



Positive psychopathology: Social anxiety via character strengths underuse and overuse



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ABSTRACT

Despite a number of theoretical propositions suggesting that character strengths are multidimensional and may have darker sides, to date strengths have been approached strictly as a positive entity. The current study sought to (a) define and measure these darker sides of character strengths in the form of underuse-overuse, as well as their traditionally positive counterpart—optimal use—and their associations with positive and negative outcomes, and (b) explain the role of specific strengths' underuse-overuse in social anxiety.

Based on an international sample of 238 adults, we found that general character strengths underuse and overuse were related to negative outcomes, while optimal use was related to positive outcomes. The overuse of social intelligence and humility, and underuse of zest, humor, self-regulation and social intelligence was associated with social anxiety. Using discriminant analysis, this combination successfully re-sorted 87.3% of the participants into those that do and do not have clinical levels of social anxiety. These findings suggest that strengths are in fact multifaceted, providing novel insight into the role that sub-optimal-use facets play in undesirable outcomes, providing a glimpse of psychopathology through the lens of positive psychology.

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1. Introduction

Positive psychology has set a mission to help people flourish and experience 'the full life' (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Among the building blocks of positive psychology are character strengths (CSs), a set of 24 intrinsically fulfilling, ubiquitous traits, valued across cultures and nations, and viewed as central components of a fulfilling life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Examples of these character strengths include curiosity, kindness, fairness, perseverance, humility, and hope. Much like the DSM's outline of psychopathology criteria, the *Character Strengths and Virtues Handbook* (CSV; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) describes the roots, manifestations and benefits of CSs.

Notwithstanding their benefits, Peterson laid out a framework that describes the 'darker' sides of CSs, looking at psychopathology through the lens of positive psychology. In his alternate vision of human malfunction, Peterson viewed deviations from strengths—in their under, over, or opposite expression—as indicative of negative functioning and psychopathology (see Peterson, 2006). This theoretical proposal

has been further reworked into a user-friendly framework that is sensitive to context and offers a continuum from strengths overuse to underuse with optimal use in the center (Niemiec, 2014), suggesting that a balanced use of strengths represents the Aristotelian *golden-mean* (optimal use) between the underuse and overuse of each strength (See nomenclature in Table 1).

The current study is a preliminary attempt to provide empirical support for these theoretical propositions by examining how CS facets relate to both positive and negative outcomes, and by examining 'darker' sides of CSs in more detail and in tandem with an existing disorder.

CSs have traditionally been shown to be related to a host of desirable outcomes (e.g., Park et al., 2004), their deployment resulting in increased meaningfulness (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010) and better daily mood (Lavy, Littman-Ovadia, & Bareli, 2014). However, it is now of interest to determine whether optimal strength use is associated with positive outcomes in the same way as do high monotonic expression of strengths.

H1. Optimal use of CSs will be positively correlated to (a) life satisfaction and (b) flourishing, and negatively correlated to (c) depression.

Since optimal use of strengths is predicted to be linked to desirable outcomes, it follows that strengths' under-overuse should be associated with negative outcomes.

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Table 1
Use distribution.

Strength	Use type	Mean	Std. Deviation
Creativity	Underuse (conformity)	18.56	20.03
	Optimal use	62.49	21.78
	Overuse (eccentricity)	18.95	13.28
Curiosity	Underuse (disinterest)	13.00	15.01
	Optimal use	71.95	20.06
	Overuse (nosiness)	15.05	15.85
Judgment	Underuse (unreflectiveness)	18.58	17.73
	Optimal use	63.25	21.62
	Overuse (cynicism)	18.17	14.59
Love of Learning	Underuse (complacency)	4.29	8.40
	Optimal use	74.04	22.05
	Overuse (know-it-all-ism)	21.67	20.90
Perspective	Underuse (shallowness)	12.63	12.23
	Optimal use	71.07	17.83
	Overuse (overbearing)	16.30	15.03
Bravery	Underuse (cowardice)	37.56	27.10
	Optimal use	52.91	25.92
	Overuse (foolhardiness)	9.53	13.50
Perseverance	Underuse (fragility)	15.56	18.96
	Optimal use	62.65	22.62
	Overuse (obsessiveness)	21.79	18.41
Honesty	Underuse (phoniness)	21.00	20.33
	Optimal use	61.13	22.35
	Overuse (righteousness)	17.87	16.13
Zest	Underuse (sedentary)	20.00	22.05
	Optimal use	66.67	23.56
	Overuse (hyperactivity)	13.33	15.70
Love	Underuse (emotional isolation)	10.28	15.65
	Optimal use	69.83	24.29
	Overuse (emotional promiscuity)	19.89	20.39
Kindness	Underuse (indifference)	9.74	13.25
	Optimal use	78.15	17.22
	Overuse (intrusiveness)	12.11	13.07
Social Intelligence	Underuse (cluelessness)	8.33	13.92
	Optimal use	59.01	24.67
	Overuse (over-analysis)	32.66	23.43
Teamwork	Underuse (selfishness)	35.55	30.77
	Optimal use	52.62	28.60
	Overuse (dependency)	11.83	15.39
Fairness	Underuse (partisanship)	22.10	19.77
	Optimal use	67.90	22.18
	Overuse (detachment)	10.00	14.27
Leadership	Underuse (compliance)	26.81	25.22
	Optimal use	67.17	25.93
	Overuse (despotism)	6.02	11.79
Forgiveness	Underuse (mercilessness)	20.01	22.03
	Optimal use	65.87	26.01
	Overuse (permissiveness)	14.12	17.77
Humility	Underuse (baseless self-esteem)	21.31	21.96
	Optimal use	68.70	23.57
	Overuse (self-deprecation)	9.99	13.61
Prudence	Underuse (sensation-seeking)	22.57	23.07
	Optimal use	60.80	24.32
	Overuse (stuffiness)	16.63	18.32
Self-Regulation	Underuse (self-indulgence)	26.51	21.43
	Optimal use	63.85	23.52
	Overuse (inhibition)	9.64	12.17
Appr. of Beauty/Excel.	Underuse (oblivion)	6.32	11.50
	Optimal use	63.50	26.29
	Overuse (perfectionism)	30.18	27.03
Gratitude	Underuse (rugged individualism)	11.05	16.84
	Optimal use	69.17	22.43
	Overuse (ingratiation)	19.78	20.78
Hope	Underuse (negativism)	14.00	19.19
	Optimal use	68.87	24.39
	Overuse (pollyanna-ism)	17.13	18.10
Humor	Underuse (over-seriousness)	10.99	15.47
	Optimal use	78.87	18.98
	Overuse (giddiness)	10.14	13.73
Spirituality	Underuse (anomie)	13.20	25.88
	Optimal use	64.65	30.61
	Overuse (fanaticism)	22.15	27.14

Note: Strengths nomenclature adopted from Peterson and Seligman (2004), and under-overuse nomenclature from Niemiec (2014).

H2. Under-overuse of CSs will be positively correlated to (a) depression, and negatively correlated to: (b) life satisfaction and (c) flourishing.

To examine the possibility that under-overuse of CSs may be related to the absence of mental health, we deemed social anxiety disorder (SAD) as appropriate for investigation, being an easily screened (Modini, Abbott, & Hunt, 2015) and very common psychological disorder, with lifetime prevalence of 12.1% (Kessler et al., 2005).

2. Social anxiety disorder

In the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) an individual with SAD is regarded as “fearful or anxious about or avoidant of social interactions and situations that involve the possibility of being scrutinized... fearing that he or she will act in a way or show anxiety symptoms that will be negatively evaluated” (p. 202). Social anxiety runs on a continuum, with its lower levels reflecting phenomena such as shyness, up to its higher levels, characterizing SAD (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

The cognitive behavioral model of social anxiety posits that one of SAD's core processes is represented in the gap between the perceived high-social expectations of others and lowly perceived self-social-performance, both misinterpreting social settings and continually monitoring self and others (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). The underuse of social intelligence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is characterized as cluelessness, being unaware of or misunderstanding others, while overuse is characterized by an over-analysis of one's own and others' emotions, nonverbal behavior, and social nuances (Niemiec, 2014). Therefore:

H3. Overusing and underusing social intelligence will be positively associated with social anxiety.

Socially anxious individuals suffer from the paradox of attempting to stringently control themselves prior to and during social interaction, but ultimately failing to exercise control in social encounters (Kashdan, Weeks, & Savostyanova, 2011). The strength of *self-regulation* represents the individual's ability to regulate and control one's emotions, thoughts, impulses, and behaviors (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Despite their efforts at self-regulation, anxious individuals will ultimately underuse this strength.

H4. Underusing self-regulation will be positively associated with social anxiety.

SAD individuals more readily accept negative experiences and have fewer positive experiences (Kashdan et al., 2011) and less life satisfaction (Jazaieri, Goldin, & Gross, 2016). The strength of *zest*, on the other hand, reflects the excitement and vitality in human functioning (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and has been robustly associated with life satisfaction (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011), suggesting the following hypothesis:

H5. Underusing zest will be positively associated with social anxiety.

A central feature of social anxiety is the negative interpretation of social information (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Phenomena such as laughter have also been found to be more negatively interpreted as levels of social anxiety rise (Ritter, Brück, Jacob, Wildgruber, & Kreifelts, 2015). Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined the humorous individual as one who easily laughs, gently teases, sees the light side of a situation and makes jokes. The negative interpretation characteristic of SAD subjects, as well as the interpersonal channels often used to convey humor, suggest the following hypothesis:

H6. Underusing humor will be positively associated with social anxiety.

Over-sensitivity to external evaluation is one of the hallmarks of SAD, with behavioral symptoms often responsible for avoiding or controlling external evaluation (Hofmann, 2007), including positive feedback (Weeks, Jakatdar, & Heimberg, 2010). *Humility* represents the

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