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Moral competence and character strengths among adolescents: The development and validation of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth

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Abstract

Moral competence among adolescents can be approached in terms of good character. Character is a multidimensional construct comprised of a family of positive traits manifest in an individual's thoughts, emotions and behaviours. The Values in Action Inventory for Youth (VIA-Youth) is a self-report questionnaire suitable for adolescents that measures 24 widely valued strength of character. Data from several samples bearing on the internal consistency, stability, and validity of the VIA-Youth are described, along with what is known about the prevalence and demographic correlates of the character strengths it measures. Exploratory factor analysis revealed an interpretable four-factor structure of the VIA-Youth subscales: temperance strengths (e.g., prudence, self-regulation), intellectual strengths (e.g., love of learning, curiosity), theological strengths (e.g., hope, religiousness, love), and other-directed (interpersonal) strengths (e.g., kindness, modesty). The uses of the VIA-Youth in research and practise are discussed along with directions for future research.

Keywords: Moral competence; Character strengths; Virtues; Children; Adolescents; Positive psychology

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Introduction

Competence and character strengths are important components of optimal human development. Studies of competence and character among youth demonstrate their important role for successful lifelong development (Colby, James, & Hart, 1998). The entwined relationship between competence and character in human development was well described by Baumrind (1998, p. 13) who noted that "it takes virtuous character to will the good, and competence to do good well."

Competence is not simply absence of deficits, problems, and pathology but the presence of well-developed clusters of attributes, abilities, and skills. Competence is "effective human functioning in attainment of desired and valued goals" (Baumrind, 1998, p. 13). In the past two decades, the multidimensionality of competence has been increasingly recognized (Gardner, 1983, 1993; Harter, 1985; Zigler & Berman, 1983). Adolescent competence subsumes different areas of optimal youth functioning, including social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and moral abilities (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). The building and enhancement of competence and character can prevent negative outcomes (Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Botvin, & Diaz, 1995) and are also important outcomes in their own right, indicative of positive development and thriving (Kornberg & Caplan, 1980; Park, 2004; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1997).

Although competence often refers to the achievement of socially valued goals, it does not necessarily have moral or ethical constraints. That is, abilities to do well on some task at a cost to others could be considered examples of competence. What distinguishes moral competence is the explicit moral value placed on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the individual. Moral competence refers to the ability to direct one's behaviour toward goals that are considered worthy and good in their own right (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Rohan, 2000; Rokeach, 1973). Moral competence is the knowledge, ability, and motivation to pursue and to do good effectively. Moral competence is not entirely distinct from other types of competence, though. It relies on their optimal development and in turn may influence them. Indeed, moral competence is a generic competence that guides all other competences in constructive ways.

Most theorists agree that moral competence subsumes not only how people think about moral dilemmas and their resolution (Kohlberg, 1963; Piaget, 1965), but also their moral conduct and prosocial behaviour (Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999). Making the topic even more complex is that psychologists may focus as well on the affective and cognitive mechanisms that give rise to moral reasoning and behaviour, processes like empathy, sympathy, and perspective-taking (Murphy, Shepard, Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1999). The individual and social precursors of moral competence also need to be considered (Jagers, 2002; Staub, 1978, 1979).

Good character is at the core of moral competence (Baumrind, 1998). Without good character individuals do not have desire to do what is right. Plato observed that "to know the good is to do the good." We disagree. We believe that there is more to doing the good than simply knowing what it is. One must also desire to do good. This is the role of character, qualities within individuals that lead them to desire and to pursue the good, assuming that they know what it is (Anscombe, 1958).

In recent years, character and issues of morality among youth have received nationwide attention from the general public, policy makers, educators, and parents (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Raising caring, honest, fair, courageous, and wise youth is a goal of all parents and societies. However, there is no consensus on the main components of character or virtue, and there is little