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# Individual Strength-Based Assessment for Adult Empowerment NGOs

Ashley T. Turner

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Individual Strength-Based Assessment for Adult Empowerment NGOs

Ashley T. Turner

Concordia University Portland

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this culminating comprehensive project is to advise adult empowerment focused NGOs on the importance of identifying and leveraging the strengths of the individuals they serve. Given the evidence that all individuals innately have strengths, it is important to be aware of them in order to properly engage such assets. Character strengths are studied in this paper as one of the main pillars in the field of positive psychology. This culminating comprehensive project reviews the literature on positive psychology to best understand how empowerment can be achieved. Accompanying this research is a sample resource guide that was designed to advise adult empowerment-focused NGOs on the importance of understanding individual strengths as well as to equip them with tools to help individuals' access and leverage these strengths. While conducting research for this project it was identified that there is a major gap in positive psychology programming in social change (organizations whose services support the well-being of their constituency). This cumulative comprehensive project seeks to bridge the gap and to further continue dialogue of the incorporation of positive psychology with social change.

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### **Introduction**

Strengths are preexisting capacities that are authentic and energizing which lead to optimal functioning when they are employed. Strengths have been found to be universal phenomena, including cultures and societies where people live without material luxuries or modern conveniences. (Biswas-Diener & Patterson, 2011, p. 136)

The single biggest research objective of positive psychology, a field that got its start in 1998 (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), is how to best understand an individual's capacity to thrive. Specifically, this young field has sought to understand how people flourish, while also considering people's motivations, affects, strengths, weaknesses, values, and overall subjective well-being, a term commonly used in positive psychology as a proxy for "happiness." Scholars have analyzed a variety of cultures from all over the world, from the Inuit in Greenland, to the Masai Tribe in Kenya, from the homeless in Los Angeles, and to the wealthy on Wall Street (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006). Resulting assessments and positive psychology interventions have been created with these context considerations from around the world and positive psychology, as a field, has identified proven empirical interventions that lead to increased levels of subjective well-being or happiness (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006).

In order to better explore these interventions, this culminating comprehensive project offers an overview of the importance of individual strength assessments and how they can be utilized by non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) or non-profit organizations whose programming supports the empowerment of adults. In addition, to address some of the gaps in positive psychology programming in social change programs (organizations whose programming supports the well-being of those served), this cumulating comprehensive project introduces a new intervention of strengths-based assessments for social change non-profits/NGOs in this field.

The literature review portion of this paper informs the cumulating comprehensive project by exploring how strengths-based assessment could potentially benefit empowerment programs for adults. In the first section of the literature review, empowerment and positive psychology are defined and explained, including a brief overview of the topic, prominent findings in the research, why it is important, and critiques of the field.

In the second section of the review, the three pillars of positive psychology are introduced. Pillar one, subjective well-being, will be explained followed by pillar two, the heart of the paper: character strengths, characteristics, and virtues. A widely used and known classification book on the subject, "Character Strengths and Virtues" by Peterson and Seligman will also be examined and an analysis of strengths across different cultures and nations will be highlighted. In addition, two pertinent strengths assessments will be evaluated: The VIA-IS and the Realize2 assessment.

Prior to beginning this research, I completed both of these strengths assessments. Some of my identified strengths came as no surprise to me, but some of them I was unaware of. To discover strengths I have that go unused was

empowering because I was able to make life decisions according to where my top strengths lie. For example, as I neared the end of a Masters program, I found myself seeking employment. By examining my top strengths and considering my top weaknesses (assessed via the Realise2 exam), I was able to single out positions that would complement my abilities and strengths. In turn, I passed on applying for positions where my weaknesses aligned with the daily job requirements. In this culminating comprehensive project, I examine and support my personal findings with the research of positive psychologists who study character strengths and their improvement on individual well-being.

Returning to the three pillars of positive psychology, the third pillar, institutions, is next described in the literature review, creating a transition to the proposed application. The proposed application is an overview of a resource guide template for empowerment-focused non-profit organizations, designed to provide them with information on the following topics: empowerment and strengths assessments, activities to enhance strengths, and sample client portfolios.

Following the proposed application portion of the paper, the discussion section explains why it is important for empowerment-focused NGOs within social change programs to consider utilizing the proposed application. The culminating comprehensive project then concludes with closing remarks and recommendations for future areas of study to expand on this topic.

## **Literature Review**

### **Defining Empowerment**



The term “empowerment” has had an evolving history of definitions and parameters. According to Panda (2000):

Empowerment is an abstract and complex concept and it is interpreted in many ways. According to the Random House Dictionary, empowerment comes from the term empower, which means ‘to give power or authority’ and ‘to enable or permit’. The key elements in empowerment are ‘enabling’ and ‘providing power’, and they reinforce each other. In practical terms however, empowerment would mean the process of challenging existing inequality, power relations, and of gaining greater control over sources of power by the under-privileged (p. 2).

In 1986, Korten shared that empowerment is “control, specifically the control over the ability to manage productive resources” (as cited in Panda, 2000, p. 3). Meanwhile, Schuler defined empowerment as the “capacity to mobilize resources to produce beneficial social change” (as cited in Panda, 2000, p. 4). Zimmerman defined empowerment as “a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them” (1995, p. 581). Combining these definitions, for the purposes of this cumulating comprehensive project, empowerment will be defined as an adult’s ability to master, control, and manage resources to advance their future.

In Chiang Mai, Thailand, an organization called the We women Foundation offers empowerment-based programs to the people they serve, similar to the above definition of empowerment. Specifically, they empower Burmese women by providing higher educational opportunities with the goal to

advance their leadership skills in preparation for their eventual return to Myanmar. Among their projects are a pre-university preparation program, a scholarship program, and a university assistance program (We women Foundation, 2014). In the pre-university program, women take English lessons, prepare for college entrance exams, and receive mentorship to prepare for university. The scholarship program provides tuition and living expenses at universities in Thailand for selected women who showcase leadership skills. The women are assisted every step of the way, so that they will ideally become transformational leaders. As per the definition of empowerment for this thesis, the women are being empowered because they are able to control and manage their resources (higher education) to advance their futures (become female leaders in Burma) (We women Foundation, 2014).

### **Empowerment Measures**

It was difficult to find a variety of measures that assess individual empowerment. Speer & Peterson (2000) wrote that finding measures that assess individual empowerment was challenging; in fact, their efforts revealed only one that was thorough enough to have combined cognitive, emotional, and behavioral into its assessment. This measure is the Sociopolitical Control Scale (SPCS) developed by Zimmerman and Zahniser in 1991. The SPCS assesses psychological empowerment in a sociopolitical context by measuring leadership competence and political efficacy (Speer & Peterson, 2000). Additionally, in the assessment as originally developed, it was reported that seven subscales represented cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains: 1) power through

relationships, 2) political functioning, 3) defining debate, and 4) shaping ideology, 5) leadership competence, 6) political efficacy, and 7) behavior (Speer & Peterson, 2000). Speer and Peterson tested construct and content validity and found that they were strong for six of the seven subscales ( $\alpha = .47 - .78$ ). The factor not produced was defining debate. They tested validity by anticipating that person's sense of belonging and connection with others (sense of community) and self-reported membership with groups and organizations (membership in community organizations) would positively be associated with the empowerment scales, which was the result (2000).

### **Psychological Empowerment**

Zimmerman expanded the term empowerment to psychological empowerment (PE) in order to study individual levels of empowerment analysis. He defined psychological empowerment as "the belief that goals can be achieved, awareness about resources and factors that hinder or enhance one's efforts to achieve those goals, and efforts to fulfill the goals" (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 582). Zimmerman's contribution of PE worked at the individual level in assessing adults' perceived level of obtaining and utilizing resources to achieve goals. Aligned with this culminating comprehensive projects nominal definition of empowerment, Zimmerman's PE definition additionally pertains to how an adult can perceive their ability to master, control, and manage resources to advance their future.

Spreitzer (1995) examined research to measure PE in the workplace. The Measure looked at four dimensions of psychological empowerment:

meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact, and was created from items in the following measures designed by Tymon (1988) and Johns (1986) as well as Hackman and Oldman's (1985) autonomy scale and Ashforth's (1989) helplessness scale. Construct and content validity was assessed: "The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the overall empowerment construct was .72 for the industrial sample and .62 for the insurance sample...The measurement model suggests that each of the four dimensions contributes to an overall construct of empowerment in a second-order factor analysis and the dimensions are not constructive-equivalent" (as cited in Speitzer, 1995, p. 1453). Test-retest reliability and internal consistency were evident.

### **Positive Psychology**

Throughout much of the history of psychology, the field has focused primarily on mental health by seeking to understand a "disease model of human functioning" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). In fact, psychology articles examining negative states outnumbered those examining positive states by a ratio of 17 to 1 (Myers & Diener, 1995). Only recently, with the emergence of positive psychology, have psychologists begun to take a look at the opposite of the disease model and attempted to understand the reasoning behind the science of happiness, including how to achieve and sustain it.

As explained by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), "Before World War II, psychology had three distinct missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent" (p. 6). A vast majority of psychological research funding,

distributed primarily by the National Institute of Mental Health, were grants to those studying mental illness; given this, mental illness emerged as the discipline's main focus area. The other two areas of focus—making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing talent—were largely neglected, but not wholly forgotten (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

To address this imbalance, many psychologists sought to refocus traditional language in the academic field, looking further into how humans flourish. Rather than focusing primarily on the traditional disease model, researchers hunted for an understanding of why and how people do well. As explained by Froh (2004), “Many psychologists, unhappy with the disease model that drives much of psychology, maintain that all people have an innate tendency to strive for perpetual growth and development” (p. 18). In a study by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), it was noted that those who were identified as happy, based on longitudinal tests, seemed to enjoy the following successes later in life: marriage, friendship, employment, income, positive work performance, and good mental health.

Beginning in 1998, prominent positive psychologists began initial research into alternate areas of study by researching what makes people successful and happy. In fact, the positive psychology field grew from this understanding that there was an imbalance in the research and that areas such as human potential, motivation, human strengths, and other positive behavioral human functioning were being neglected (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

**Definition of positive psychology.**

Positive psychology has many definitions. One simple definition, offered by Biswas-Diener and Patterson (2011), is the following: "Positive psychology is, by definition, about what works" (p. 125). In practice, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) stated that positive psychology is a science designed to emphasize the excelling aspects of human functioning, rather than mending the weak parts. The authors explained, "Psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 1). They continued, "The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5).

Gable and Haidt (2005) considered a more social approach when defining the field: "Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" (p. 103). Froh (2004) included community groups, building on the previous definition from Gable and Haidt with: "Positive psychology is the study of how human beings prosper in the face of adversity" (p. 18). Froh (2004) continued, "Its goals are to identify and enhance the human strengths and virtues that make life worth living, and allow individuals and communities to thrive." (p. 18)

Sheridan et al. (2004) explained, “Positive psychology is an integrative framework that draws upon the enduring themes and values across time periods and cultures to test theories using scientific tools designed to discover not only the elements of human well-being, but also the means by which that well-being can be experienced by all individuals” (p. 4).

In summary, positive psychology seeks to understand the science behind positive well-being. In opposition to traditional psychological research, positive psychology takes an exploratory look into positive human functioning, i.e. why and how people worldwide thrive and lead happy and fulfilling lives.

Researchers in the field attempt to define the qualifiers of a “good life” by defining and evaluating such things as happiness, individual strengths, and human excellence. Scholars then seek to engage in more in depth examinations of how people can improve themselves and facilitate the conditions and processes that might lead to a life of optimal human flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

### **Critiques of positive psychology.**

Positive psychology is not without critique from scholars; indeed, many believe that it is merely a self-help phenomenon. Sundararajan (2005) claimed that positive psychology has a strong and a weak version and that the weak version suggests that happiness can be achieved by simply studying the neglected side of psychological science: the positive attributes. Sundararajan explained that this new approach “cannot be taken seriously as an innovation in science” (p. 35). Sundararajan continued, “The assumption is that value (the

good life) depends on science for its validation, when in fact science itself is shaped by value” (2005, p. 51). “Marketing the good life as generic wine... because the good life is believed to be philosophically multidimensional, to do it justice to the richness and complexity of the good life, psychology needs not an inventory of traits so much as a fine grained cultural description...Empirical validation is akin to performing chemical testing on the wines of the good life” (as cited in Sundararajan, 2005, p. 52)

McDonald & O’Callaghan argued that positive psychology has “essentialized and shaped definitive categories and character traits that reflect the movement’s rigid approach to critical inquiry and what constitutes happiness and well-being” (2008, p. 138-139). Miller (2008) stated, “instead of demonstrating that positive attitudes explain achievement, success, well-being and happiness, positive psychology merely associates mental health with a particular personality type, a cheerful, outgoing, goal-driven, status-seeking extrovert” (p. 591). McDonald and O’Callaghan (2008) noted that Martin Seligman was on a “fool’s gold” mission studying the unpredictability of happiness and human behavior. Miller (2008) also stated that positive psychology indicates that specific personality types are what predetermine success and that positive psychology hasn’t proven that its interventions can indeed increase happiness levels and successful outcomes. Miller continued by stating that positive psychology is appealing because of its promise of empowerment and achievement for those who practice it, yet it’s claim is without merit.



Miller (2008) continued by critiquing positive psychology's stance on goal setting, stating that if someone was interested in achieving something then he or she was likely to be motivated regardless of setting a specific goal, and that setting it up as a goal was counterintuitive. Miller wrote, "It is a central contention of positive psychology that people can be crafted into goal achievers able to control their emotions and harness all their positive energies in the service of their goals" (2008, p. 594).

Researchers McDonald & O'Callaghan acknowledged that positive psychology has its limits and that positive psychologists should be aware of such limitations. They continued that the field is far from liberating psychology from the negative side of psychology, nevertheless "it has instituted a new set of governmental and disciplinary mechanisms by means of defining what is 'positive' in human existence via a prescriptive set of constructs" (as cited in McDonald & O'Callaghan, 2008, p. 128-129).

### **Positive psychology and the three pillars.**

Positive psychology focuses on three main pillars: 1) positive subjective well-being, 2) positive individual characteristics (strengths and virtues), and 3) positive institutions and communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These pillars indicate the three main areas that psychologists in the field mainly focus on.

**Pillar I: subjective well-being.** Positive psychology is often known as the science of happiness. Happiness is a complex concept to measure, as are the intricacies of assessing a depressed mental state. Given this, instead of studying

“happiness,” positive psychology researchers refer to one’s pleasurable mental state or happiness as subjective well-being (SWB) (Seligman, 2002). One way psychologists can measure SWB is by asking study participants situational questions that assess differences between positive and negative affect. Positive affect is defined as “when something feels good, whereas negative affect is the opposite” (Wiener, 2008, p. 133). According to Biswas-Diener and Patterson (2011), higher levels of positive affect are linked to higher rates of happiness or overall SWB.

***Historical roots of happiness studies.*** The science of defining and exploring happiness dates back to between 435-366 BCE, with the philosopher Aristippus, and the introduction of hedonism. Hedonism is defined as “maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain” (Peterson, 2006, p. 78). This was later elaborated on between 342-270 BCE by Epicurus, who added the concept of ethical hedonism by suggesting that one’s moral obligation as human beings is to maximize one’s experience of pleasure (Peterson, 2006).

In contrast to hedonism is eudaimonia or “being true to one’s inner self” (Peterson, 2006, p.78). According to Aristotle, who introduced eudaimonia, “true happiness entails identifying one’s virtues, cultivating them, and living in accordance to them” (Peterson, p. 78, 2006). He continued, “Uniting eudemonic emphases is the premise that people should develop what is best within themselves and then use these skills and talents in the service of greater goods – including in particular the welfare of other people or humankind writ large” (Peterson, 2006, p. 78).

Various psychologists have addressed the two principles of achieving happiness and life satisfaction, hedonism and eudemonia. Peterson's (2006) research suggested that a forecaster for life satisfaction is eudaimonia, as it can exceed pleasure (hedonism). Peterson and his colleagues found that those who pursued eudemonic goals and activities were more satisfied than those who pursued pleasurable goals. Peterson noted that hedonism is not irrelevant to life satisfaction, but rather that hedonism provides less sustained levels of happiness than eudaimonia does (2006). Exploring the contrasts between hedonism and eudaimonia complements the central argument of this culminating comprehensive project: that the development of character strengths is useful to programming in empowerment focused non-profits whose mission is to empower the individuals that it serves. This culminating comprehensive project seeks to focus on strengths/virtues (which derives from the idea of eudaimonia) rather than increasing levels of happiness or subjective well-being (which derives from the idea of hedonism) for the basis of the proposed application.

Just as it is important to understand the maladies of the human experience, it is also critical to know the factors that influence success, perseverance, and human flourishing, which leads the discussion into strengths and their role in positive psychology. As explained by Dahlsgaard et al. (2005), previous to positive psychology, classified diagnostics were used to "describe much of what is wrong with people;" yet many researchers asked "what about those things that are right?" (p. 203). The goal of positive psychologists was to expand what previous psychology has examined with the addition of trying to

find out what is right about people and what set of character strengths can potentially lead to a fulfilling life (Dahlsgaard et al. 2005). As mentioned earlier, interest in “the good life” isn’t a new exploration as early philosophers sought the answer to “What attributes account for a good person?” (as cited in Weiner, 2008, p. 10). Wondering about the qualities of a “good person” led early philosophers to consider both character and virtue as applied to individuals. (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

***Pillar II: character virtues and strengths.***

In the anthology textbook “Character Strengths and Virtues”, Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) sought to define two concepts: ‘strengths’ and ‘individual highest potential’. This 800-page classification publication delved deep into human strengths and characteristic virtues, including offering detailed research on the most basic of strengths, as well as assessments and applications of strengths. Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) classification of strengths specifically addressed the second two pillars of positive psychology: individual strengths and positive institutions. In doing so, the authors sought to “shed light” on the first pillar, “the study of positive experiences” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 4-5).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) divided strengths into six main categories or virtues: 1) wisdom and knowledge, 2) courage, 3) humanity, 4) justice, 5) temperance, and 6) transcendence. Within each category, sets of character strengths were also identified. For example, the strengths that account for wisdom and knowledge are creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of

learning, and perspective. In total, the authors provided twenty-four character strengths labeled within the six main virtues. For a detailed description of the virtues and subcategories of strengths that Peterson and Seligman presented, see Appendix A. Table 1 also offers a brief overview of their virtues their associated strengths.

Table 1

*Summary of Virtues and Strengths:*

Virtue	Corresponding Strength
1. Wisdom and Knowledge	1. Creativity
	2. Curiosity
	3. Love of Learning
	4. Open-mindedness
	5. Perspective
2. Courage	6. Bravery
	7. Perseverance
	8. Honesty
	9. Zest
3. Humanity	10. Love
	11. Kindness
	12. Social Intelligence
4. Justice	13. Teamwork
	14. Fairness
	15. Leadership
5. Temperance	16. Forgiveness
	17. Humility
	18. Prudence
	19. Self-regulation
6. Transcendence	20. Appreciation of beauty and excellence
	21. Gratitude
	22. Hope
	23. Humor
	24. Spirituality

Table 1. Adapted from *Promoting Wellness: Integrating Community and Positive Psychology*, p. 926, Stephen Schueller, 2009, *Journal of Community Psychology*.

To best understand Appendix A and Table 1, it is important to define virtues and character strengths, as they are two different concepts. As defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004), virtues are:

The core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence...We argue that these are universal, perhaps grounded in biology and through evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species (p. 13).

Within virtues are character strengths, which can be defined as the ingredients, processes or mechanisms that help to define virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Virtues are recognized across world cultures and throughout time, as will be explained later in this literature review (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006).

Table 2 below represents correlated attributes that are associated with strengths from the Character and Virtues book by Seligman and Peterson (2004). This table also explains the link between strengths and some visible attributes that correlate.

Table 2

*Development Character Strengths Related to Youth Development.*

Behaviors/Attributes	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
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<b><i>Commitment to learning</i></b>	
Achievement motivation	Love of learning; curiosity
School engagement	Love of learning
Homework	Persistence
Bonding to school	Citizenship
Reading for pleasure	Curiosity; love of learning
Positive values	
Caring	Kindness
Equality and social justice	Fairness
Integrity	Integrity
Responsibility	~Integrity
Restraint	Self-regulation; prudence
Social Competencies	
Planning and decision making	Hope; open-mindedness
Interpersonal competence	Love; social intelligence
Cultural competence	~Social intelligence
Resistance skills	Self-regulation; prudence
Peaceful conflict resolution	Perspective; ~social intelligence; ~leadership
Positive Identity	
Personal power	~Creativity
Self-esteem	None
Sense of purpose	Spirituality
Positive view of personal future	Hope

Adapted from *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*, p. 83, by Peterson & Seligman, 2004, Oxford University Press.

Peterson (2006) researched ways to boost happiness by randomly assigning research participants one of the following five exercises to perform within a period of one week:

“1) Gratitude visit (write and deliver a letter of gratitude), 2)

Three good things (every day for a week, write down three

things that went well and explain, 3) You at your best (write a story about an event that brought out the best in you, review story every day for one week), 4) Identify Signature Strengths (take online measure of strengths of character and not your highest scores, use these more in the week), and 5) Using Signature Strengths in a Novel way (take online measure of strengths of character and note your highest scores; use strength 'in novel ways' during the week" (p. 99).

Patterson (2006) discovered that individuals who were assigned to use their signature strengths in novel ways for one week noted increased levels of happiness during their six-month follow-up sessions. In addition, those who practiced the strength boosting exercises past the one-week participatory period had maintained higher levels of happiness past the six-month follow-up than those whose who were not asked to continue this practice.

Seligman (2006) stated, "Good character is essential for individuals and societies to thrive" (p. 118). Similarly, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) found that, by understanding what one's strengths are, one could nurture their strongest qualities and, while doing so, identify niches in which they could best utilize these strengths. Understanding one's innate strengths is important when making life decisions, as one can choose life roles that parallel their known strengths (Biswas-Diener, 2011). Additionally, understanding individual strengths is important because research has shown that by recognizing them one can prevent some mental illnesses (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).



Salovey et al., (2000) suggested that, while negative emotions can promote illness the opposite can be seen for positive emotions and promoting inverse effects and can be used therapeutically. In addition to possibly preventing illnesses, there are other positive benefits to health and well-being like leading happy and fulfilling lives; this was identified in a study by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) which found that people who identified as happy enjoyed later successes in life from marriage, employment, income, friendship, positive work performance and improved mental health.

Biswas-Diener and Patterson (2011) noted that strengths are pre-existing innate capacities that, when employed, can energize people. They stated in their research that strengths are universally found and that people in a variety of cultures, from the poor to the very rich, all have individual character strengths.

### **Strengths Across Cultures.**

Previous research has identified several strengths that are near to being universal; specifically, virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence have been identified across cultures (Park et al., 2006). Park et al., found in a study conducted in 2006 that, in 54 nations and across all 50 U.S. states, there was a prevalence of the 24 different character strengths listed in Table 1 that they were examined for in the participant pool. Among the most common strengths identified across the United States were kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, and judgment. The most common strengths identified around the world were justice and humanity, temperance, wisdom, transcendence, and courage (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005). In focus groups

with indigenous cultures like the Maasai tribe in Western Kenya and the Inuitsuit in Northern Greenland, Biswas-Diener confirmed that the same core virtues previously mentioned were also recognized and valued (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006).

Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2006) suggested that common strengths are important around the world and are displayed by most people in most societies because “these dispositions are needed for a group to survive and thrive” (p. 120). Park et al. (2006) also found that in addition to strengths being identified and recognized around the world, they also have a ranking order that may be fairly similar from place to place.

#### **Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS).**

The Values in Action Inventory (VIA-IS) was developed in conjunction with the research conducted for Character Strengths and Virtues by Seligman and Peterson (2006) and included strengths that were universally recognized. This free, online assessment uses the same 24 strengths and 6 virtues identified by Seligman and Peterson. It has been translated into a multitude of languages and has been used in 190 countries by 2.6 million people (“VIA Institute”, 2014). The VIA-IS is designed as a questionnaire with a 240-item self-report measure that provides feedback on the top strengths of an individual. While Seligman and Peterson (2004) noted that not all of the character strengths could be determined from self-reporting, they explained that it is the field’s current best attempt at measuring individual strengths.

The questions and scenarios presented in the survey were drawn from a previous questionnaire titled “The Wellsprings,” designed by Diener, Isaac, Cowitz, Clifton, and Seligman (Emmons, 2003). Additionally, the VIA-IS survey was inspired by the well-known Gallup Organizations Strengths Finder measure, which focused primarily on workplace team strengths (Rath, 2007). The VIA-IS survey uses a five-point Likert scale to measure an individual’s set of strengths, as listed in Table 1 (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Researchers have used this measure across cultures and nations and demonstrated consistent reliability and validity: “Each of the strength subscales have alphas greater than .70 as well as 4-month test-retest correlations greater than .70. Results from the VIA correlate with self-nomination of strengths ( $r$ s equal or greater than .50)” (as cited in Schueller, p. 925, 2009). For a sample of items used in the VIA-IS assessment, see Appendix B.

### **Realise2 Strengths Assessment.**

In contrast to the VIA-Is strengths survey is the Realise2 strengths assessment, as it is important to also introduce another prominent strengths assessment for comparison. The Realise2 CAPP 4-M (Marshal, Maximize, Moderate & Minimize) strengths assessment was developed by The Center of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) in Culvertry, England (Garcea & Linley, 2011). It examines sixty different attributes categorized as three criteria dimensions: energy, performance, and use. It provides users with a comprehensive profile report that provides details on strengths and weaknesses using four quadrants (see Figure 1 below); the assessment identifies for the test

participant their strengths and weaknesses in these four categories: 1) strengths that they likely already know they have and utilize on a regular basis that provide energy when employed (realized and energizing), 2) strengths that they have don't know they have and aren't used often but provide energy when employed (unrealized and energizing), 3) behaviors that are learned over time that may be confused as strengths to the individual, yet are exhausting and de-energizing (learned behaviors and exhausting), and, lastly, 4) weaknesses that are exhausting to the individual when employed (weakness and exhausting) (Garcea & Linley, 2011). The CAPP 4-M model then suggests actions tailored to the identified strengths and weaknesses, using the four M's in the title: Marshal realized strengths, Maximize unrealized strengths, Moderate learned behaviors, and Minimize weaknesses (Garcea & Linley, 2011).

Figure 1

*CAPP 4-M Model*

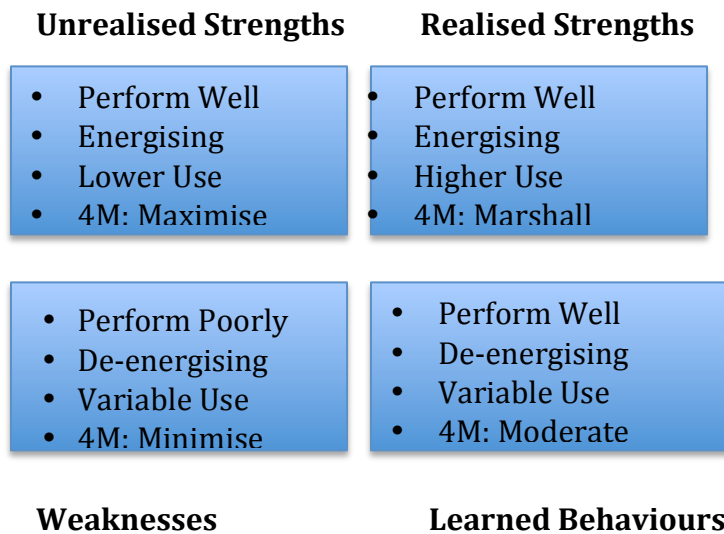


Figure 1. CAPP 4-M Model (2011).

Once a person is assessed using the CAPP 4-M model, individuals are given advice about how to utilize strengths and avoid weaknesses in their everyday life. It is believed by the authors of the tool that identifying what an individual does best and loves to do is a start to a more productive life (Garcea & Linley, 2011).

The main difference between the VIA-IS measure and the Realise2 measure is the cost. As of 2015, utilizing the Realise2 measure costs 16 Euros while the VIA-IS is free for a basic test. With the Realise2 measure, the test participant receives a more robust profile including strengths that they have learned that ought to be focused on less, as well as weaknesses. Also unique to the Realise2 measure is the assessment of realized strengths in addition to the unrealized strengths. The VIA-IS measure doesn't attest for strengths that are realized and used often versus unrealized and not used often (Garcea & Linley, 2011).

### **Strengths and Empowerment.**

The working definition of empowerment for this thesis, as stated earlier, is an adult's ability to master, control, and manage resources to advance their future. As stated by Schueller (2009), "Empowerment refers to the notion that individuals and communities possess the skills and strengths necessary to flourish and function. In this view, the goal of a researcher or practitioner is to mobilize this potential." (p. 931). Schueller continued by explaining that a researcher or practitioner can help empower individuals with interventions that emphasize subjective well-being and signature strengths. Positive psychology

strength assessments are designed to promote individual's strengths as more fruitful than addressing and working on weaknesses. In a study by Schueller that tested this hypothesis, participants were separated into two groups (2009). One group engaged in an activity that used signature strengths while the other group worked on a weakness of theirs, each for two weeks. The strengths were assessed using the VIA-IS assessment. Those who used strengths regarded their participation as more enjoyable than those who worked on their weaknesses. The strengths group also experienced longer lasting benefits of well-being and health. Schueller (2009) also noted that those in the strengths group were more empowered and achieved lasting benefits of subjective-well-being following the intervention.

***Pillar III: positive institutions and communities.***

The third pillar, positive institutions and communities, focuses on how to operationalize positive institutions, a concern for both positive psychology and a related field focusing on community level strengths: community psychology. Schueller (2009) defines community psychology, as "a community wellness approach [that] should strive to balance the promotion of individual wellness with the collective goals of the community" (p. 928). Positive psychology and community psychology institutions share parallel themes: political and societal organizations that redistribute resources, promote democracy, and empower individuals (Schueller, 2009).

Community psychologists have studied community at institutions such as the work place and within schools (Schueller, 2009). Schueller (2009) stated

that, by incorporating positive psychology interventions such as strengths or the use of frequent positive emotions, wellness can be conceptualized as “generalized resistance resources” or considered as resources a person, or in the case of this pillar, a community, can access that can assist them in inching closer to their collective goals (p. 927). Schueller continued, “Focusing on the positive can be especially powerful for those individuals who often have never considered what they do really well, (i.e., in the lower class, disenfranchised groups)” (2009, p. 927).

As noted earlier in this paper, positive psychology is a relatively new field, soon to reach its third decade as a discipline. Much of what has been published on this field thus far has focused on people in the workplace within the Western world. Not until recently has positive psychology paired social it’s interventions within social change programs (Schueller, 2009).

To explore known applications, the following section of the literature review offers an examination of three community-focused organizations or institutions that have utilized tools and concepts of positive psychology in their programs: the ABCD Institute, LASA Development, and the Strengths Project. These can be considered examples of positive psychology institutions, the third pillar of positive psychology.

*ABCD institute and the mercado central.*

In 1999, Asset Based Community Development Institute, or ABCD Institute, worked with the local Latino immigrant community in Minneapolis, Minnesota to create a retail cooperative, The Mercaco Central. ABCD Institute

believed that “asset-based community development can draw upon existing community strengths to build stronger, more sustainable communities for the future... each community boasts a unique combination of assets on which to build its future” (Linley et al., 2011, p. 146). Working with the ABCD Institute, the community purchased and invested in three buildings worth \$2.4 million. Among their successes, they pursued and received \$277,000 in small business loans to support the cooperative, established forty-four businesses within the community, made first year sales of over \$2 million, increased employment opportunities, and increased city and state revenues (Linley et al., 2011). By merging the asset-based programming with traditional community organizing, they assessed those assets The Mercado Central community already had available. They then identified the areas of talent possessed by community members and developed a business model to support them. The Mercado Central cooperative was able to thrive because of their efforts in maximizing their community strengths, working collectively and tailoring their cooperative according to the skill sets of individual members (Linley et al., 2011).

*LASA development.*

Launched in 1998, LASA conducted a strengths-based project working with villagers in Nepal. The heart of the program was a 4-D model that focused on discovery, dreaming, design, and delivery (Linley et al., 2011). With regards to discovery, villagers were asked what went well in the village that they had done together as a community. They were asked what sort of village they could best imagine, or dream for future generations. Next, they were questioned about



how they wanted the design of the community to look like, i.e. their plan and their objectives and goals. Lastly, LASA assisted the villagers to implement the design that was driven by them in the delivery phase. LASA then communicated results to community members (Linley et al., 2011).

Overall, the project inspired the community to raise money for building foundations for local schools that were ruined in a recent monsoon; they also applied for and received a grant to build the first local secondary school. In addition, they raised money to cover school registration fees for those who couldn't afford them as well as to help with teacher salaries. According to Linley et al. (2011), the 4-D model used by LASA inspired initial change that furthered the community. The outcomes of the project were sustainable. The idea of working together as a community to achieve benefits continued after LASA's involvement (Linley et al., 2011).

*The Strengths Project.*

The Strengths Project was launched in March of 2008 as the world's "first positive psychology charity" with a mission of "helping to improve the quality of life of people living in poverty, not just materially, but psychologically as well" ("The Strengths Project," 2009).

Researchers conducted an assessment of residents living in a slum called Shiriti in Kolkata, India. The objective of the study was to explore how the use of positive psychology strengths assessments could potentially be harnessed in a social change capacity. Researchers began their study by first assessing adult

female community member's strengths with the Realise2 questionnaire (Garcea & Linley, 2011).

Each one of the participants was identified as having their own individual strengths, which had been largely unexplored. Most of them were found to be abundant in social strengths and to have a remarkable sense of community identity. The researchers also noted that most participants had thriving family lives (Garcea & Linley, 2011).

During the initial stage of the project, there were two meetings held with local women. In the meetings, participants expressed a need for extra income and were most interested in learning how to sew, since the demand was high in the area. Following the meeting, four sewing machines were donated and women were able to sign up for an 8-10 month sewing course. The aim of the project was to "form a co-operative where the jobs would be aligned according to their strengths" (Linley et al., 2011, p. 151). Linley et al. (2011) noted that the women were hopeful not just because of the increased income but also because it was a social project and they would have time in a group to share and collaborate. People who were skilled in sewing were recruited to become teachers of the co-operative.

Despite the many successes identified by researchers, there were also many challenges. For example, the scholars noted that their findings were limited given that this project was conducted with a small group of women. In addition, there was a general lack of documentation on this project, which means that it is unknown how the actual strengths assessments were used and how

recommendations were implemented for participating women (Linley et al., 2011). It was also unclear what specific strengths were accounted for in relation to work success. Furthermore, longer-term results of the project were also absent and The Strengths Project did not define or indicate if any increases were discovered in terms of empowerment for the women involved (Linley et al., 2011). Despite these challenges, the study was the first of its kind to pair strengths assessment with project implementation for social change (Linley et al., 2011).

### **Proposed Application**

While researching positive psychology and strengths assessment programming, a plethora of information on organization and business development was identified. Most of the literature on these topics discussed how strengths assessments could be beneficial for organizational development and individual employee performance (Schueller, 2009). However, it appears that little research and even less implementation of such assessments have occurred within social services. As presented in the literature review, one known strengths-based project for individuals in an impoverished area was The Strengths Project in Kolkata, India; however, no other such projects have been identified. Furthermore, there was minimal research on positive psychology used in conjunction with social change programs domestically and around the world. Given these findings, I plan to help bridge these gaps by designing methods and models for how positive psychology strengths assessment could potentially be used in the work of NGOs/non-profits.

For this culminating project, I have focused the proposed application specifically on adult empowerment NGOs because, based on the literature reviewed, these types of organizations serve populations that would benefit from identifying and practicing strengths, leading to increased levels of empowerment. The purpose of this proposed application is to provide NGOs with a new strength-based resource guide to potentially enhance their programs.

The goal of this resource guide template is to inform and advise adult empowerment-focused NGOs on the importance of understanding individual strengths as well as to equip them with tools to help individuals' access and leverage these strengths. By assessing and identifying all individuals' innate strengths, organizations can properly employ appropriate strategies to assist the people they serve. The best audience for this resource guide is empowerment based NGOs/non-profits themselves as it seeks to add a small but vital step to their programming.

The resource guide template was developed using positive psychology research in conjunction with research on empowerment and offers information on how to access two widely used empowerment measures and two strengths measures. The resource guide template offers step-by-step instruction about how the NGO staff member and client would use the empowerment and strengths measures. For each, there are two measures to choose from with a brief description about what each offers. An NGO staff member and client can choose one empowerment measure and one strengths measure to use. The

resource guide template is intended for use prior to any goal setting the client or participant sets while using the programming of the NGO. It is also suggested that the empowerment measure be administered again four months after the first initial empowerment measure was given to see if increased levels of empowerment were achieved.

Following initial assessment, it is recommended that NGO/non-profit staff members have one-on-one weekly meetings with participating adults to follow-up on and further discuss their strengths. It is also advised that participants keep a journal to document their efforts using the strength boosting exercises as they continue to practice identified strengths. It is expected that, based on the research of Peterson and Seligman (2004), those who practice boosting their strengths versus those who are assigned to just engage in strengths assessment but not practice using the strengths will have more significant rates of improved subjective well-being in follow up sessions. In an effort to enhance strengths, the NGO/non-profit staff member should also promote the practice of strength boosting exercises. By keeping regular meetings and a journal, they would be able to evaluate progress and any increased levels of empowerment.

Ed Diener, one of the founders of positive psychology, explained that happiness could help one better achieve their goals, their relationships, and make more money (as cited by Belic, 2011). By indicating and acknowledging strengths in an individual, they may be empowered to pursue opportunities that help them to lead successful lives and achieve higher levels of happiness. By

leading with strengths rather than weaknesses, it is more likely that people will love what they do and perform better.

A key success factor for any interventions is that the individual post-intervention can sustain it. Essentially, it is our mission that at the individual level, we are providing individuals with lasting intrapersonal resources that they can sustain and nurture over time. This means that we are placing a greater emphasis on individuals taking responsibility for their own personal development. The discipline of personal responsibility is a critical success factor in individual interventions, since we are looking to people to take responsibility for their own growth and development, and to pursue this and take it in the direction that is right for them. (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011, p. 165).

Adults participating with an empowerment-focused organization can potentially change their lives as they seek opportunities for themselves by taking initiative with regard to their future. When utilized, this resource guide has the potential for creating long-term results for the individual involved. This tool should be considered a jumping off point for igniting and inspiring people to understand their personal assets and strengths and how they can engage them. By identifying the strengths of the adults who participate with these empowerment-focused NGOs/non-profits, he or she will have more known resources in their toolkit to use as they seek to actualize their hopes, dreams and goals.

### **Discussion**

Peterson and Seligman (2004) stated that they could only do so much with characters strengths in 2004 but that a future goal of theirs for the field was to characterize the properties that enable strengths and virtues. This characterization would point to attributes of the physical environment and the social environment, an example of which would be to study the empowerment found from the NGOs who utilized strengths assessments in their programming. The resource guide template designed for this culminating comprehensive project would work as an ideal guide to enable strengths within social change programs and could touch upon the future goals that Peterson and Seligman had in mind for the field of positive psychology.

### **Anticipated Results**

With the use of my resource guide, I anticipate that adults who take the assessment and participate in the mentoring program will experience greater empowerment and a better alignment of their programming. This resulting empowerment would be a strong acknowledgement of their individual resources that can be accessed to help them in the pursuit of their goals. As Schueller (2009) suggested in his research, practitioners, or in the case of this paper, the non-profit staff member, will have the ability to help identify strengths that an individual they are serving has and then empower them by assisting them to achieve lasting benefits post-intervention. Again, the working definition of empowerment for this paper is that it is adult's ability to master, control and manage resources to advance their future. I believe that adding an intervention

of assessing strengths and offering strength boosting exercises will allow individuals participating to have a stronger ability to control and manage their unique resources (i.e. their strengths) to advance their future. By implementing this intervention, participants can work towards the goals they and their non-profit partner establish with more ease as they utilize their character strengths. It was identified in the literature review that, by practicing positive psychology interventions, people are more successful across multiple domains, including income, marriage, work performance, friendship, and mental and physical health (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). I foresee that NGOs/non-profits will see similar improved results in their already existing programming with the addition of this intervention.

The resource guide template I created, while referencing information from the Values in Action Institute, is intended to be a small, yet concise, resource tool. Since it is expected that the NGOs or non-profits that might use this guide will already be focused on empowerment for the adult members they serve, my resource guide template is designed to help enhance that process.

### **Limitations**

The Realise2 assessment identifies four areas (realize, unrealized, learned behaviors and weaknesses) and offers ways to understand and use the information provided. The VIA-IS assessment could be improved to identify strengths that are used often by the test taker (realized strengths), strengths that are hardly used (unrealized strengths), behaviors that are learned that are not necessarily strengths (learned behaviors) and identify the participant's



weaknesses. The VIA-IS only identifies the participant's strengths from strongest to least strong. It is important to know and understand each area because, as explained in the literature review and illustrated in Figure 1, two of the four areas (as listed previously) for the Realise2 are energizing, (realized strengths and unrealized strengths) and ought to be emphasized more, while de-emphasizing the other two categories (learned behaviors and weaknesses). By understanding the four categories (realized strengths, unrealized strengths, learned behaviors, and weaknesses) measured with the Realise2, one can begin jobs, tasks, and community roles that highlight what they inherently do well, while being aware of what they don't do well and ought to minimize in their daily roles. Still, the VIA-IS assessments are offered along side the Realise2 because the VIA-IS assessment is free of cost and does provide the participant with an indication and description of their top strengths. The Realise2 assessment is expensive, which is why I offer two strengths assessment options in the resource guide. As of 2015, the cost to take the standard Realise2 exam is sixteen Euros and to create the advanced profile, which provides reflective exercises for the advancement of strengths, costs thirty Euros. Because of the potential for cost becoming a barrier, this assessment may be less accessible for empowerment NGOs whose budgets may be small.

Another limitation of the intervention is related to a criticism of the VIA-IS assessment. Specifically, while it is translated into many languages, it appears to be geared primarily towards English reading adults (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). Appendix B displays some of the sample questions for the

assessment. Given this English language focus, it may be difficult to accurately translate all of the questions on the survey across cultures. For example, for the characteristic of forgiveness and mercy, the sample question asks the participant to evaluate how much they “allow others to leave their mistakes in the past and make a fresh start” (Peterson & Seligman, p. 629, 2004). Some cultures and languages may not ascribe to time continuums such as past, present, and future, therefore making this particular question more difficult to understand or potentially invalid. As identified in the literature review, many strengths and virtues do translate and are considered to be universal across cultures; however, there are concerns that the questionnaire may not be entirely translatable across cultures with regards to themes and values. Further research on creating cultural sensitive strengths assessments is needed.

Another limitation identified for this resource guide is the lack of opportunity to test it in a real world setting. Had there been more time to develop this project, it would ideally have been tested and revised per evaluation results. It would also have been beneficial to assess empowerment levels prior and post an approximate six-week time period for adults whose strengths were analyzed and practiced to establish this project. However, due to a lack of time for implementation and analysis, there are no definitive conclusions of this project to share.

Further limitations for an organization adapting this intervention into their programming might be that they could be unfamiliar with asset-based assessment. Because positive psychology is still an early social science, many

are still unaware of its potential for providing alternative solutions to empowerment based social change programming for adults. In addition, as mentioned earlier, little discussion has occurred with positive psychology and social change. The majority of positive psychology research is business development that has studied success in the work place. However, the resource guide template does briefly introduce positive psychology and how strength and asset-based assessment is significant to NGO programming.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Recommended Next Steps**

While exploring the research and examining strengths assessments, I had a difficult time finding examples that were not focused on workplace development or the objective of increasing workplace satisfaction and productivity. Thus far, positive psychology has done little to address and better serve the social change sector. After an extensive search, only one textbook on positive psychology in social change was identified as a subject pairing. The current literature on work place enhancement using positive psychology interventions is limiting to other communities/institutions mentioned in pillar three (schools and social change NGOs) because it lacks research on better improving programming in institutions outside of the work place. I would suggest that more research take a look at how positive psychology interventions can potentially improve social change programs. For example, the LASA project in Nepal, previously mentioned in the literature review, was innovative and unique because the project administrators assessed what went well in their

community and how they could build upon already existing resources and/or strengths. NGOs' and development programming generally focus on what can be improved in projects in order to produce results that can have a positive effect on mankind. What is lacking is more dialogue to support programming that builds projects up, like in the LASA project in Nepal, versus building down by first identifying faults and creating solutions to problems. Both approaches are valuable and necessary for alternative perspectives to creating change.

While I was unable to test the proposed application, given the time limitations of this project, I would recommend that one of the primary next steps be to implement it in a real world setting. The resource guide was designed as a template. To further develop it, it would be wise to test the current proposed application with an adult education non-profit or NGO. To best facilitate this, participants should be divided into two groups: one that receives the condition and uses the strengths measure (the experiment group) and one group that will not receive the strengths measure (the control group). When testing the intervention, all individuals in both groups would take an empowerment assessment before participating with the NGO and then again after a specified amount of time. By using an experimental design the results would indicate if the group who took the strengths assessment had higher levels of empowerment versus the control group whose strengths were not identified. Per the outcomes of this initial testing, the guide should then be adapted as needed.

This project was designed for use by NGOs whose programming supports adult empowerment. However, this proposed application is also transferrable to

many different populations and different programming areas at a variety of institutions, not limited to NGOs. For example, the resource guide template could be beneficial for college counselors to utilize because they could adapt materials to work with their students on how they can employ their strengths into their college career success. In addition, participating organizations or institutions could consider using it to assess and engage members of youth. Values in Action Institute, the organization that administers the VIA-IS strengths assessment, also has an available strengths assessment for adolescents.

The overall goal of this culminating project was to bridge the gap between positive psychology in the work place and the inclusion of positive psychology interventions in social change programs. I believe that positive psychology can have a place in organizations that support social change, international and within the United States, but that a paucity of research has limited it's application in such contexts. The purpose of this cumulative comprehensive project was to continue the dialogue around the incorporation of positive psychology and social change. The work detailed herein is significant because it indicates that positive psychology does have a place in social change programming that supports empowerment for adults, as it has the potential of creating lasting impact.

Participation in positive psychology interventions suggests an increase in the individual levels of happiness and success. Empowerment is defined as an adult's ability to master, control, and manage resources to advance their future. I believe that, with the addition of strength-identifying activities and the practice

of them in novel ways, adults participating in nonprofit/NGO programs will be empowered. They will have the ability to control and manage their strengths and resources and advance their future goals while working with the already establish programming of the NGO or non-profit whose services they are utilizing.

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## Appendix A

### The VIA Classification of Character Strengths & Virtues

See website link for full descriptions and categorization of the six virtue categories and the twenty-four corresponding character strengths:

<http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths/VIA-Classification>

The Six Virtue Categories are 1.) Wisdom and Knowledge, 2.) Courage, 3.) Humanity, 4.) Justice, 5.) Temperance, and 6.) Transcendence.

The Corresponding Twenty-Four Strengths are:

[Wisdom and Knowledge]

- 1.) Creativity
- 2.) Curiosity
- 3.) Love of Learning
- 4.) Open-mindedness
- 5.) Perspective

[Courage]

- 6.) Bravery
- 7.) Perseverance

8.) Honesty

9.) Zest

[Humanity]

10.) Love

11.) Kindness

12.) Social Intelligence

[Justice]

13.) Teamwork

14.) Fairness

15.) Leadership

[Temperance]

16.) Forgiveness

17.) Humility

18.) Prudence

19.) Self-regulation

[Transcendence]

20.) Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence

21.) Gratitude

22.) Hope

23.) Humor

24.) Spirituality.

Definitions of all the Virtues and Strengths are at link provided above.

## Appendix B

## Adapted Sample Items from the VIA-IS

Creativity	<p>When given an opportunity to do something new, I think of alternative ways to get the same thing done.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Very much like me</li> <li>○ Like me</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Unlike me</li> <li>○ Very much unlike me</li> <li>○ I do not have any special urge to do something original</li> </ul>
Curiosity	<p>I am bored often</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Very much like me</li> <li>○ Like me</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Unlike me</li> <li>○ Very much unlike me</li> <li>○ I do not have any special urge to do something original</li> </ul>
Open-mindedness	<p>I don't think of other options when I like the original option offered.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Very much like me</li> <li>○ Like me</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Unlike me</li> <li>○ Very much unlike me</li> <li>○ I do not have any special urge to do something original</li> </ul>
Love of learning	<p>I always go out of my way to seek out educational events or opportunities to learn.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Very much like me</li> <li>○ Like me</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Unlike me</li> <li>○ Very much unlike me</li> <li>○ I do not have any special urge to do something original</li> </ul>
Perspective	<p>People describe me as mature and wise for my age.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Very much like me</li> <li>○ Like me</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Unlike me</li><li>○ Very much unlike me</li><li>○ I do not have any special urge to do something original</li></ul>
Bravery	<p>I often stand up for what I believe in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Very much like me</li><li>○ Like me</li><li>○ Neutral</li><li>○ Unlike me</li><li>○ Very much unlike me</li><li>○ I do not have any special urge to do something original</li></ul>

(Adapted from Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 629)

## Appendix C

### Resource Guide Template

#### Introduction

Ed Diener, one of the founders of the field positive psychology, explains that happiness can help one better achieve their goals, improve their relationships, and make more money<sup>1</sup>. Positive psychology is the study of human flourishing and positive well-being. The goal of the science is to understand why some people are successful and happy while others aren't. Within the field, positive psychologists have created exercises designed to nurture individual's innate character strengths and unique talents. Research has uncovered that by identifying, acknowledging, and practicing strengths an individual will achieve increased levels of happiness, both short and long term<sup>2</sup>. Participants who identified as being happy in a long-term study published in 2005 were found to have successful marriages, friendships, successful employment, increased income, positive work performance, and good mental health<sup>3</sup>.

The purpose of this resource guide template (RGT) is to advise adult empowerment-focused NGOs on the importance of identifying and leveraging the strengths of the stakeholders, so that those individuals may reap the benefits that studies suggest promotes happiness. Recognizing that all individuals have innate strengths, it is important that individuals be aware of them in order to properly employ these strengths and lead more fulfilling lives.

Empowerment is the ability of an individual to master, control, and

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<sup>1</sup> Shadayac, T., Reid, F., Shimizu, E. H., & Belic, R. (2011). *Happy*. United States: Wadi Rum Productions.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson C. (2006). Happiness. In *A primer in positive psychology* (pp. 75-106). New York, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: does happiness lead to success? *Psychological bulletin*, 131(6), 803-855.

manage resources to advance their future. In this case the resource to be mastered, managed, and controlled is personal strengths. It is anticipated that with the use of this resource guide template, in combination with the services the NGO provides, that those being served will experience increased empowerment as they employ their unique resources (strengths) for the betterment of their future. Increased empowerment will likely increase the quality and effectiveness of an NGO's current practices therefore helping the NGO to better align with its mission and values.

To help NGOs better incorporate positive psychology into their practice, this resource guide template offers resources and a step-by-step guide on how to access and use two widely used empowerment measures and two strengths measures. Additionally, the resource guide template provides a guide on how to document use of this tool and measure success.

Resource Guide Template (RGT) Table of Contents:

- Empowerment Measures Instructional Guide
- Strength Measures Instructional Guide
- NGO Staff Member Notes
- Example of Client's Strengths Portfolio
- Session notes

### **Empowerment Measures Instructional Guide:**

This section will walk you through the steps to assess initial empowerment levels with your stakeholders. Despite the fact that multiple measures are available, the two measures briefly described below have been determined to best align with NGO practice. Once the empowerment measure is chosen, repeat the same measure again in four months to assess any increased levels of empowerment.



Step 1: Work with the client on an empowerment assessment. This assessment should be completed prior to any goal setting with the NGO so that the individual can be retested after programming is complete to determine if there were increased levels of empowerment when employing strengths. See below for a list of recommended empowerment measures. Depending on the reading and writing abilities of the client, NGO staff may need to assist the test-taker.

Suggested empowerment assessments:

1. Sociopolitical Control Scale (SPCS).<sup>4</sup> SPCS assesses psychological empowerment. Psychological Empowerment is the perception of empowerment identified by the test participant. The assessment measures the following: how people constructively work through problems, their emotional intelligence, and how they behave with regard to challenges. The most recent version, along with background information, and instructions for use and scoring, can be found in the original journal article, available here:  
<http://med.mui.ac.ir/clinical/pezeshkei/fulltext.pdf>
2. Spreitzer (1995) Four Components of Psychological Empowerment Scale: Meaning, Competence, Self-Determination, Impact. This measure examines psychological empowerment (perception of empowerment) in the following ways: how the individual interprets meaning in life, how competent they perceive themselves to be in their day to day lives, how self-determined they are to work towards goals, and how much impact they perceive they contribute to society. This measurement can be found in the original journal article, along with background information, and instructions for use and scoring, available here:

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<sup>4</sup> Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American journal of community psychology*, 23(5), 581-599.

<http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/spreitze/Pdfs/PsychEmpowerment.pdf>

Step 2: Once the exam is complete, save the results. Print two copies of the results, one to be given to the test-taker and one to be kept in the client file. See example portfolio for client.

Step 3: Complete the same empowerment assessment again in four months after the individual's strengths are assessed and practiced continuously for that duration. Assess if increased levels of empowerment were achieved. Keep the record in the client's file.

### **Strength Measures Instructional Guide:**

This section of the resource guide template will introduce steps for walking participants through the strengths assessment process. Provided here are resources and information on two culturally sensitive strengths-based assessments: The VIA-IS Assessment and the Realise2.

#### **Steps for Strengths Assessment and Application:**

Step 1: Work with the client on a strengths assessment. See below for a list of recommended strengths assessments. Depending on client reading and writing abilities, NGO staff may need to assist the test-taker.

## Suggested Strengths Measures:

1. VIA-IS Character Strengths Assessment. The Values in Action Inventory (VIA-IS)<sup>5</sup> was developed to include strengths that are universally recognized. This free, online assessment examines 24 strengths that are aligned within 6 virtues (see chart below). It has been translated into a multitude of languages and used in 190 countries by 2.6 million people.<sup>6</sup> The VIA-IS is designed as a questionnaire with a 240-item self-report measure that provides feedback on the top strengths of an individual. A free basic strengths assessment exam is available at the link below:  
[www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)

## Summary of Virtues and Strengths:

Virtue	Corresponding Strength & Definition
Wisdom and Knowledge	Creativity <i>(Innovative; adaptive; inventive)</i>
	Curiosity <i>(Investigative; open to new understandings)</i>
	Love of Learning <i>(New task mastery)</i>
	Open-mindedness <i>(Takes in new information without judgment)</i>
	Perspective <i>(Provides knowledgeable advice; considers multiple points of views in decision making)</i>
Courage	Bravery <i>(Courageous; bold; speaking up for rights)</i>
	Perseverance <i>(Determined; insistent; finishing challenging tasks)</i>
	Honesty <i>(Moral; righteous; authentic)</i>
	Zest <i>(Enthusiastic; energetic)</i>

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press and Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

<sup>6</sup> (“VIA Institute”, 2014).

Humanity	Love <i>(Tender; values relationships)</i>
	Kindness <i>(Compassionate; sympathetic)</i>
	Social Intelligence <i>(Aware of the emotions of others and themselves; aware of motivations)</i>
Justice	Teamwork <i>(Collaborative; communicative; cooperative)</i>
	Fairness <i>(Values equality; Fair-minded)</i>
	Leadership <i>(Governing; provides guidance; encouraging of others)</i>
Temperance	Forgiveness <i>(Merciful; understanding; tolerate)</i>
	Humility <i>(Modest; humble; unpretentious)</i>
	Prudence <i>(Judicious; careful; cautious; practical)</i>
	Self-regulation <i>(Uses self-control; not impulsive)</i>
Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty and excellence <i>(Admiration; marvel; amazement)</i>
	Gratitude <i>(Thankful; appreciative)</i>
	Hope <i>(Optimistic)</i>
	Humor <i>(Witty; comedic; appreciates comicality)</i>
	Spirituality <i>(Faithful; religious)</i>

2. Realise2. The Realise2 CAPP 4-M (Marshal, Maximize, Moderate & Minimize) strengths assessment<sup>7</sup> examines 60 different strengths according to three dimensions: 1) how these strengths provide energy for the individual, 2) how well are these strengths performed, and 3) how often are these strengths used.

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<sup>7</sup> G. Nicky, P. A. Linley. (2011) Creating positive social change through building positive organizations: Four levels of intervention. In positive psychology as a force for social Change (159-174).

It provides users with a comprehensive profile report that provides details on strengths and weaknesses using a CAPP 4-M model (see Figure 1 below): the assessment identifies for the test participant their strengths and weaknesses in four categories:

1. Strengths that they likely already know they have and utilize on a regular basis that provide energy when employed (*realized and energizing*).
2. Strengths that they don't know they have and aren't used often but provide energy when employed (*unrealized and energizing*).
3. Behaviors that are learned over time that may be confused as strengths to the individual yet are exhausting and de-energizing (*learned behaviors and exhausting*).
4. Weaknesses that are exhausting to the individual when employed (*weakness and exhausting*).

The CAPP 4-M model then suggests actions tailored to the identified strengths and weaknesses, using the four M's: Marshal realized strengths, Maximize unrealized strengths, Moderate learned behaviors, and Minimize weaknesses. Realise2 strengths assessment exam is 16 Euros and available at the following link:

<http://www.cappeu.com/Realise2.aspx>

**CAPP 4-M Model**

**Unrealised Strengths**

- Perform Well
- Energising
- Lower Use
- 4M: Maximise

**Realised Strengths**

- Perform Well
- Energising
- Higher Use
- 4M: Marshall

- Perform Poorly
- De-energising
- Variable Use
- 4M: Minimise

- Perform Well
- De-energising
- Variable Use
- 4M: Moderate

**Weaknesses**

**Learned Behaviours**

Figure 1. CAPP 4-M Model (2011).

Step 2: Once the strengths assessment is complete, save the results. Print two copies of the results, one to be given to the test-taker and one to be kept in the client file. See example portfolio for client.

Step 3: Explain to the test-taker the description of each strength. Focus on the top 5-7 strengths.

Step 4: Introduce strength boosting exercises. These can be tailored to complement the specific empowerment-based programming offered by the NGO as well as to focus on specific strengths of the client. For example, if your organization's mission is to provide higher education scholarships, you can potentially advise specific areas of study to the client based on their benefiting strengths (e.g. justice as a top strength could match well with a political science study focus). Recommendations should be context specific, based on cultural norms and local opportunities available; determining these would be up to the discretion of the participating NGO staff.

If the VIA-IS assessment is used, there are suggested boosting strengths available at the VIA Institute on Character. Each boosting strength is described in the link below:

<http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths/VIA-Classification#nav>

Step 5: The NGO staff member then will advise their clients to keep a journal where they can reflect on their strengths and how they utilize them within their daily lives. Also recommended is that the staff member assigns homework assignments where the participant can practice strength boosting exercises. The journal would be an ideal place for the participant to document their experiences.

Step 6: it is wise to facilitate periodic follow up discussions between staff and participants to understand if progress is occurring and if not, why that might be.

Ideally, this would be an ongoing dialogue between the staff member and the client. Strengths are best utilized when they are consistently practiced and encouraged.

Additional Tips:

Practice what you preach: It is recommended that NGO staff members take the strengths assessment themselves. By doing so, staff can share their own experiences with the adults they serve regarding their strengths and how they have utilized them. This will help establish a trusting and reciprocal relationship between staff and the population being served.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Handy, F., & Kassam, M. (2006). Practice what you preach? The role of rural NGOs in women's empowerment. *University of Pennsylvania ScholarlyCommons: School of Social Policy and Practice.*

**NGO Staff Member Notes:**

(For NGO staff members only)

Empowerment and Strengths Assessments:

Client Name:

Empowerment Measure Initial Test Date:

Empowerment Measure Used:

Results (brief notes):

Final Date of Post-Empowerment Measure:

Results: Were there any changes observed in empowerment between the initial and final assessment? (Brief notes):

Strengths Measure Assessment Date Given:

Strengths Measure Used:

Top resulting strengths:

- 1.)
- 2.)
- 3.)
- 4.)
- 5.)
- 6.)
- 7.)



**Example of Client's Strengths Portfolio:**

[One copy to save in NGO client portfolio & one copy to be given to client]

Client Name: *John Doe*

Measure Used: *VIA Character Strengths Assessment*

Date of Assessment: *1/1/2015*

**Results (all strengths, in order):**

Include description of each strength as indicated on assessment result.

1. Fairness
2. Humility
3. Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
4. Gratitude
5. Teamwork
6. Judgment
7. Leadership
8. Perspective
9. Hope
10. Curiosity
11. Forgiveness
12. Humor
13. Love of Learning
14. Social Intelligence
15. Bravery
16. Love
17. Prudence
18. Creativity
19. Kindness

20. Honesty
21. Zest
22. Perseverance
23. Self-Regulation
24. Spirituality

Top 5 Strengths and Boosting Exercises:

1. Fairness (Justice Virtue) – Exercises for Boosting Fairness  
On client's paper work, include the link in addition to printing the provided boosting exercises.
2. Humility (Temperance Virtue) – Exercises for Boosting Humility.
3. Etc.

**Client Session Notes:**

Date of meeting:

Strength Discussed (1 of 5 top strengths):

Strength Boosting Exercised Assigned:

How will exercise be measured/documented?

Follow-up - Notes:

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Date of meeting:

Strength Discussed (1 of 5 top strengths):

Strength Boosting Exercised Assigned:

How will exercise be measured/documented?

Follow-up - Notes: