

An Analysis of the Contribution of Positive Psychology to Character Building

Corneliu Ben Buzguța

*PhD Candidate, The Interdisciplinary Doctoral School, "Aurel Vlaicu" University from Arad, Romania
corneliubbuzguta@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT: This article explores the significant role that positive psychology plays in the development of character. It begins by thoroughly examining the foundational principles of positive psychology, including its origins, key concepts, and the major figures who have shaped the field, such as Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. This foundational understanding is crucial because it sets the stage for understanding how positive psychology differs from traditional psychology by focusing not just on alleviating mental illness, but on fostering well-being, flourishing, and the cultivation of strengths and virtues. The article proceeds to explore the core concepts and theories within positive psychology that directly contribute to character building. These include the study and application of character strengths and virtues, which are central to positive psychology's approach to human development. For example, the VIA Classification of Character Strengths, developed by Peterson and Seligman, categorizes virtues into broad categories such as wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. The article analyzes how these strengths are not just inherent qualities but can be developed and enhanced through specific interventions and practices. In addition to theoretical exploration, the article emphasizes practical applications, showing how positive psychology interventions are used to cultivate these strengths in real-world settings. It examines interventions such as gratitude exercises, mindfulness practices, and strengths-based approaches, which have been empirically shown to foster character development. By highlighting the effectiveness of these interventions, the article demonstrates how positive psychology provides concrete tools for individuals to build stronger, more resilient, and virtuous characters.

KEYWORDS: positive psychology, positive emotions, PERMA, character building, character strengths

Introduction

This article delves into the significant contributions of positive psychology to character building, starting with an exploration of what positive psychology is and its foundational principles. The article examines how the concepts, theories, and interventions within positive psychology foster the development of character strengths and virtues. Through a detailed analysis of both theoretical frameworks and practical applications, the article aims to demonstrate how positive psychology contributes to the formation of strong, resilient, and virtuous character traits. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of the significant role that positive psychology plays in the development of character. It begins by thoroughly examining the foundational principles of positive psychology, including its origins, key concepts, and the major figures who have shaped the field, such as Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. This foundational understanding is crucial because it sets the stage for understanding how positive psychology differs from traditional psychology by focusing not just on alleviating mental illness, but on fostering well-being, flourishing, and the cultivation of strengths and virtues. The article proceeds to explore the core concepts and theories within positive psychology that directly contribute to character building. These include the study and application of character strengths and virtues, which are central to positive psychology's approach to human development. For example, the VIA Classification of Character Strengths, developed by Peterson and Seligman, categorizes virtues into broad categories such as wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

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interventions are used to cultivate these strengths in real-world settings. It examines interventions such as gratitude exercises, mindfulness practices, and strengths-based approaches, which have been empirically shown to foster character development. For instance, gratitude exercises are linked to the development of humility and appreciation, while mindfulness practices enhance self-regulation and emotional intelligence. By highlighting the effectiveness of these interventions, the article demonstrates how positive psychology provides concrete tools for individuals to build stronger, more resilient, and virtuous characters. Overall, the article aims to show that positive psychology is not merely an academic discipline but a practical approach to enhancing human potential. By fostering character strengths and virtues, positive psychology contributes significantly to the formation of individuals who are not only psychologically resilient but also morally grounded and capable of leading meaningful lives. This dual focus on theory and application ensures that the article provides a holistic view of how positive psychology supports the development of strong, resilient, and virtuous character traits, ultimately contributing to both individual well-being and societal flourishing.

Understanding Positive Psychology

Definition of positive psychology

Positive psychology is a relatively modern branch of psychology that addresses all aspects related to life, thinking, and behavior aiming at our well-being and happiness, and focuses on understanding and promoting factors that contribute to human happiness, well-being, and flourishing. Positive psychology is an approach within psychology that focuses on studying positive emotions, character strengths, inner well-being, and psychological resilience. This field is relatively new in psychology, gaining recognition in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was formally introduced as a distinct area of study in the late 1990s by Martin Seligman, who is often regarded as the father of positive psychology. Seligman's interest in the field was sparked by a desire to shift the focus of psychology from merely addressing mental illness to also understanding what makes life worth living. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, another pioneer in this field, contributed significantly with his research on the concept of "flow," a state of deep engagement and immersion in activities that are both enjoyable and challenging (Lopez 2000, 897).

Scope of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology encompasses various topics that contribute to well-being and human flourishing. Its scope includes the study of positive emotions (such as joy, gratitude, and hope), strengths and virtues (like courage, kindness, and resilience), and the development of positive institutions that foster these qualities in individuals and communities. The field seeks to understand what enables people to thrive and how these factors can be cultivated and sustained over time. Researchers in positive psychology investigate various aspects of well-being, including happiness, life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, and the development of strengths. The field also explores how positive experiences, traits, and relationships contribute to a good life. The ultimate goal is to apply this knowledge to enhance individual and collective well-being, creating a more positive and fulfilling society (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 4-5).

Core Principles

Human Flourishing and the PERMA Model:

One of the central concepts in positive psychology is human flourishing, which refers to a state of optimal well-being where individuals experience positive emotions, meaningful engagement, and a sense of purpose. Seligman proposed the PERMA model (Seligman 2013, 23) as a framework for understanding and promoting human flourishing. The PERMA model includes five essential elements (Seligman 2013, 23 - 24):

- Positive Emotion: Experiencing joy, gratitude, hope, and other positive emotions.
- Engagement: Being deeply involved and absorbed in activities that use one's strengths.
- Relationships: Building and maintaining strong, positive connections with others.
- Meaning: Having a sense of purpose and finding significance in life.
- Accomplishment: Pursuing and achieving goals that bring a sense of fulfillment.

These elements are considered foundational to living a flourishing life. Unlike traditional models of well-being that might emphasize the absence of negative states (e.g., stress or depression), the PERMA model focuses on the presence of positive factors that contribute to a fulfilling life. It is not just about feeling good, but about being good and doing good in the world.

Strengths-Based Approach

Positive psychology emphasizes identifying and cultivating individual strengths rather than solely addressing weaknesses. This strengths-based approach is rooted in the belief that people can achieve greater well-being and success by building on their inherent qualities, such as creativity, perseverance, or kindness. The VIA Classification of Character Strengths, developed by Peterson and Seligman, categorizes 24 character strengths that are universally valued across cultures. Positive psychology interventions often involve helping individuals identify their top strengths and find ways to use them more frequently in their lives. This approach not only enhances personal well-being but also contributes to the well-being of others (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 28).

While traditional psychology has been instrumental in addressing mental illness and providing valuable therapeutic interventions, positive psychology broadens the scope by also focusing on the promotion of positive mental health. This holistic approach integrates both the prevention of psychological issues and the promotion of positive qualities that enable people to thrive. Positive psychology thus complements traditional practices, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience by acknowledging the importance of both alleviating suffering and enhancing well-being (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 5).

This detailed exploration of positive psychology highlights its fundamental role in shifting the focus of psychology from simply fixing problems to also building strengths and fostering well-being. The concepts of human flourishing, the PERMA model, and the strengths-based approach underscore the unique contributions of positive psychology to the field, distinguishing it from traditional approaches and offering valuable insights for enhancing individual and collective well-being.

Theoretical Foundations of Positive Psychology in Character Building

Character Strengths and Virtues

One of the foundational contributions of positive psychology to the understanding and development of character is the VIA (Values in Action) Classification of Character Strengths. Developed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman in their seminal work "Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification" (2004), the VIA Classification was created as a positive counterpart to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). While the DSM focuses on diagnosing psychological disorders, the VIA Classification aims to identify and categorize positive traits that contribute to human flourishing (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 28-29). The VIA Classification organizes character strengths into six broad virtues, which are considered universally valued across cultures and societies (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 29-30):

- Wisdom and Knowledge: Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge (e.g., creativity, curiosity, judgment).
- Courage: Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition (e.g., bravery, perseverance).
- Humanity: Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others (e.g., love, kindness).

- Justice: Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life (e.g., fairness, leadership).
- Temperance: Strengths that protect against excess (e.g., forgiveness, humility).
- Transcendence: Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning (e.g., gratitude, spirituality).

Each of these virtues is further divided into more specific character strengths, resulting in a total of 24 strengths. The VIA Classification provides a framework for understanding and cultivating these strengths, which are seen as crucial components of a well-lived life (Rotaru 2019, 214-215). According to Peterson and Seligman, character strengths are not only essential for personal development but also for building strong communities and societies.

Defining and Measuring Character Strengths

In positive psychology, character strengths are defined as positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that contribute to individual and collective well-being. These strengths are considered stable and enduring, yet they can be developed and enhanced through intentional practice (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 3-4). The VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) is the most widely used tool for measuring character strengths. It is a self-assessment questionnaire that helps individuals identify their unique profile of strengths. By understanding their strengths, individuals can focus on using them more effectively in their personal and professional lives, which leads to greater well-being and fulfillment. This strengths-based approach is integral to positive psychology and is often used in coaching, therapy, education, and organizational development to foster personal growth and resilience (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 627-628).

The importance of character strengths in positive psychology lies in their ability to enhance life satisfaction, improve relationships, and contribute to meaningful and purposeful living. Research has shown that individuals who regularly use their character strengths experience higher levels of happiness, lower levels of depression, and greater resilience in the face of adversity (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 13-14).

The PERMA Model and Its Relevance to Character Building

The PERMA model, developed by Martin Seligman, is a cornerstone theory in positive psychology that describes the five essential elements of well-being. These elements are Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Each of these elements contributes to human flourishing and is deeply connected to the development and application of character strengths (Seligman 2013, 23-24).

- Positive Emotion: Experiencing positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, and hope contributes to overall well-being and can be fostered by focusing on character strengths like optimism and zest.
- Engagement: The state of flow, where individuals are fully absorbed in activities, is linked to strengths such as perseverance and curiosity. Engaging in activities that align with one's strengths leads to greater fulfillment and personal growth.
- Relationships: Strong, positive relationships are crucial for well-being and are supported by strengths like love, kindness, and social intelligence. Building and maintaining these relationships enhances one's ability to flourish.
- Meaning: Having a sense of purpose and meaning in life is essential for well-being. This is closely related to strengths like spirituality, gratitude, and hope, which help individuals find and maintain a sense of purpose.
- Accomplishment: Pursuing and achieving goals contributes to a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. Strengths such as perseverance, self-regulation, and bravery play a vital role in achieving success and personal growth.

In the context of character building, the PERMA model provides a framework for understanding how different strengths contribute to various aspects of well-being. By developing and applying these strengths, individuals can build stronger characters that support a flourishing life.

Csikszentmihalyi's Concept of Flow and Its Impact on Engagement and Personal Growth

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2008, 4) is another key theory within positive psychology that has significant implications for character building. Flow is defined (Csikszentmihalyi 2008, 155) as a state of complete immersion and engagement in an activity, where the individual experiences a sense of timelessness, deep focus, and intrinsic motivation. This state often occurs when there is a balance between the challenge of the task and the individual's skill level. Flow is closely related to the character strength of perseverance and the virtue of courage, as it often involves pushing oneself to achieve higher levels of performance and mastery. Experiencing flow regularly can lead to personal growth, as individuals continuously challenge themselves and build their competencies. Flow is also linked to the element of Engagement in the PERMA model, emphasizing the importance of being fully absorbed in activities that align with one's strengths and interests (Szentagotai-Táatar, David 2017, 59).

In educational and professional settings (Rotaru 2021a, 87-92), promoting activities that lead to flow can enhance engagement, satisfaction, and the development of important character traits. For example, students who experience flow in their studies are more likely to develop a love of learning and perseverance, which are critical for long-term success. Similarly, employees who experience flow at work are more likely to be productive, creative, and committed to their roles.

This exploration of the theoretical foundations of positive psychology highlights the central role of character strengths and virtues in personal development and well-being. The VIA Classification, the PERMA model, and Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow all provide valuable insights into how individuals can cultivate strong, resilient characters that contribute to a flourishing life. These theories underscore the importance of focusing on positive traits and experiences, offering a roadmap for individuals and communities seeking to enhance their well-being and achieve their full potential.

Positive Psychology Interventions for Character Building

Interventions Overview

Gratitude Exercises

Gratitude exercises (Linley and Joseph 2004, 470-471) are one of the most well-researched interventions in positive psychology aimed at fostering character strengths such as appreciation and humility. Common practices include keeping a gratitude journal, where individuals regularly write down things they are thankful for, or composing gratitude letters to express appreciation to others. These exercises are designed to shift focus from negative to positive aspects of life, thereby reinforcing character strengths like kindness, forgiveness, and humility.

Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness practices (Linley and Joseph 2004, 115-117), which involve paying attention to the present moment without judgment, are another powerful tool in positive psychology. Mindfulness enhances self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy, contributing to the development of character strengths such as self-regulation, patience, and compassion. Techniques like mindfulness meditation, mindful breathing, and body scans help individuals become more attuned to their thoughts and emotions, enabling them to respond to challenges with greater resilience and wisdom.

Strengths-Based Activities

Strengths-based activities (Linley and Joseph 2004, 256- 259) focus on identifying and utilizing an individual's top character strengths in various aspects of life. The VIA Inventory of Strengths is often used to help individuals discover their core strengths. Once identified, people are encouraged to apply these strengths in new and creative ways, whether in personal goals, work tasks, or relationships. This approach not only enhances personal fulfillment but also reinforces strengths like perseverance, creativity, and leadership, which are vital for character building.

Empirical Evidence

Effectiveness of Gratitude Interventions

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of gratitude interventions in enhancing well-being and character development. For instance, a study by Emmons and McCullough (Emmons and McCullough 2003, 377-389) found that individuals who kept a gratitude journal reported higher levels of optimism, life satisfaction, and physical well-being compared to those who focused on daily hassles or neutral events. Additionally, research by Wood, Joseph, and Maltby (Wood, Joseph and Maltby 2009, 443-447) showed that gratitude is strongly associated with higher levels of well-being and lower levels of depression and anxiety, suggesting that gratitude exercises can strengthen character traits like resilience and hope.

Impact of Mindfulness on Character Strengths

Research has shown that mindfulness practices can lead to significant improvements in character strengths such as self-regulation, empathy, and resilience. A study by Keng, Smoski, and Robins (Keng, Smoski and Robins 2011, 1041-1056) reviewed the effects of mindfulness on psychological health and found that regular mindfulness practice was associated with reductions in emotional reactivity and increases in self-compassion and emotional intelligence. These findings suggest that mindfulness not only enhances individual well-being but also strengthens the character traits necessary for personal growth and ethical behavior.

Strengths-Based Approaches and Well-Being

Numerous studies have highlighted the positive effects of strengths-based approaches on character development and overall well-being. For example, Seligman (Seligman, Park and Peterson 2005, 410-421) conducted an online study where participants were asked to identify and use their top five strengths in a new way every day for a week. The results showed sustained increases in happiness and decreases in depression for up to six months. This suggests that actively using one's strengths not only fosters personal growth but also builds lasting character traits that contribute to long-term well-being.

Application in Everyday Life

Incorporating Gratitude into Daily Routines

To enhance character development, individuals can integrate gratitude exercises into their daily routines. For instance, starting or ending the day by reflecting on three things one is grateful for can cultivate a positive mindset and reinforce strengths such as humility and appreciation. Writing thank-you notes or expressing gratitude to others in person can also deepen social bonds and enhance empathy, kindness, and social intelligence.

Practicing Mindfulness in Daily Life

Mindfulness can be incorporated into daily life through simple practices such as mindful breathing, mindful eating, or taking a few moments to observe one's surroundings without judgment. By setting aside a few minutes each day for mindfulness meditation, individuals can develop greater emotional resilience and self-awareness, which are critical for managing stress and cultivating strengths like patience and wisdom. Regular mindfulness practice also helps in making thoughtful, values-based decisions, thereby reinforcing ethical character development.

Using Strengths in New and Creative Ways

Individuals can enhance their character by finding new ways to apply their strengths in everyday situations. For example, someone with a strength in creativity might seek out opportunities to innovate at work, while a person with a strength in kindness might volunteer in the community. By consciously applying strengths in diverse contexts, individuals can reinforce these traits, leading to greater personal growth and fulfillment.

Role of Positive Emotions and Resilience

Positive Emotions

Contribution to Character Strengths

Positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, and hope are central to the reinforcement and development of character strengths. Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory posits that positive emotions expand an individual's awareness and encourage novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions (Fredrickson 2001, 218-226). Over time, these experiences build personal resources, including social connections, psychological resilience, and intellectual capacities, which are essential for character development. For instance, the experience of joy can lead to the strengthening of social bonds, while gratitude fosters a deeper sense of connection and empathy toward others.

Empirical Support for Positive Emotions:

Empirical studies have shown that positive emotions are not only beneficial for immediate well-being but also play a crucial role in long-term character development. For example, Tugade and Fredrickson (Tugade and Fredrickson 2004, 1161-1190) found that individuals who experience and cultivate positive emotions are better able to recover from stress and adversity, suggesting that positive emotions contribute to the development of resilience, a key character strength. Additionally, positive emotions have been linked to increased creativity, problem-solving abilities, and prosocial behavior, all of which are important for building a strong and virtuous character.

Resilience

Resilience as a Character Strength

Resilience, the ability to bounce back from adversity, is both a key outcome and a character strength that can be cultivated through positive psychology practices. Resilience is not just about enduring hardship but also about growing and learning from these experiences. Positive psychology interventions, such as strengths-based approaches and mindfulness practices, are particularly effective in building resilience by helping individuals focus on their strengths, maintain a positive outlook, and develop adaptive coping strategies.

Building Resilience through Positive Psychology

Research has shown that resilience can be significantly enhanced through positive psychology interventions. For example, a study by Shatté, Perlman, Smith, and Lynch (2017) found that a resilience-building program based on positive psychology principles led to significant improvements in participants' ability to manage stress, maintain optimism, and persevere through challenges. These findings highlight the role of positive psychology in not only helping individuals cope with adversity but also in fostering character strengths that enable them to thrive in the face of difficulties (Lopez 2000, 837-839).

Application of Resilience in Character Building:

Incorporating resilience-building practices into daily life can greatly enhance character development. For example, individuals can practice cognitive reframing to view challenges as opportunities for growth, thereby fostering strengths like courage and perseverance. Additionally, engaging in regular physical activity, maintaining strong social connections, and cultivating a positive mindset through gratitude and mindfulness are all effective strategies for building resilience. Over time, these practices contribute to the development of a strong and resilient character capable of thriving in diverse and challenging circumstances (Linley and Joseph 2004, 521- 532).

This detailed exploration of positive psychology interventions highlights their significant role in fostering character strengths and building resilience. By integrating gratitude, mindfulness, and strengths-based activities into daily life, individuals can cultivate a strong, virtuous character that enhances both personal well-being and the ability to navigate life's challenges. The empirical evidence supporting these interventions underscores their effectiveness in promoting long-term character development and flourishing.

Conclusions

This research had several objectives. First and foremost, it aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of positive psychology and its role in character building. The study defined the core concepts of positive psychology, exploring its theoretical foundations, and explaining how these principles facilitate the development of strong character traits. It highlighted the significant contributions of pioneers such as Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, particularly their frameworks such as the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and the PERMA model. By linking these models to the process of character building, the article provided a clear picture of how positive psychology supports personal growth and flourishing. Additionally, the article identified specific positive psychology interventions that are effective in fostering character strengths. It provided an overview of widely-used interventions such as gratitude exercises, mindfulness practices, and strengths-based approaches, supported by empirical studies that demonstrate their impact. By discussing the practical application of these interventions, the research illustrated how they can be integrated into daily life to nurture and strengthen character, offering valuable insights for both practitioners and individuals.

Another important aspect of this study was its practical recommendations for applying positive psychology in various contexts, including education (Rotaru 2021b, 190-196), personal development, and professional settings. In education, the article explored how positive psychology can enhance character education through strengths-based programs and mindfulness techniques. For individuals, it offered guidance on incorporating positive psychology practices into daily routines to enhance personal growth. In professional settings, the article suggested strategies for cultivating a strengths-based culture that enhances employee well-being. These recommendations were grounded in research, ensuring their relevance and applicability across different audiences.

The relevance and implications of this research are significant. It addresses a critical need for understanding how positive psychology contributes to the development of strong character traits. In an increasingly complex world, where mental health and well-being are of paramount importance, understanding how to cultivate positive character traits is crucial. This research enhanced theoretical knowledge, inform practical applications, and contribute to the broader goal of promoting human flourishing (Rotaru 2016, 29-43). By integrating positive psychology principles into education, therapy, and personal development, the article offered valuable insights that can help individuals and communities thrive.

Moreover, this research has the potential to enhance well-being and foster a more resilient and virtuous society. By promoting the development of strong character traits, the findings could contribute to creating more compassionate, ethical, and resilient communities. The implications extend to public policy and educational strategies, encouraging a more comprehensive approach to well-being and character development. Ultimately, the findings of this research could lead to long-term benefits for society, including improved mental health, greater social cohesion, and a stronger emphasis on ethical living.

In summary, the article provided a thorough exploration of positive psychology's contributions to character building, identified effective interventions, and offered practical recommendations for their application. The expected outcomes and implications of this research underscore its significance in shaping individuals and society, contributing to a more resilient, virtuous, and flourishing world.

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