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Positive psychology, the classification of character strengths and virtues, and issues of measurement

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ABSTRACT

This essay raises concerns about positive psychology's classification of character strengths and virtues and issues of measurement. Part I examines the process whereby the classification was compiled. Part II turns to issues of measurement and questions about positive psychologists' sensitivity to variations in the meanings of the constructs they purport to measure, both within and across cultures. I argue that attempts to find a 'deep structure' of the character strengths and virtues should proceed hand in hand with efforts to render positive psychology and its measurement tools more sensitive to variability in character strengths and virtues across and within cultures. The essay concludes with suggestions for future research.

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Introduction

The aim of positive psychology is to open the field of psychology to the positive aspects of human life and correct the tendency to focus on the negative. It originated with a presidential address given to the American Psychological Association by Martin Seligman in 1998 (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015, p. 185). The response to Seligman's call has been significant. Numerous books on positive psychology have been published, and from 1999–2013, 1336 peer-reviewed articles on positive psychology have also appeared (Donaldson et al., 2015, p. 187). This work has been both theoretical and applied.

A signature piece of positive psychology is the VIA (values in action) hierarchical classification of 6 virtues and 24 character strengths.¹ After reviewing a plethora of sources, including philosophical and religious traditions, Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 13) assert that six virtues emerged as valued across traditions: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Character strengths, they claim, are: '... the psychological ingredients – process or mechanisms – that define the virtues' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13).² As an example, the authors give the virtue of wisdom, which can be achieved through strengths such as curiosity, creativity, love of learning, open-mindedness and perspective. More can be said about the classification of character strengths and virtues – for example, Peterson and Seligman (2004,

p. 14) discuss situational themes – the habits that lead people to express character strengths and virtues in specific situations – but enough has been said for now.

The movement is not without critics. Some authors question its theoretical foundations (see, for example, Banicki, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2013, 2010; Waterman, 2013; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Christopher & Campbell, 2008; Richardson & Guignon, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008; and Lazarus, 2003). Included in this group are those who charge that positive psychology imposes the values and presuppositions of western individualism on non-western cultures (Banicki, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2013, 2010; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Christopher & Campbell, 2008; see also Walsh, 2001; p. 83).³ Moreover, scholars urge that positive psychology should show more sensitivity to cross-cultural and multicultural perspectives (see, for example, Pedrotti & Edwards, 2014; Rao & Donaldson, 2015; Sandage, Hill, & Vang, 2003).⁴

In part I, I examine the process whereby the classification of character strengths and virtues was compiled. I find reason to agree with those who believe it was generated in ways that import bias toward western values and offer several other critiques. In part II, I turn to issues of measurement and raise questions about positive psychologists' sensitivity to variations in the meanings of the constructs it purports to measure, both within and across cultures. I conclude by urging that attempts to find a 'deep structure' of the character strengths and virtues (see Niemiec, 2013; p. 14;

McGrath, 2015a; under review) should proceed hand in hand with efforts to render positive psychology and its measurement tools more sensitive to variability in character strengths and virtues both across and within cultures. I share the thoughts of a colleague who is a positive psychologist, well informed on measurement issues, suggesting possible avenues for future research.

I. Generating the classification of character strengths and virtues

Let us turn now to the way in which the classification was compiled (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004; pp. 3–31, esp. 14–16; and Dahlsgard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Peterson and Seligman (2004, pp. 14–16) tell us that a core group of scholars created a list of tentative human strengths. They consulted a wide variety of sources: the ancient Greek, Judaeo-Roman, Muslim, Hindu, Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions, as well as lists of virtues from Charlemagne, Benjamin Franklin, the Boy Scouts of America, the Girl Guides of Canada, the Klingon Empire, Hallmark greeting cards, Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers, Tarot cards, Hogwarts residence halls, popular song lyrics, personal ads, profiles of Pokémon characters, and graffiti.

McGrath (2015b, p. 407) provides another snippet of information, writing: 'The VIA Classification suggests the domain of virtuous character can be understood in terms of 24 character strengths. These strengths were identified through a three-year process that involved input from more than 50 scholars and clinicians, extensive brainstorming, reviews of historical lists of virtues, and examination of popular literature and media.'⁵ In McGrath (2015b), he notes that the classification was '... crafted with cross-cultural generality in mind.'⁶ Dahlsgard et al. (2005) give a more in-depth account in which they describe the various texts and cultural traditions that were investigated, such as Confucius' *Analects*, Buddhist, Daoist, Judaic, and Islamic texts, and the *Bhagavad-Gita* of Hinduism.⁷ Though I admire the authors' attention to the variety of traditions and sources that were taken into account, I find their methods and conclusions troubling in several respects.

Let me begin by quoting a passage in which the authors are apparently off to a good start:

Nominated virtues were sometimes vaguely defined, in which case secondary sources and expert colleagues were consulted to determine the meaning of the entry within its cultural context. Analysis involved condensing each list by locating thematically similar virtues and classifying them under an obviously emerging *core virtue*. By that term, we mean an abstract ideal encompassing a number of other, more specific virtues that

reliably converge to the recognizable higher order category. ... Individual virtues that could not, without pushing and squeezing, be classified within a core virtue category were considered distinct.

Furthermore, to say that certain virtues, *across traditions*, converged into a core virtue does not mean that we found a one-to-one mapping of a virtue across cultures. Certainly, an abstraction such as justice means slightly different things – and is valued for somewhat different reasons – from one culture to another (Dahlsgard et al., 2005, p. 204; emphasis theirs).

However, the method, which, as described thus far, is not beyond question,⁸ quickly becomes suspect:

Again, what we sought was coherent resemblance, that the higher order meaning behind a particular core virtue lined up better than with any other core virtue (e.g. examples of Confucian justice have more to do with those of Platonic justice than with those of Platonic wisdom). What we identified were instances in which the similarities across cultures outweighed the differences, and, again, when the core virtue of a particular tradition did not have an obvious cross-cultural counterpart, it was considered as separate in the final analysis (Dahlsgard et al., 2005, p. 204).

Three issues arise in the preceding passage; I'll add two more concerns. The three concerns suggested by the passage are these: (1) how alignments of virtues across cultures and traditions were made; (2) mistakes in making judgments about when similarities across traditions outweighed differences; and (3) the omission of key material within traditions. The two others are: (4) the possibility that the classification is tainted by western bias, and (5) the interpolation of virtues/values in the interpretation of key texts.

(1) As a preliminary comment on the issue of alignments across traditions, we should note that it is doubtful that different traditions adopt the same definition of 'virtue.' (I use the term 'virtue' and not 'character strength' because classical traditions, such as Platonic, Aristotelian, and Confucian traditions, typically use the term 'virtue' and not 'character strengths.' The latter distinction is made by positive psychologists, and, as far as I know, is not found within the traditions they investigated.) Conceptual commonalities could exist, however. Starting with Aristotle, we can say that virtue is an entrenched disposition of character or thought.⁹ For Aristotle (also for Plato, the Stoics, and Aquinas, and likely for Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism), the dispositions incorporate practical wisdom, which guides appropriately motivated action in accordance with a conception of the good. Furthermore, in the western philosophical virtue traditions and Confucianism, and likely also in other eastern traditions, practical wisdom

functions as a kind of ‘executive virtue’ that integrates other virtues into individual character. Thus, within a personality, virtues such as justice, compassion, mercy, and kindness are integrated and balanced, and possible conflicts among the virtues adjudicated, by practical wisdom.¹⁰

Returning to the issue of alignment, it seems obvious that Confucian justice would align better with Platonic justice than with Platonic wisdom. Even so, lumping Confucian justice with Platonic justice obscures important differences between them. For example, it is not implausible to think that *li*, ritual propriety, or what the authors call the Confucian precept of good etiquette (see Dahlsgard et al., 2005, p. 205) could be considered a form of justice, insofar as it requires giving to other members of society the respect that is their due. Furthermore, *yi*, or righteousness, what the authors call the Confucian ideal of duty, is the manifestation of mutual respect that is owed to others, and could be considered an expression of justice both in familial and state relations. Yet both concepts differ markedly from Platonic justice, according to which justice is a harmony of potentially conflicting forces in the soul: reason, spirit, and appetite.¹¹

Similarly, the authors assimilate Aristotle’s list of virtues to Plato’s but seem to ignore the distinctive meanings the virtues have for each philosopher (see Dahlsgard et al., 2005, p. 208). Again, justice is a case in point. Aristotle distinguishes general justice (virtue as a whole) from special justice, and divides the latter into three types: justice in distribution, in exchange, and in rectification. Broadly speaking, the three types of special justice are distinct ways of giving to each individual what is his due, or what he merits, in specific kinds of situations. This is not the same as Plato’s meaning.¹²

(2) The authors had to make judgments about cases in which cross-cultural similarities outweighed differences. They do not tell us how these determinations were made. In making these judgments, it seems that significant differences between traditions were glossed over or ignored.

A case in point is their assimilation of the Buddhist and Hindu traditions on the virtue of wisdom, which they also try to assimilate to Confucianism. They write (207–208): ‘Consider wisdom: Although the Hindu (and Buddhist) ideal of attainment of transcendental knowledge of the self does not directly compare with the Confucian notion of the importance of wisdom gained through education and experience, the theme of coming to a higher knowledge is central to all traditions.’ Though this statement acknowledges that Confucianism differs importantly from the other traditions, it glosses over (albeit parenthetically) the

important point that in the Hindu tradition, wisdom (and transcendence) is attained through submerging the self in the Self (Atman) that is Brahman, the divine. In Buddhism, wisdom (and transcendence) is attained by recognizing that, in fact, we are non-self, or Anatman. All is emptiness, or *shunyata*. In Hinduism, by contrast, all is one in Brahman.¹³ The issue here is that the metaphysical underpinnings of these traditions influence the meanings, purposes, and roles that virtue has in these traditions. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, the virtues are meant to direct our attention away from earthly desires and toward a life beyond that which we currently experience. The same is true, though in very different ways, of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, according to which the virtues help to direct us toward life with God.¹⁴ The kind of mistake the authors make is that of ignoring the metaphysical frameworks of the various traditions and how they contextualize, and give meaning and purpose to, the virtues.

The upshot is that if, for example, Buddhists, Christians, and Jews are asked on a survey about whether they are just or wise, or are given examples of just or wise behavior and asked whether they do or would act in such a manner, their answers could reflect very different, tradition-based understandings of the meanings of the terms or the significance of actions expressive of the meanings. If so, their responses are similar in name only, and could be incompatible with each other at deeper levels of meaning.¹⁵ These data, then, do not give us an accurate understanding of the character strengths in their lives, and aggregations could yield conceptually incoherent data sets of questionable value. Positive psychologists have responses to the latter concern, which I will address in part II.

(3) The third problem relates to the passage quoted earlier, namely: ‘when the core virtue of a particular tradition did not have an obvious cross-cultural counterpart, it was considered as separate in the final analysis’ (Dahlsgard et al., 2005, 204). I am not sure what ‘considered as separate’ means, but I assume it means ‘was omitted.’ The larger point here concerns what was included and what was omitted. The authors admit they did not include an important yoga text in the Hindu tradition, *The Yoga-Sutra* by Patanjali. Instead, they focus on the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Dahlsgard et al., 2005, p. 204). While I applaud the inclusion of the *Gita*, I am puzzled by the omission of Patanjali.¹⁶ Walsh (2001) criticizes the compilers of the classification for omitting studies of the ‘... Indian psychologies of Buddhism and yoga.’ He writes that ‘A large body of research – several 100 studies of meditation alone – suggests that

meditation and yoga have effects ranging across psychology, physiology, and biochemistry and can enhance both psychological and physical health, sometimes to exceptional degrees.¹⁷

In response, one might note that the *Bhagavad-Gita* represents a partial inclusion of yogic traditions. That said, one might also contend that noting that meditation practices yield good outcomes is tangential to what the compilers of the classification were doing, namely, mining *virtue* traditions. However, the importance of mindfulness practices for virtue has received support from a recent study by Ivtzan, Niemiec, and Briscoe (2016), which has generated results linking mindfulness practices and character strengths.¹⁸

(4) The exclusion of such a large body of relevant material and the inclusion of sources such as personal ads, greeting cards, virtue lists from the Boy Scouts of America and the Girl Guides of Canada, graffiti, popular songs, Tarot cards, descriptions of Pokémon characters, material on Hogwarts, the Klingon empire, and Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers reinforces the charge that western bias influenced the compilation of the classification. Why is it that personal ads (presumably from western newspapers) should be thought to have more value for people's lives than the texts of a venerable and ancient tradition that have been handed down and studied for centuries?

One might respond that this mix represents an attempt to combine humor and comprehensiveness.¹⁹ Personal ads, for example, were not used as primary sources, but instead, in an attempt to be exhaustive. I find this response unconvincing. Far from deflecting the charge of western bias, which has been pressed by others (Banicki, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2013; 2010; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Christopher & Campbell, 2008; see also Walsh, 2001; p. 83), it reinforces it. If exhaustiveness was the goal, why not include all of the texts of great traditions as well as artifacts of western popular culture and other popular cultures? Even the point that humor was involved falls flat. Including western artifacts of popular culture would be unobjectionably playful and humorous, had the other texts not been altogether excluded from consideration, even as secondary sources. Trying to be playful while omitting important cultural texts from other traditions seems glib and lacking in respect and empathy for other cultural standpoints. Moreover, if humor was being sought for its own sake, why not include humorous cultural artifacts from non-western cultures?

(5) The authors describe interpolating virtues into traditions. For example, they write: 'Confucius did not explicitly mention temperance, but its importance to

the humane life is strongly implied.' Again on Confucius, 'Another core virtue not explicitly named was transcendence' (Dahlsgard et al., 2005, p. 205). They also impute transcendence to Aristotle: 'Aristotle invoked the transcendent when he discussed the relationship between virtue and happiness (*eudaimonia*)' (208). In the case of Confucius, I believe the authors have reasonable grounds on which to make their interpolation. However, their interpolations render questionable another claim they make: 'Although our classification is decidedly about such values, it is descriptive of what is ubiquitous rather than prescriptive or idiosyncratic' (211). If core virtues are not explicitly named, they are hardly ubiquitous, but need to be teased out of the meanings of texts through interpretation. This is what the authors do in the cases I mention. Yet by doing this, they have deviated from the avowedly descriptive aim of their enterprise and are engaging in textual interpretation. This opens them to the charge that they are not finding these virtues in the traditions in question, but are, instead, reading virtues into them.

The examples of Confucian temperance and Aristotelian transcendence also raise questions of meaning. Aristotle's conception of temperance is that it is a mean state having to do with desires for goods such as food, sex, and drink.²⁰ Confucian temperance, as Dahlsgard, Peterson, and Seligman (2005, p. 205) interpret it, seems to be broader in scope:

Confucius did not explicitly mention temperance, but its importance to the humane life is strongly implied. The importance placed on rites presumably involves a respect for propriety and self-control as much as for humanity. In both his personal affairs and the *Analects*, Confucius advocated modesty and self-control. In the *Analects*, he commended as virtuous those who lived simply (6:10), refrained from self-aggrandizing boasts (6:14) or extravagance (3:4), and placed hard work before reward (6:22).

If so, Confucian temperance goes well beyond Aristotle's narrower conception.

Similarly, the imputation to Aristotle of transcendence is problematic, since two competing conceptions of *eudaimonia* appear in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²¹ According to one conception, *eudaimonia* or flourishing is living a life of virtue. It is a life of immersion in one's *polis*, or city-state. According to the other, *eudaimonia* is attained through contemplation. If there is Aristotelian transcendence, it would be obtained through contemplation. Aristotelian contemplation is not, however, directed toward unification with God, as it is in the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. One could point out that the problem is not so much the lack of

a standard God as the ultimate source of transcendence, as the fact that Aristotle does not acknowledge transpersonal emotions directed at transcendent ideals. There is no awe in Aristotle's emotion theory and his conception of wonder is more like enthusiastic curiosity. The intensity of emotional response to the transcendent is missing.²² These are important differences of meaning which the compilers of the classification submerge or ignore. Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 518) list appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality as the character strengths associated with transcendence. They write (519):

... the common theme running through these strengths of transcendence is that each allows individuals to forge connections with to the larger universe and thereby provide meaning in their lives... in the case of transcendence strengths, the reaching goes beyond other people to embrace part or all of the larger universe. The prototype of this strength category is spirituality, variously defined but always referring to a belief in and commitment to the transcendent (nonmaterial) aspects of life – whether they be called universal, ideal, or divine.

The obvious response to the critique that important elements of meaning were lost in the compilation of the classification is to observe, as McGrath, 2015b, p. 1) does, that it was identified with cross-cultural generality in mind. However, Niemiec (2013, pp. 12–13) makes a stronger claim: 'Character strengths and virtues have been determined to be universal across cultures, nations, and belief systems (Dahlsgard et al., 2005; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006) and readily found in some of the most remote areas on the planet (Biswas-Diener, 2006). They are remarkably similar across 54 nations and across the United States (Park et al., 2006).' What does Niemiec mean by his universality claim?²³ Is the claim to universality based on the comprehensiveness of the classification and the way in which it was generated? Or is it grounded in empirical data? Niemiec refers both to the study that describes the process whereby the classification was generated (Dahlsgard et al., 2005) and to empirical studies (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Park et al., 2006). As for what he means by 'universal,' consider his remarks from a personal email correspondence:

... one of the central elements of the original work of the CSV [Character Strengths and Virtues] is that only character strengths that are ubiquitous be included in the VIA Classification. By this concept, the intended meaning is that the strengths/virtues be present in all human beings (as far as we know... as far as science has discovered) – in not only very remote cultures (Biswas-Diener, 2006) but also across nations (Park, Peterson study that was replicated 10 years later by McGrath,

2015b). The CSV scientists say it another way when they emphasize that the classification explicitly does not include "culture-bound strengths" – examples such as achievement and ambition in Western cultures, *sisu* in Finland, and a myriad of other culture-specific strengths (Niemiec, 2017, used with author's permission).

In the same correspondence, he confirms that his claim to universality rests both on theoretical and empirical foundations.

For the reasons noted earlier, it is doubtful whether the claim to universality can rest on the process of compiling the classification. As we'll see in part II, the empirical basis for the universality claim can also be questioned.

II. Questions of measurement

The empirical basis of the universality claim can be questioned on at least three grounds. First, the meanings of the constructs measured by the classification, such as forgiveness, justice, and so on, could vary across cultures. Second, meanings could also vary among different groups within a culture. For example, as suggested earlier, practitioners of different religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity, could have very different understandings of virtue terms such as 'wisdom' or 'justice,' even if they live in the same country or the same region of the same country. Third, contemporary understandings of terms such as 'spirituality' and 'transcendence' could differ from their traditional meanings. To what extent, for example, is it reasonable to think that contemporary Chinese people living in the People's Republic of China adhere to the values articulated by Confucius' *Analects*, given the many centuries of historical and value transitions interposed between the original texts and the actual circumstances of their lives?

All of these issues raise questions about the coherence of aggregated data gathered using the classification of character strengths and virtues – to which positive psychologists have answers. I will turn to this in a moment. For now, I wish to take the discussion in a different direction.

The first two grounds on which empirical claims to the classification's universality can be questioned, as well as adumbrations of the third, are developed in chapters in Pedrotti and Edwards (2014). Of special interest is a section in the chapter by Rasmussen and Lavish (2014) contrasting culture-free and culturally embedded thinking. The classification is given as an example of culture-free thinking. Echoing the charge that the classification is biased, the authors write: 'Embedded within this culture-free approach is the

assumption that the researcher is also culture-free. In other words, the researcher is *assumed* to be objective, with the values of their own culture not entering into their professional work ...' (Rasmussen & Lavish, 2014, p. 19; emphasis mine). The authors contrast this with what they call the 'culturally embedded' approach. According to this perspective, strengths and virtues should be understood within their own cultural contexts. Moreover, the culturally embedded approach acknowledges that researchers have values of their own that can bias their perceptions. This point is similar to one made by Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008, p. 578): 'But is it really so surprising to find commonality where one looks for it? After all, it is one thing to look at other cultures and to try to understand them on their own terms, it is quite another to develop a list and check off similarities.' Pursuing the matter even further, Rasmussen and Lavish (2014, p. 19) ask: '... does mere presence of a behavior/attitude in a variety of cultures tell us enough about how that strength behaves, if it has the same definition as the one we are providing, or if it is valued as strength at all ...'?

Two articles illustrate how psychologists can move forward in ways that are sensitive to the nuances of meaning that virtue terms can have. Both study the construct of forgiveness: one among members of a unionized trucking firm (Bright, Fry, & Cooperrider, 2006); the other, among Hmong Americans (Sandage et al., 2003).

Based on interviews with members of the trucking firm, Bright et al. (2006) find three different ways in which forgiveness is framed: from the perspectives of begrudgement, pragmatics, and transcendence. Begrudgement is a frame wherein offended parties harbor chronic negative attitudes such as resentment, judge offenders harshly, desire to retaliate, tell negative stories, and disbelieve in forgiveness. It is not so much a frame for forgiveness, as an attitude that is 'non-forgiving' (see Bright et al., 2006, p. 90–92). In the pragmatic frame, offended parties are open to forgiving offenders, but do so for pragmatic reasons: they weigh the cost of not forgiving, focus on practical compromise, protect their self-interest, and seek to neutralize negative emotions (see Bright et al., 2006, p. 92–94). Transcendent forgiveness is characterized by the themes of fostering positivity, elevating others, seeking to empathize, and being quick to forgive (see Bright et al., 2006, p. 94–96).

The fascinating study of the Hmong community, called 'indigenous psychology' by the researchers and for which they brought in a native Hmong advisor, acknowledges the deep embeddedness of the notion of forgiveness in the collective identity of the Hmong,

and brings to light factors not overtly associated with forgiveness in Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 446ff)'s account.²⁴ For example, in considering forgiveness as a virtue indigenous to the Hmong, Sandage, Hill, and Vang (2003, pp. 577–580) identify notions such as social face, and known procedures and rituals of third party mediation within clans that negotiate the dynamics of conflict, honor, and face. They also note that '... the leadership structure of the Hmong clan system is often male-dominated and that clan-mediated decisions can be disadvantageous to Hmong women' (Sandage et al. (2003, p. 579). This is the kind of textured and nuanced analysis that not only deepens our multicultural understandings of forgiveness, but also suggests what Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 455–456) call enabling factors for forgiveness, for example, third party mediations that seek to save the honor and social face of the parties.

Studies of these types, which are sensitive to variations in what virtues mean to people, go some way toward showing how psychologists can address the first two concerns mentioned earlier, namely, variations in the meanings of virtues both within and across cultures.

Let me turn now to the third concern raised previously, that the classification does not adequately capture contemporary understandings of some virtues. Earlier I raised this in connection with the likelihood that the meanings of virtues in ancient texts such as Confucius' *Analects* do not convey the meanings as understood by contemporary Chinese people. This thought occurred to me while reading a sophisticated and in-depth chapter on measurement issues by Ho et al. (2014), in which they criticize more directly the classification's applicability to contemporary Chinese understandings of items on it. They write:

A closer look at the VIA-IS items suggests that some of the behaviors described in the inventory may appear odd when applied to a Chinese sample, especially individuals in rural mainland China. For example, the item "*I never tell outsiders bad things about my team*" (item 108 of the VIA-IS) is a common social expectation in a collective culture such as Mainland China and may lack the sensitivity to measure the strength related to citizenship. Similarly, the item "*I practice my religion*" (item 124 of the VIA-IS) may not appropriately represent spirituality in mainland China, due to the fact that most of the people in the country are atheists (Ho et al., 2014, 53; emphasis theirs).

The upshot is that the constructs measured by items might not address the meanings of virtues found in ancient texts and traditions (because of the compilers' interpolations of meanings not directly suggested by

texts/traditions), nor do they adequately capture the meanings of the virtues as understood by research participants. If the latter, Ho et al. (2014) and others have good reason to question the classification's claim to universality, if that claim rests on empirical grounds.

An anonymous reviewer suggests, 'The phrasing by Ho et al. implies that the authors did not test the assumption, but deleted the items without tests.' Ho (2017a) has responded that his team did test the items before deleting them. Ho et al. (2014)'s position is based on an earlier study among 839 Chinese undergraduate students (see Duan et al., 2012). In other words, the items were deleted based on empirical studies (Ho, 2017b).

The same reviewer continues: 'Of course, an item cannot directly be translated to another language or culture. In different cultures (and times) different behaviors can be indicative of the same construct. Merely translating an instrument without considering the cultural context would also be considered bad practice in psychology (and cross cultural psychology would be especially worried) and is a matter of measurement adaption [sic]. However, the finding that the same item cannot be used in another culture does not question the validity of the underlying construct.'

Ho and his research team agree. Ho et al. (2014) suggest ways in which survey instruments can be fine-tuned or supplemented so as to produce better fits between the constructs being measured by survey items and the meanings of virtue and character strength constructs in non-western cultures. They suggest qualitative research strategies, such as interviews and focus groups, as supplements to surveys (Ho et al., 2014, p. 54). Interviews were used in the studies by Bright et al. (2006) and Sandage et al. (2003), and in my view, provide persuasive evidence for the conclusions they drew.

Park et al. (2006); Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2006); and Biswas-Diener (2006) conducted studies in which the VIA was given to various populations across cultures. Both Shimai et al. (2006) and Biswas-Diener (2006) used small sample sizes, and Park et al. (2006) had small sample sizes for some countries, which raises questions about the generalizability of their findings. These studies used techniques that help to show that virtue constructs are valued and prioritized in similar ways across cultures, but do not test whether the underlying virtue measures have the same meaning and function across countries.

Park et al. (2006) and Shimai et al. (2006) examined and found that the rank ordering of self-ratings of strengths was similar across 54 countries, and 2 countries, respectively. The cross-country similarity was high,

but in some cases was not close to perfect. Biswas-Diener (2006) tested Inughuit, Maasai, and USA participants' perceptions of the existence of each strength, its perceived importance, and its desirability for their children. They found similarities, but also cultural variations. For example, 81% of Inughuit vs. 100% of USA respondents reported that open-mindedness/judgment was a virtue that existed in their local culture.

In a more recent study, McGrath (2015b) analyzes data from 1,063,921 adults who took the VIA-IS online between 2002 and 2012. At least 150 individuals from 74 countries participated, with the United States being the largest sample (634,933). McGrath (2015b) writes that research participants completed the VIA-IS on either the Authentic Happiness (www.authentichappiness.com) or VIA Institute (www.viacharacter.org) website, and that about 10% of his sample was comprised of data from Park et al. (2006)'s study. Despite significant cross-cultural convergence on various strengths, McGrath (2015b) is forthright about some of the study's limitations, for example, 'The conclusions of this study can only be generalized to those populations of individuals who are relatively well-educated, presumably economically stable, and interested in the topic of virtues and character strengths.'

Echoing many of the concerns already mentioned, McGrath (2015b) acknowledges that '... the VIA-IS items reflect an amalgam of self-perceptions, behavioral tendencies, claims about the perceptions of others, and attitudes. It provides insight into personal functioning as it relates to the various character strengths. However, this is not equivalent to understanding the cultural attitude toward those strengths.'

Earlier I raised questions about variations in the understandings of the meanings of the constructs being measured across and within different groups taking the VIA-IS. None of the aforementioned studies using the classification employs a statistical technique that directly tests the cross-cultural invariance of the measures. As Ho et al. (2014, pp. 53–54) point out, variations could also arise in how participants from different groups within the same country understand the meanings of the items meant to test a construct, such as citizenship. These issues fall under the heading of 'measurement invariance.' The point of measurement invariance is to test whether measures function in the same way across groups. If the measures aren't comparable, comparisons of mean levels across groups and strengths of associations across groups on various constructs, such as fairness and citizenship, are not warranted. There are different types of measurement invariance. Psychologists

typically test for them using various types of statistical modeling.

McGrath (2016) takes on issues of measurement invariance. He tested measurement invariance in VIA-IS translations from groups across 15 countries using a US-derived model. He notes: '... the countries where the US-derived model seemed to fit most poorly were restricted to East Asia: Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and mainland China' (McGrath, 2016, p. 191). This is consistent with my earlier observation about the possible disconnect between the classification as inspired by Confucius' *Analects* and contemporary Chinese understandings of virtues and character strengths, as well as with the concerns that Ho et al. (2014) raise. However, there are reasons to disagree with McGrath's conclusion about the East Asian countries having the poorest fit with the US-derived model. France had the poorest fit, and Brazil and Germany are on a par with the East Asian countries (see McGrath, 2016, p. 191). The Netherlands and Turkey might also have a poorer fit than he thinks. As my colleague Michael T. Warren notes, it would be instructive if McGrath (2016) had provided the set of fit indices for each country separately.²⁵

Conclusion: prospects and challenges for future research

Peterson and Park (2009, p. 27) write: '... we expect change in the classification. Some existing strengths may be dropped, and others may be combined. Still others may be added ...' McGrath (2014) agrees, noting that the VIA-IS was never intended as an endpoint in the process of developing a measurement instrument. He observes that empirical work evaluating whether the 24 strengths collapse into six factors consistently shows that instead the strengths are best captured by three to five factors (McGrath, 2016, p. 187). His own recent work focuses on developing a three-factor model consisting of caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control (McGrath, 2015a, under review). McGrath (2015a) suggests that 'The model consisting of Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Control is proposed as a reliable latent structure for the VIA Classification strengths, an intuitive classification of traditional cultural virtues, and a framework for social efforts encouraging the development of virtue.' I would urge that, as studies continue, positive psychologists take seriously the need for more focused multicultural and cross-cultural studies.

On this issue, it is instructive to mention recent work by Ho and his team.²⁶ Drawing on Chinese ethical traditions such as Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Mohism, they hypothesized that '... virtues might

have different functions and behavioral appearances in Chinese society, and that testing the factorial invariance of the Chinese version of the VIA-IS is imperative to ensure an accurate measurement of virtues and strengths among the Chinese' (Duan et al., 2012, p. 681). They conducted a study of 839 Chinese undergraduate students. Duan et al. (2012, 685) failed to confirm the six-factor model proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). What emerged was the Chinese Virtues Questionnaire (CVQ), an instrument whose use provided empirical support for a three-factor model of virtue: interpersonal, vitality, and cautiousness (Duan et al., 2012, pp. 684–685). Duan et al. (2012, pp. 685–686) believe that the CVQ provides a better measure of virtue in Chinese people than the Simplified Chinese version of the VIA-IS, and noted that the three-factor model is consistent with the findings of other studies, for example, Khumalo, Wissing, and Temane (2008); Shryack, Steger, Krueger, and Kallie (2010). They observe that the similarities of their model to those found in other studies are greater than the differences, suggesting a possible universal virtue structure consisting of three factors: one reflecting positive behavior toward other people, such as interpersonal strength or sociability; one reflecting positive qualities toward the world and society, such as vitality or assuredness; and one reflecting intrapersonal traits, such as cautiousness or conscientiousness (Duan et al., 2012, pp. 685–686). Interestingly, the orientation of these factors – toward other people, society, and self – is consistent with the factors that emerged for McGrath (2015a). Noting the limitations of their 2012 study, the team has continued work on the CVQ (see Duan, Ho, Bai, & Tang, 2013).

Yet measurement challenges persist. As Warren notes, some might contend that McGrath (2016) has provided evidence of metric invariance across some countries, and thus we know that virtues are at least somewhat commensurate across some cultures. However, Warren believes that it is generous to say that '... the data approach but do not achieve scalar equivalence' (McGrath, 2016, p. 192). McGrath (2016)'s alignment analysis shows that one-third of the strengths were noninvariant (not the same) in at least half of the countries. That is to say that for some strengths (most notably humor, perspective, self-regulation, honesty, spirituality, beauty, and curiosity), across countries people seem to use different internal reference frameworks, such as social norms, and may be more or less susceptible to social desirability and other factors when constructing their responses, thus leading to differences in average ratings across countries for certain strengths. McGrath (2016) does not report which countries failed the

worst with respect to scalar invariance of each construct, nor does he give much clue as to why, except in a broad way by saying that East Asian countries were the worst-fitting overall, across all virtue. However, as noted earlier, it is problematic to single out East Asian countries when Brazil and Germany had equally poor fit, and France, worse fit.

Warren notes that another measurement challenge arises when trying to define when a culture is sufficiently homogeneous to expect near-uniform interpretations of each virtue.²⁷ Even within the same country, city, religion, and even household, virtues can have different meanings, for example, for women and men. In cultures with strong subservience norms for women, 'courage' might mean stoically bearing one's lot in life for women, whereas for men it might involve overcoming one's fears. In such cases, the virtue is the same in name only, and measures will not be invariant across groups.

Finally, Warren believes it is worth considering whether the classification of character strengths and virtue offered by positive psychology implicitly attends to cultural nuance in a way different from that suggested by Pedrotti and Edwards (2014) and Ho et al. (2014). The norm in psychology is to measure specific virtues in isolation, but the classification offers an overarching framework that posits a structure of virtues and interrelations among character strengths, potentially encouraging research on virtue systems (for example, studying dynamics among several virtues). It would be interesting if studies along these lines found evidence that some virtues, and not others, cluster together in members of certain ethnic groups and not in others.

Such a move could be of considerable interest to philosophers. Unifying classifications of virtues are found within traditions in the history of western philosophy as far back as Plato. However, a serious concern is that character strengths and virtues are not deeply unified within the framework of positive psychology because positive psychology has thus far neglected the role of practical wisdom or *phronēsis* in uniting strengths and virtues within personalities. Thus, it has identified a list of character strengths and virtues but has not offered an explanation, presumably relying on practical wisdom, as in Aristotelian and other traditions, of how virtues and character strengths can be integrated to form a person's overall character. A truly exciting development would be for positive psychologists to undertake empirical studies of whether and how practical wisdom or *phronēsis* has roles to play in integrating character strengths and virtues within personalities.

Surely other positive psychologists and philosophers will think of more directions for future research. These are only some of the possibilities worth exploring.

Notes

1. See McGrath (2015a): 'VIA originally stood for "Values in Action" but has since become an orphaned acronym associated with the VIA Institute on Character.' Because of this, I have wherever possible avoided the use of 'VIA' and have instead referred to positive psychology's classification of character strengths and virtues.
2. This classification of character strengths and virtues is, to the best of my knowledge, unique to positive psychology. All of the other virtue traditions with which I am conversant write only of 'virtues,' even when they are organized into hierarchical categories, as with Plato's and the Stoics' hierarchies of four cardinal virtues and subordinate virtues. For discussion of these hierarchies of virtues, see Russell (2009, 148ff).
3. For the critique that positive psychology is insensitive to issues of race, see Bacigalupe (2001, pp. 82–82); to issues of gender, race, and ethnicity, see Rao and Donaldson (2015).
4. See Pedrotti and Edwards (2014, p. xvi), who use 'cross-cultural psychology' to refer to comparisons across countries and cultures, and 'multicultural psychology' to refer to studies of different cultural groups within a single context.
5. McGrath (2015b, p. 407) cites N. Mayerson, personal communication, 23 June 2011.
6. See also McGrath (2015b, 407).
7. See also Peterson and Seligman (2004, 33–52).
8. For example, as Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008, p. 578) note, '... given that none of these authors are specialists in the traditions they are attempting to synthesize, we wonder about their qualification to say "slightly different".'
9. For Aristotle's definition of virtue, see the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II.
10. See, for example, Schwartz and Sharpe (2006), Fowers (2008), and Kristjánsson (2010).
11. See Plato, *The Republic*, Book IV.
12. For Aristotle's conceptions of justice, see the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V. One might argue that the Confucian, Platonic, and Aristotelian traditions share the same core notion of justice, namely, that it consists in performing the functions for which one is best suited and giving to others what society deems is their due. This argument does not appear in Dahlsgard et al. (2005), and the two paragraph entry on justice in Peterson and Seligman (2004, pp. 36–37) discusses competing conceptions of justice as equality and as equity, contending that '... the shared notion is that some standard should be in practice to protect intuitive notions of what is fair' (37). This ignores the possibility that intuitions about fairness likely differ from tradition to tradition and culture to culture. The subsequent section on the 'Strengths of Justice' is not helpful, either, as it discusses the character strengths of Citizenship,

- Fairness, and Leadership (see chapters 16, 17, and 18).
13. See Snow (2014) for discussion of the Hindu tradition and Flanagan (2011) and Gowans (2003) for Buddhism.
 14. This point is similar to that made by Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) about one- and two-tiered systems.
 15. Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008, p. 576) make a similar point about the Orientations to Happiness Measure, which measures Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, (2001)'s notion of 'authentic happiness,' as well as about measures of subjective well-being.
 16. One might also question their focus on Confucius' *Analects*, while omitting the work of two other important Confucians, Mencius and Xunzi. Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008, p. 578) make a similar point about significant omissions in the authors' discussion of Confucian and Taoist virtues, namely, they omit mention of the importance in each tradition of '... finding harmony and alignment with the natural order.'
 17. Another sin of omission occurs in the authors' treatment of the Christian and Greek virtue traditions. Commenting on Aquinas' list of the virtues, the authors note that he interpreted Aristotle's philosophy in terms of Christian theology. Yet they claim that 'In his virtue catalog, Aquinas deleted all of Aristotle's additions to Plato' (Dahlsgard et al., 2005, p. 209). Apparently they are referring to Aquinas' list of the four cardinal virtues – similar to Plato's – of justice, courage, temperance, and wisdom, and the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. What they ignore is the large body of discussion in the *Summa Theologiae* and other works in which Aquinas is greatly inspired by Aristotle's list of virtues, adopting many, if not all. This, to my mind, is a significant omission, and the mistake in question is omitting key parts of the traditions that were under study. But perhaps the authors regard Aquinas' detailed treatment of Aristotelian and other virtues as character strengths, not as virtues in their sense of the term.
 18. It should be noted that the authors view these results as preliminary and recommend further research (see Ivtzan et al., 2016, 1pp. 9–10).
 19. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
 20. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books III and VII.
 21. The bulk of the *Nicomachean Ethics* appears to advocate the conception of *eudaimonia* as the life of virtuous activity in the *polis*. However, adumbrations of this conception as well as *eudaimonia* as contemplation appear in Book I, and contemplation is discussed explicitly in Book X.
 22. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point about the lack of emotional response to the transcendent in Aristotle.
 23. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
 24. Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 446ff) regard forgiveness as a character strength of the virtue of temperance. This is at odds with traditional philosophical perspectives, which typically regard temperance and

forgiveness as separate virtues. In an interesting study, Ruch and Pryor (Ruch & Pryor, 2015) tested psychologists', philosophers', and theologians' prototypicality ratings of character strengths and virtues; that is, they measured the extent to which members of each group view different strengths as prototypical of each of the six virtues. They write: 'The more a strength was seen to represent a virtue, the higher was its loading on a factor labeled after this virtue' (Ruch & Pryor, 2015p. 9). And,

While the temperance strengths of modesty, prudence, and self-regulation were complemented by endurance, temperance (9.8%) was not loaded by forgiveness. Forgiveness (and partly also modesty), the strengths of humanity (love, kindness, and to a lower extent social intelligence), some strengths of justice (teamwork, fairness) marked the first and strongest (17.0% explained variance) factor together with gratitude and humor (Ruch & Pryor, 2015,p. 9).

Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this study to my attention.

25. I am grateful to Michael T. Warren, a positive psychologist with expertise in virtue measurement, for helpful conversations and comments on an earlier version of this paper, for useful insights about the measurement techniques used in the studies under discussion, and especially for sharing his insights on McGrath (2016).
26. I am grateful to Professor Ho for sharing these studies with me.
27. We see this challenge illustrated in the studies of forgiveness by Bright et al. (2006), and Sandage et al. (2003).

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