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Strengths profiling: an alternative approach to assessing character strengths based on personal construct psychology

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Statement of the Problem: Practitioners draw attention to a person's character strengths to promote empowerment and well-being. This study explores the possibility that existing approaches for assessing character strengths (e.g., the VIA-IS) could be even more autonomy supportive when combined with strengths profiling, an ideographic approach informed by personal construct theory (PCT). A PCT approach ensures that: knowledge is co-created (i.e., the practitioner is not seen as the 'expert' who leads the process); those individuals are not required to 'fit' within a prescribed list of characteristics; and that individuals are free to use their own terminology and interpretations. A combined strengths profiling and VIA approach was used in a sample of homeless youth (aged 16-25 years) who are commonly perceived as hard-to-engage.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: During strengths profiling, homeless youth (N=116) listed character strengths that mattered most to them, before scoring themselves out of ten in areas of importance, ideal and current competencies. Discrepancy scores were calculated such that a lower discrepancy score indicated greater satisfaction. Strengths Profiling was carried out before and after a 10-week positive youth development program. Informed by pragmatist methodology, experiences were captured through a video diary room, facilitators' reflective notes, and pre/post measures of well-being, self-worth and resilience.

Findings: All participants (100%) completed a Strengths Profile when invited. It was found to be an autonomy supportive and empowering process. Over 200 different character strengths were identified, each with a variety of meanings, demonstrating the value in soliciting personal constructs. Using the individual meanings provided, these characteristics were categorized deductively into the VIA framework. Discrepancy scores for each virtue correlated positively with well-being and were improved following the intervention.

Conclusion & Significance: Ideographic approaches offer a valuable and underused alternative to strengths assessment. Recommendations are made for how Strengths Profiling can be combined with existing frameworks to optimize assessment and promote well-being.

Biography

Sam J Cooley completed a PhD in 2015 in the development of transferable skills through outdoor pursuit activities. He is now a Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society and works as a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, UK. He has published 16 papers in reputable academic journals and presented at over 17 national and international conferences. His expertise is in the fields of youth development, sport and exercise psychology, and outdoor learning. In 2014, he co-developed My Strengths Training for Life (MST4Life), a strengths-based intervention that has since gone on to support over 40 homeless youth in their development of resilience and re-engagement with society.

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