

# **James O. Pawelski**

## **The Promise of Positive Psychology for the Assessment of Character Outcomes**

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James O. Pawelski is Assistant Professor of Human and Organizational Development and Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University. Having earned his Ph.D. in philosophy (Penn State, 1997), he is working chiefly on the history of philosophy (especially American philosophy) and its application to human development. He is particularly interested in theoretical issues in American pragmatism and positive psychology and in their application to character development. He is the leader of the Positive Psychology Network's Interdisciplinary Pod (a research group) and has co-authored an article with Martin Seligman on "Positive Psychology FAQs" (forthcoming in *Psychological Inquiry*). He applies this theoretical work in a course he has created on the "Foundations of Character Development" at Vanderbilt University.

### Abstract

Positive psychology is a new and rapidly-expanding field focused on the empirical study of human flourishing. One of its central missions is the development of an operationalized classification of the strengths and virtues that constitute character. The aim is to foster the identification, measurement, and cultivation of these strengths and virtues. Also supportive of this aim is the recently-published *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures*. This presentation gives a brief overview of the positive psychology movement, examines its operationalized definition of character, and considers some of the advantages and disadvantages of the empirical study of character. Appended is a brief annotated bibliography of some important sources in positive psychology.

The theme of this year's Institute is "Moral and Civic Responsibility: Can We Assess the Character Outcomes of College?" The answer one gives to this very important question will be guided, of course, by one's definition of character. For present purposes, I will take my general definition from Marvin Berkowitz, who defines character as "an individual's set of psychological characteristics that affect that person's ability and inclination to function morally" (2002, 48, italics deleted). More specifically, I would like to explore the way this relevant set of psychological characteristics is understood in the new field of positive psychology. This in turn will lead to some important answers to the questions of whether and how character outcomes might be assessed.

Positive psychology was launched in 1998 by Martin Seligman during his term as president of the American Psychological Association. In his presidential address to the Association, Seligman pointed out that since World War II psychology has focused largely on pathology. By focusing on the identification and treatment of mental illness, he observed, psychology has found effective treatments "and even cures" for a range of psychological diseases. But Seligman argued that healing disease is only part of psychology's mission, a mission

which, more broadly, is about making the lives of all people better. Accordingly, one of his presidential initiatives was to spearhead the empirical study of flourishing individuals and thriving communities in order to learn how to foster such individuals and such communities (Seligman 1998).

Positive psychology has grown rapidly since 1998 and now involves hundreds of researchers in the U.S. and around the world. These researchers are studying optimal human functioning in order to “discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive” (Sheldon, Fredrickson, Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi, and Haidt, 2000). They take Positive psychology to be a “science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 5). One of the central projects positive psychologists are undertaking is the creation of a classification of human strengths, intended to function as a counterpart to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association. Called the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths Manual (Peterson and Seligman 2003), the goal of this “manual of the sciences” is to identify the core virtues that are consistently valued across cultures and across time. The main virtues identified are wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

For positive psychology, good character is a function of these six virtues. The problem, though, is how to define and measure them. Courage, for example, can mean different things in different contexts (physical bravery on the battlefield, for example, or moral integrity under pressure). In order to facilitate the definition, cultivation, and measurement of character, positive psychologists have ranged a total of twenty-four strengths under the six virtues. They are as follows:

Positive Psychology Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths and Virtues (Seligman 2002, 140-158)

#### Wisdom and Knowledge

1. Curiosity/Interest in the World
2. Love of Learning
3. Judgment/Critical Thinking/Open-Mindedness
4. Ingenuity/Originality/Practical Intelligence/Street Smarts
5. Social Intelligence/Personal Intelligence/Emotional Intelligence
6. Perspective

#### Courage

7. Valor and Bravery
8. Perseverance/Industry/Diligence
9. Integrity/Genuineness/Honesty

#### Humanity and Love

10. Kindness and Generosity
11. Loving and Allowing Oneself to Be Loved

#### Justice

12. Citizenship/Duty/Teamwork/Loyalty
13. Fairness and Equity
14. Leadership

#### Temperance

15. Self-Control
16. Prudence/Discretion/Caution
17. Humility and Modesty

#### Transcendence

18. Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
19. Gratitude
20. Hope/Optimism/Future-Mindedness
21. Spirituality/Sense of Purpose/Faith/Religiousness
22. Forgiveness and Mercy
23. Playfulness and Humor
24. Zest/Passion/Enthusiasm

The goal of the VIA Classification is to provide operationalized definitions, measurements, and interventions for each of these character strengths. Some of these are already available in the recently-published *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures* (Lopez and Snyder 2003). Among the character strengths addressed in this work are creativity, optimism, hope, emotional intelligence, forgiveness, humor, and gratitude.

The work of positive psychologists is making significant contributions to our ability to assess the character outcomes of college. First, positive psychology's definition of character is a rich one that, while independent of particular philosophical or religious creeds, is not inimical to them. This allows for this approach to character development to be used in many different contexts. Second, positive psychology's definition of character is empirically oriented. It encourages the development of a variety of interventions whose results are empirically measurable. Third, positive psychologists are developing resources for the empirical testing of the outcomes of character development initiatives. Some of this work involves gathering into one place instruments that have already been developed, and some of this work involves developing brand new instruments.

Of course, this work is not easy, and it raises questions that must be answered. One area of concern is the reliance on self-report in these instruments. To what extent might self-report mask changes that are "or not" taking place in character development programs? A second area of concern is the quantitative nature of these instruments. How accurately can

something as complex as character development be measured quantitatively? How might qualitative assessments be used to help offset the dangers of reductionism? Finally, if we define character in terms of psychological strengths, is it possible that character development programs will be developing strong characters instead of good characters? What is to guarantee that strong characters will also be good?

Much work remains to be done. But there is much promise in this work. Accepting positive psychology's definition of character has definite theoretical advantages. It also has important practical implications for the construction of character development programs and for the assessment of their effectiveness.

So, in conclusion, Can we assess the character outcomes of college? Yes. Can we do so perfectly? No. But we are getting better at it. And the rich theoretical and practical resources of positive psychology are a very promising aid in this important endeavor.

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Some Sources in Positive Psychology [www.positivepsychology.org](http://www.positivepsychology.org), This Positive Psychology Network website gives a good overview of the positive psychology movement.

[www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org) This website supports Authentic Happiness, Martin Seligman's new introduction to positive psychology (see below). Here you can take a

number of psychological assessments for free, including the Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths to identify your signature strengths.

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