The role of character strengths in adolescent romantic relationships: An initial study on partner selection and mates' life satisfaction

Marco Weber[*], Willibald Ruch

Section on Personality and Assessment, Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, Binzmuehlestrasse 14/Box 7, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the role of 24 character strengths in 87 adolescent romantic relationships focusing on their role in partner selection and their role in mates' life satisfaction. Measures included the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth, the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale, and an Ideal Partner Profiler for the composition of an ideal partner. Honesty, humor, and love were the most preferred character strengths in an ideal partner. Hope, religiousness, honesty, and fairness showed the most substantial assortment coefficients. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed targets' character strengths as explaining variance in targets' life satisfaction. Furthermore, to a lesser degree, specific character strengths of partners and couples' similarity in certain character strengths explained variance in targets' life satisfaction beyond targets' character strengths. This first research on this topic showed that character strengths play a significant role in adolescent romantic relationships.

© 2012 The Foundation for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The present exploratory study investigated the role of character strengths for the description of ideal partners, for selecting real life partners, and for determining mates' global life satisfaction. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed the Values in Action (VIA) classification of 24 morally valued, positive traits (i.e., character strengths) that are represented in individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Their theoretically derived VIA classification consists of six virtues (on the highest, abstract level) that are manifest in life via character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Each of these virtues comprises three to five observable, measurable character strengths: (1) *wisdom and knowledge* (includes the character strengths of creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective), (2) *courage* (i.e., bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest), (3) *humanity* (i.e., love, kindness, social intelligence), (4) *justice* (i.e., teamwork, fairness, leadership), (5) *temperance* (i.e., forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation), and (6) *transcendence* (i.e., beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, religiousness). Peterson and Seligman (2004) established several criteria that a positive trait had to fulfill to be included in their classification. One criterion was that the display of a character strength by an individual does not diminish other persons in their environment, quite the contrary, their display elevates others who are with them (Park & Peterson, 2009). This led us to the assumption that character strengths are worthy to be studied in the context of romantic relationships, where two mates interact closely with each other. It was thus expected that character strengths are relevant for partner selection and mates' life satisfaction.

We considered Peterson's (2006) two-dimensional model differentiating character strengths with *focus on the self* (e.g., creativity, curiosity) vs. character strengths with *focus on others* (e.g., teamwork, fairness), and *mind-related*

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 446357522; fax: +41 446357529.
 E-mail address: m.weber@psychologie.uzh.ch (M. Weber).

(e.g., open-mindedness, self-regulation) vs. *heart-related* character strengths (e.g., gratitude, love) reflecting whether all character strengths might be equally important for adolescent romance. Given the lack of theory and research in this area of inquiry, our study was exploratory in nature. Nevertheless, we expected that most character strengths would be significantly related to adolescent romance (e.g., for partner selection), especially those character strengths with a focus on others and those that are heart-related, because there seems to be a clear connection to romance. On the other hand, character strengths that represent the combination of self-focused and mind-related characteristics (i.e., four of the five character strengths of the virtue wisdom and knowledge) were expected to be less strongly related to adolescent romance, including describing an ideal partner and becoming a couple.

One study investigated the topic of character strengths in the context of romance (Steen, 2003). Conducting content analyses of *personal advertisements* of 222 adults (age ranging from 25 to 72 years) Steen identified age, love, ethnicity, physical attractiveness, humor, education, zest, and kindness as the most desired (between 44% and 24%) characteristics. This finding indicates that specific character strengths (e.g., love, humor, zest, kindness) appeared more than others in adults' expectations for desired partners. Furthermore, Steen asked 1367 participants (age ranging from 16 to 65 years) to rate the importance of various personality characteristics in a partner, which make a *good* romance (e.g., intelligence, dependability, 24 character strengths). Concerning the character strengths, Steen found that loyalty (teamwork), capacity to love and be loved (love), and honesty were rated as the most important characteristics, even more important than, for example, intelligence. The current study extends beyond Steen's (2003) research by studying character strengths for the first time in adolescent couples (vs. individuals) using a sophisticated measure of character strengths.

Partner selection

We pursued two approaches when studying criteria for adolescents' selection of partners (i.e., consensual preferences and assortative preferences; e.g., Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006). *Consensual preferences* (i.e., ratings of the desirability of listed personality characteristics in an ideal partner) have been extensively studied in adults. Prior research found personality characteristics, like mutual attraction/love, dependable character, kind and understanding, character, maturity, exciting personality, good overall personality, honesty, good sense of humor among the most preferred characteristics, whereas religiousness or similar religious background was found among the less preferred characteristics (e.g., Buss et al., 1990; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001; Feingold, 1992; Furnham, 2009; Regan, 2008). There are only a few studies that investigated consensual mate preferences in adolescents. Regan and Joshi (2003) found intellect (e.g., intelligent, sense of humor), physical appeal (e.g., physically attractive appearance), sexual drive (e.g., sexual passionate), and interpersonal skills and responsiveness (e.g., friendly) as most preferred characteristics. Honesty was found as the most preferred characteristic in a partner among Swiss adolescents (Bodenmann, 2003).

Assortative preferences (i.e., correlation between males' characteristic A and females' characteristic A) studied in adults showed different degrees of positive assortment depending on the category of personality variables. Intelligence, opinions, and attitudes yielded the highest positive assortment coefficients (.50–.54; Vandenberg, 1972). This was found, for example, for religious attitudes (Watson et al., 2004). Personality traits (e.g., big five, sensation seeking) have shown positive, but smaller coefficients (between zero and .35; e.g., Lesnik-Oberstein & Cohen, 1984; McCrae et al., 2008; Vandenberg, 1972). Simon, Aikins, and Prinstein (2008) studied in a longitudinal design prerelationship similarity of adolescents that became a couple during the study. They found positive associations between mates' popularity, body appeal, self-rated depressive symptoms, and physical attractiveness indicating positive assortment (coefficients between .25 and .56). Because character strengths were found as predictive for popularity and psychopathological symptoms in adolescents (Park & Peterson, 2006), it was assumed for this study that those positive, valued traits might also show positive assortment coefficients. The degree of assortment was expected to be similar to that found for other traits. Based on the reported literature it is hypothesized that at least the character strengths of humor, honesty, kindness, love, religiousness, and teamwork will play a role in adolescent partner selection.

Mates' life satisfaction

Another criterion to be included in the VIA classification was that character strengths should contribute to a fulfilled and satisfied life (e.g., Peterson & Park, 2011; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Hence, we hypothesized that character strengths would predict individuals' and partners' life satisfaction. Therefore, we explored the role of character strengths in adolescent romantic relationships as *positive institutions* (i.e., couples, where both partners report a satisfied life). Life satisfaction is defined as the cognitive, judgmental component of subjective well-being that asks for a global evaluation of life (e.g., Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Huebner, 1991a). For the purposes of this study, high self-reported satisfaction with life was considered a good indicator of a life where most life conditions (incl. the romantic relationship) are going well.

Similarity in different characteristics (e.g., values, personality traits) has been already used as predictor of satisfaction in adults. Arrindell and Luteijn (2000) found negative correlations between dissimilarity (operationalized with the Euclidean distance) in personality and satisfaction of −.20 and −.24 for males and females, respectively, indicating that the more dissimilar couples reported lower satisfaction. Watson et al. (2004) examined by means of hierarchical multiple regressions, whether the difference score (i.e., absolute difference between partners' ratings in a variable of interest) in a domain (e.g., Neuroticism) predicted satisfaction in males or females when controlling for the targets' and partners' scores in that domain. They found an incremental effect on wives' satisfaction for similarity in positive emotions and dissimilarity in negative