



Relationships among higher-order strengths factors, subjective well-being, and general self-efficacy – The case of Israeli adolescents

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ABSTRACT

We investigated relationships among five higher-order strengths factors, subjective well-being, and general self-efficacy in participants that live under challenging conditions. Therefore, a sample of 396 Israeli adolescents (aged 13–18 years) completed the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth, the Satisfaction With Life Scale, the Affect Balance Scale, and the General Self-Efficacy Scale. An orthogonally rotated principal component analysis of the 24 character strengths yielded five strengths factors that explained 32% of the variance in life satisfaction, with the transcendence strengths factor as the most substantial predictor. The strongest predictors of positive affect were the transcendence and leadership strengths factors; the best predictors of negative affect were the transcendence and temperance strengths factors; and the strongest predictor of affect balance was the transcendence strengths factor. The five strengths factors explained 46% of the variance in general self-efficacy, with the leadership strengths factor as the most substantial predictor. Further analysis indicated that general self-efficacy mediated the relationship between leadership strengths and global life satisfaction. The results suggest that different strengths factors are relevant for different positive experiences (e.g., life satisfaction, self-efficacy beliefs). The findings shed light on the contribution of specific character strengths as a meaningful resource under stressful conditions.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade there has been an increasing interest in the relationship between character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and positive subjective experiences (e.g., life satisfaction). This relationship has been studied mostly among adults (e.g., Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Ruch, Proyer, Harzer, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2010), and to a much lesser degree among young people (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2006; Van Eeden, Wissing, Dreyer, Park, & Peterson, 2008). In an attempt to expand our understanding of character strengths' associations with positive subjective experiences of young people around the globe, the present study focused on Israeli adolescents as a group living under stressful environmental conditions.

For most adolescents in Western countries adolescence is a period of time characterized by self-exploration, exploring the adult world, and gaining excitement (cf. Mayseless & Salomon, 2003). Israeli adolescents live quite different lives in a relatively new country that is mostly composed of immigrants from 70 different nations and cultures, which often leads to inner conflicts. Additionally, Israeli adolescents still live with the danger of war and terror-

ism, and about 70% believe that terrorism could become a likely event in their daily lives (cf. Mayseless & Salomon, 2003).

Park (2004) postulated character strengths as protective factors – also against stress and trauma, which would enable a positive youth development even under demanding conditions. The present study explored the role of character strengths in this specific adolescent sample to examine empirically the expectation that the same personal characteristics that strengthen adolescents living under normal conditions also strengthen adolescents living in such a demanding environment.

The Values in Action (VIA) classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) facilitated the study of a comprehensive model of 24 different character strengths – morally valued personality traits. Empirical research of the relationships among these 24 character strengths and their underlying structure in young people showed that five-factorial solutions best fit the data (e.g., Gillham et al., 2011; Ruch, Weber, Park, & Peterson, in press; Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012). For example, Gillham et al. (2011) and Ruch et al. (in press) found similar factors in adolescent samples: They labeled the factors intellectual strengths, leadership strengths, other-directed strengths, temperance strengths, and transcendence strengths. The present study examined the role of these higher-order strengths factors for Israeli adolescents' subjective well-being and self-efficacy beliefs.

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Character strengths were postulated as contributing to a *good and fulfilling* life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which is not comprehensively defined yet, but is thought to include a high level of subjective well-being (SWB; i.e., high life satisfaction, high positive affectivity, and low negative affectivity). A related (but different) psychological variable, self-efficacy, defined as “peoples’ beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions” (Bandura, 1997, p. vii), was described as an important characteristic of positive youth development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Especially in such a stressful environment of Israeli adolescents, high general self-efficacy (GSE) might be a precursor of a good life, as GSE is seen as a resource that buffers against stressful experiences, because high self-efficacious individuals perceive demands as challenging, not as threatening (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992).

With respect to SWB, initial evidence showed that global life satisfaction (LS), the cognitive component of SWB (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), was most highly correlated with character strengths like zest, love, gratitude, and hope in young people (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2006; Van Eeden et al., 2008). On higher-order level the transcendence strengths factor (e.g., hope, religiousness, gratitude) was a substantial predictor of LS in American adolescents (Gillham et al., 2011).

The character strengths most highly correlated with the affective components of SWB were similar to those most highly associated with the cognitive component of SWB: Zest, hope, love, gratitude, perseverance, and social intelligence showed the highest positive relationships with positive affect (PA; Van Eeden et al., 2008); and zest, love, gratitude, and hope showed the highest negative relationships with negative affect (NA). Affect balance (AB; difference between PA and NA) was positively correlated with zest, hope, love, gratitude, social intelligence, perseverance, and religiousness. Although findings show that character strengths are related to SWB, the evidence for this relationship among adolescents, examined in only a few studies, has yet to be established. The present study explored the link between character strengths and SWB in adolescents living under demanding conditions.

There is first evidence that character strengths like, for example, creativity, hope, perspective, social intelligence, and teamwork are strongly related to GSE in young people (Ruch et al., *in press*). With respect to this initial result it is expected that specific higher-order strengths factors (e.g., leadership strengths) might also be related to GSE in Israeli adolescents.

1.1. The present study

The present study examined the relationships between higher-order strengths factors, SWB, and GSE in Israeli adolescents. Hence, the purpose of the present study was threefold.

- The *first* aim was to examine the relationships between higher-order strengths factors and SWB (i.e., LS, PA, NA, and AB). Based on the basic assumption of the ubiquitous nature of human strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and on the similarities between Israeli adult samples to those in the US and Europe (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012), despite Israel’s specific characteristics, it is hypothesized that the transcendence strengths factor would also be a substantial contributor to LS in Israeli adolescents (e.g., Gillham et al., 2011). Furthermore, the present study hypothesized that the transcendence strengths factor will also be strongly related to the affective components of SWB, because components of this factor were found as substantial predictors of PA and NA in South African youth (Van Eeden et al., 2008).
- Because character strengths seem to be predictive of GSE as a buffer against negative effects of difficulties (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992; Ruch et al., *in press*), the *second* aim of the

present study was to examine the relationships between higher-order strengths factors and GSE. This was of interest because it is unclear yet whether there are specific strengths factors that are more relevant to establish self-efficacy than others, especially in complex environmental circumstances. It is hypothesized that leadership strengths significantly contribute to GSE, because this factor comprises of character strengths such as leadership, perspective, and bravery, which might be useful buffers against stressful conditions.

- Because LS was associated with GSE (e.g., Suldo & Huebner, 2006), and character strengths were associated with both LS and GSE, the *third* more exploratory aim of this study was to examine the role of GSE in mediating the association between specific strengths factors (e.g., leadership) and LS. Specifically, it was hypothesized that endorsement of leadership-related character strengths promotes the development of GSE, which in turn contributes to adolescents’ life satisfaction. These associations and the mediating role of self-efficacy are assumed to be especially strong among Israeli adolescents, based on Mayseless and Salomon’s (2003) analysis of these adolescents’ difficulties and their resulting characteristics. In sum, the present study examined the contribution of specific strengths factors to SWB and to GSE in adolescents living under difficult and stressful conditions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 396 Israeli adolescents (50.3% male). Their mean age was 15.76 years (SD = 1.57; aged 13–18 years). Most of them (73.2%) described themselves as secular.

2.2. Instruments

The *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth* (VIA-Youth; Park & Peterson, 2006) consists of 198 items for the assessment of the 24 character strengths of the VIA classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). There are 7–9 items per strength, and about one third of the items are reverse coded. The VIA-Youth uses a 5-point Likert-style format (from 1 = *not like me at all* to 5 = *very much like me*). A sample item is: “I always keep my word” (honesty). In the present study, a Hebrew version of the VIA-Youth was used. The original inventory (Park & Peterson, 2006) was translated into Hebrew independently by two bilingual Israeli psychologists. Translations were discussed, differences resolved in consensus, and given to a pilot sample of bilingual students who also completed the original English questionnaire and provided feedback on differences between both versions. Based on their comments a final translation was created, which was back-translated into English by two bilingual psychologists familiar with the concepts. After comparing the back-translation to the original inventory, several minor revisions were made. Generally, the VIA-Youth proved to be a reliable and valid measurement (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2006; Ruch et al., *in press*). The Hebrew VIA-Youth also showed good internal consistencies in the present study (median was $\alpha = .75$; all scales showed internal consistencies $>.65$, with three exceptions: social intelligence, fairness and self-regulation).

To reduce the number of variables in the analyses of this initial research in Israeli adolescents, a principal component analysis (PCA) was computed for the 24 scales. Eigenvalues of five factors exceeded unity and also the scree test suggested the retention of five factors (Eigenvalues: 8.12, 2.15, 1.72, 1.45, 1.23, 0.95, and 0.87) explaining 61.10% of the variance. The five factors were subsequently rotated using the varimax routine (see Table 1 for loadings).

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