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Measuring Character in Youths: what are the obstacles?

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Though the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) represents a relatively recent attempt at carving character at its joints, the model demonstrates a number of potentially valuable features. First, it was developed using a variety of conceptual approaches, including reviews of classic texts addressing issues of moral and social excellence; input from experts in character and elements of positive social functioning, and codes of good conduct as diverse as those of the Boy Scouts and the Klingon Empire; a particularly comprehensive catalog of 24 personal strengths and six culturally derived virtues; a hierarchical structure that relates personal character at the more articulated level with social virtues at a higher level of abstraction; an unusually large number of published studies involving the use of the model to predict other personal attributes (e.g., Harzer & Ruch, 2014) or as the basis for targeted interventions (e.g., Duan et al., 2014); and the development of three measurement methods intended for lifespan assessment beginning at age 3 (Park & Peterson, 2006a, b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

It is this last innovation that is the focus of this presentation. We are currently in the process of revising the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), which is the measurement tool that was developed specifically for use with adults ages 18 and older. Analyses using data from hundreds of thousands of individuals who completed the VIA-IS online indicated several significant problems with the existing instrument. First, some scales demonstrated poor discriminant validity, to the extent that they correlated more highly with scales other than their target scale. Second, items demonstrated less than desirable item information at relatively high levels of the attribute, i.e., they demonstrated the potential for negative skew or ceiling effects. Third, items were rated as demonstrating poor prototypicality for their underlying construct. Finally, items are all keyed positively, which increases the potential impact of certain response biases on research findings. It should be noted that most of these issues are often ignored in the process of scale development. However, the value of a well-developed instrument inspired a course of research on the revision of the VIA-IS that is currently in process. Reasons for the revision, and results of the revision process, will be discussed during the presentation.

Upon completion of the VIA-IS revision, a similar process will begin to revise instruments intended for children and adolescents. This will involve two instruments. One is a lexical analysis technique, intended for youths ages 3-9, where parents, teachers, and peers are asked to describe the character of the child. The second is the VIA-Youth, an instrument currently targeted to ages 10-17. The same considerations will be applied to the items of the VIA-Youth. Both research projects will be outlined in brief. In particular, preliminary work on the changes needed to the VIA-Youth will be outlined.

An important component of this session follows from the assumption that the context of character measurement is quite different in youths versus adults. First, preliminary research suggests that the empirical structure of character is somewhat different (e.g., Gillham et al., 2011), a finding that we believe is consequent to the powerful influence of school and family religion on character development in children. Second, character must be viewed both as an unfolding process and as a structural construct (Lerner & Callina, 2014). The parameters of this unfolding have not yet been well mapped. What are the factors that contribute to a commitment to the actualization of different aspects of character as part of the normal developmental process? Do different organizations encouraging good citizenship and personal development beyond the relatively universal ones (religion and school) differentially contribute to character development, or is character development largely a function of individual difference variables? Is it possible to develop instruments intended for use across childhood and adolescence while maintaining measurement invariance?

The rest of this session will therefore be a dialog about the measurement of character in children and youths. It is intended for those who would like to play a role in thinking about how character should be measured in children and youths, how it differs from such measurements in adults, and how those differences can be captured in a system of measurement.