* traits, such as honesty, benevolence, and trustworthiness (Piazza, Goodwin, Rozin, & Royzman, 2014). Likewise, moral philosophers have contrasted *strength of character* with *goodness of character* (see Kupperman, 1991; Slote, 1983). And most recently, *New York Times* columnist and social commentator David Brooks (2015) has distinguished *resume virtues* from *eulogy virtues*.

Baehr (2013) and Ritchhart (2002) have highlighted a third and conceptually distinct dimension, *intellectual character*, which enables fertile and independent thinking. Intellectual character strengths include curiosity, open-mindedness, and wonder. Importantly, intellectual character is conceptualized as distinct from cognitive ability: "A person can be very knowledgeable and intellectually 'gifted' while also being intellectually hasty, lazy, dishonest, arrogant, servile, distracted, superficial, careless, or closed-minded" (Baehr, 2016). How so? Whereas cognitive ability refers to the *capacity* to learn easily or quickly, intellectual character strengths specify a *disposition* toward lifelong learning.

In parallel, the social and emotional learning (SEL) community has identified five critical competencies. Two of these competencies are interpersonal: *social awareness*, which refers to empathy and tolerance for diverse perspectives, and *relationship skills*, which enable children to relate positively to other people. Two other competencies are intrapersonal: *self-awareness*, which entails accurately evaluating one's feelings, interests, and values; and *self-management*, which refers to setting goals and self-control. Finally, *responsible decision-making* is an intellectual competency and refers to making constructive and responsible life choices. A recent meta-analysis found that SEL programs indeed improve academic achievement, social outcomes, and emotional well-being (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). However, neither the theoretical framework of SEL competencies (i.e., the five competencies) nor the distinct relations between each of the SEL competencies and outcomes have been empirically tested.

Separately, the National Research Council (NRC) has identified dimensions of "twenty-first century" skills. Specifically, the NRC commissioned a blue-ribbon committee to review the "large research base in cognitive, developmental, educational, organizational, and social psychology, and economics for purposes of clarifying and organizing concepts and terms" (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012, p. 2). In the final report, the committee identified three "competency clusters" of ascendant importance in the modern economy. *Interpersonal competencies* consist of collaboration, teamwork, responsibility, and conflict resolution. *Intrapersonal competencies* include work ethic, conscientiousness, self-control, and grit. Finally, *cognitive competencies* encompass reasoning, critical thinking, and creativity. The NRC recommended that all three competencies be intentionally cultivated in schools (i.e., enabling children to transfer lessons learned in the classroom to real life situations; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). As with SEL competencies, the NRC's tripartite taxonomy so far lacks empirical validation.

To date, empirical research on the organization of character in school-age children has centered upon the Values in Action-Youth Inventory (VIA-Y; Park & Peterson, 2006). The VIA-Y assesses 24 character strengths identical to those in the more widely-used adult version from which it was adapted (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Published studies that examine the factor structure of this inventory have so far yielded conflicting results, but most have suggested either four or five different factors (Gillham et al., 2011; Park & Peterson, 2006; Ruch, Weber, Park, & Peterson, 2014; Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012; Weber, Ruch, Littman-Ovadia, Lavy, & Gai, 2013). Notably, all of proposed solutions have included factors corresponding to interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intellectual strengths. Furthermore, a recent study with the adult version of this inventory (McGrath, 2015) found an analogous three-factor structure labeled *caring* (e.g., gratitude, forgiveness, social intelligence), *self-control* (e.g., perseverance, self-regulation, prudence), and *inquisitiveness* (e.g., creativity, curiosity, leadership).

1.2. Our methodological approach: research-educator partnership

We undertook the current investigation in partnership with educators who shared our interest in the organization and consequences of character. In doing so, we followed both Dewey (1939) and more recent calls for collaborative research partnerships with educators (Glennon, Hinton, Callahan, & Fischer, 2013; Hinton & Fischer, 2008; Tsukayama, Duckworth, & Kim, 2013). It is common sense that research on youth should entail a reciprocal exchange of ideas between academics, who are skilled in theory and research methodology, and educational practitioners, who