



The Character Strengths Rating Form (CSRF): Development and initial assessment of a 24-item rating scale to assess character strengths [☆]



Willibald Ruch ^{a,c,*}, María Luisa Martínez-Martí ^{c,a}, René T. Proyer ^a, Claudia Harzer ^b

^a Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, Switzerland

^b Department of Psychology, University of South Carolina, USA

^c Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspectives, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Character strengths are morally, positively, valued traits that are related to several positive life outcomes. In this study, the Character Strengths Rating Form (CSRF), a 24-item rating form of character strengths based on the classification proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), was developed using the data of 211 German-speaking adults. The CSRF yielded good convergence with Peterson and Seligman's Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) in terms of descriptive statistics, relationships with socio-demographic variables, and associations with life satisfaction; the means correlated .91, and standard deviations correlated .80. Correlations between corresponding strengths in the CSRF and the VIA-IS were between .41 and .77. Rank-order correlations of the correlations of both measures with age, education, and life satisfaction were .74, .76, and .84, respectively. Factor structure congruence coefficients ranged between .92 and .99. The rank-order correlation of the associations of the 5 factors with life satisfaction was .90. The CSRF proved to be a valid instrument for the assessment of character strengths. Its use is recommended for a brief measurement of character strengths when economy of instruments is at a premium (e.g., in large-scale longitudinal studies).

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1. Introduction

Positive psychology focuses on basic processes that facilitate human flourishing. Peterson and Seligman (2004) revived psychology's abandoned interest in the study of character strengths and virtues. Based on theoretical grounds, they proposed a classification of 24 character strengths that are assigned to one of six universal virtues in their *Values in Action* (VIA)-classification.¹ The strengths are seen as the distinguishable routes in which the virtues are displayed. The 24 strengths can be assessed with the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS; for an overview see Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which is considered to be the standard instrument.

Beyond the intrinsic value of character strengths, several studies have shown that strengths are positively related to subjective

and psychological well-being (e.g., Buschor, Proyer, & Ruch, 2013; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Ruch et al., 2010), recovery from illness (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006), posttraumatic growth (Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Andrea, & Seligman, 2008), health behaviors (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2013a), positive experiences at work (Harzer & Ruch, 2013), or academic achievement (Weber & Ruch, 2012). Additionally, strengths interventions have been shown to be effective in increasing participants' well-being and decreasing their depressive symptoms (e.g., Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

However, most of the evidence on character strengths so far comes from cross-sectional studies. In order to overcome this limitation, large-scale longitudinal studies that assess the role of character strengths on well-being over time are needed. This is one of the purposes of the NCCR-LIVES project (Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: Life course perspectives), which studies vulnerabilities and strengths, as well as their impact on life over time.

Of course, such studies only allow for a limited number of variables that can be tested at each measurement time point. Therefore, the goal of the present study is to develop an economic instrument that assesses the 24 character strengths of the VIA-classification, but has characteristics similar to the standard

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* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, Binzmühlestrasse 14/7, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland. Tel.: +41 446357520.

E-mail address: w.ruch@psychologie.uzh.ch (W. Ruch).

¹ The classification can be found in the [Supplementary Material I](#) accompanying this manuscript.

measure. Hence, the convergence of the Character Strengths Rating Form (CSRF) with the VIA-IS will be tested for descriptive statistics, relationships with life satisfaction and socio-demographic variables, and the comparison of the factor structure of the two instruments.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 211 German-speaking adults (34 men, 177 women), from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria between the ages of 18 and 69 ($M = 40.63$, $SD = 13.06$). Most participants were married or in a relationship ($n = 90$); $n = 87$ were single, $n = 31$ were separated or divorced, and $n = 3$ were widowed. The educational level was rather high; 109 participants had a university degree, 53 had an apprenticeship, 38 had a high school diploma, eight had completed secondary school, and three had completed primary school.

2.2. Instruments

The Character Strengths Rating Form (CSRF) is a 24-item German-language questionnaire with a 9-point Likert scale (from 1 = *not like me at all* through 9 = *absolutely like me*) that measures the 24 VIA-strengths. Each of the items of the CSRF describes one of the 24 strengths, and participants indicate the degree to which the strengths apply to them.² A sample item is: "Curiosity (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience): Curious people take an interest in all ongoing experience in daily life for its own sake and they are very interested in, and fascinated by, various topics and subjects. They like to explore and discover the world, they are seldom bored, and it's easy for them to keep themselves busy."

The *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is a 240-item questionnaire with a 5-point Likert-scale (from 1 = *very much unlike me* through 5 = *very much like me*) that measures the 24 character strengths. A sample item is "It is important to me that I live in a world of beauty" (appreciation of beauty and excellence). We used the German version (Ruch et al., 2010), which has shown good validity and reliability; e.g., internal consistencies were high (median $\alpha = .77$), and so was the stability over 9 months (median test-retest $r = .73$). The German VIA-IS demonstrated good convergence of the standard self-rating form with a peer-rating form. Correlations with, for example, measures of subjective well-being are in the expected direction (e.g., Buschor et al., 2013; Park et al., 2004). The VIA-IS is widely used in research and received broad support for its overall validity (e.g., Harzer & Ruch, 2013; Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013b).

The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item questionnaire that assesses self-reported life satisfaction, and uses a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* through 7 = *strongly agree*). A sample item is "The conditions of my life are excellent." The SWLS is widely used in research and shows good psychometric properties. We used the German version, utilized by Ruch et al. (2010), that was developed in a standardized translation-back-translation-procedure.

2.3. Procedure

We approached approximately 1000 participants that completed the VIA-IS online (using a research website hosted by the first authors' lab) within the past six months; 211 of these agreed to complete the CSRF, the SWLS, and a questionnaire on

demographics. The average time between administrations of the VIA-IS and the CSRF was 66 days (median = 56, minimum = 2, maximum = 166).

The development of the CSRF involved several steps. An initial 5-point Likert-scale version of the CSRF was developed using the descriptions given in Peterson and Seligman (2004) to describe low and high scorers in the respective strength. Using an independently collected sample of $N = 254$ for a prestudy, we found that some of the correlations of this version with the VIA-IS were lower than expected. Two reasons were identified. First, the description of some scales did not match the contents in the VIA-IS well. Therefore, these descriptions were adjusted for a revised version. Second, some CSRF scales yielded high mean scores, suggesting ceiling effects, and thus there was a restricted variability. Two precautions were taken against restrictions in variance. Firstly, the answer format was expanded to a 9-point Likert-scale. Secondly, all steps were verbally anchored to dissuade participants from systematically selecting the highest score.³

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Means, standard deviations, and the ranks of the means for the CSRF and the VIA-IS are given in Table 1. Means and standard deviations for the VIA-IS scales were rescaled to a 1–9 answer format to facilitate the comparison with the CSRF. The rescaling was done using the Gower program (Barrett, 2011). Answers in the CSRF ranged from 1 to 9 for all of the scales except for kindness (≥ 3), fairness (≥ 2), and gratitude (≥ 2).

A first descriptive inspection of the rank order of the means of the strengths indicated high convergence; for example, curiosity was ranked highest in the CSRF and second highest in the VIA-IS, while love of learning was highest in the VIA-IS and second highest in the CSRF. Overall, the correlation between the rank orders of the strengths was .85. The correlation of the means and standard deviations of the CSRF and the VIA-IS were .91 and .80, respectively.

To further test the convergence of the VIA-IS and the CSRF we computed the correlation coefficients among all scales. The correlations for the homologous scales are given in Table 1. They ranged between .41 and .77 (median = .56)⁴ and all were significant. All CSRF strengths correlated higher with their corresponding VIA-IS strengths than with the remaining strengths. This can be seen as support for the CSRF's convergent and discriminant validity. However, it needs mentioning that some of the off-diagonal values were close to the diagonal values (e.g., perspective, judgment). Overall, the differences between the correlations of the homologous scales and the second highest in a row ranged between .03 (perspective) and .40 (religiousness) and the median was .15; the differences from the homologous scale to the smallest correlation in a row ranged from .44 (prudence) to .82 (religiousness) with a median of .63.

3.2. Correlations with socio-demographic variables and life satisfaction

The correlations of the strengths, measured with the CSRF or the VIA-IS, with socio-demographic variables and life satisfaction were compared to provide further evidence of validity (see Table 2).

Strengths, measured with both instruments, did not systematically correlate with gender. For testing the convergence of the cor-

² The original German version and English translation are available by request to the first author and are also given as [Supplementary Material II](#).

³ We also developed a version that only anchored the extreme poles and the mid point of the scale. However, the current version outperformed this variant in several characteristics (e.g., convergence with the VIA-IS), so it was not further considered.

⁴ The correlation coefficients of the off-diagonal ranged from $-.23$ to $.53$ (median = $.20$); the full matrix can be found in the [Supplementary Material III](#).

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