Character Strengths and Intellectual and Developmental Disability: A Strengths-Based Approach from Positive Psychology

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Abstract: There has been limited focus in the disability field on assessing and intervening to promote strengths of character. However, character strengths have received significant attention in the broader field of positive psychology. This paper provides an overview of the growing science of character strengths and explores why and how character strengths are relevant to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and a strengths-based perspective in the disability field. We offer key concepts, research findings, and interventions from the science of character that can provide a framework for the intellectual and developmental disabilities field to begin to build on strengths of character to enhance the systems of supports and quality of life outcomes experienced by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The study of character strengths has emerged within the field of positive psychology as a means of classifying and building on positive traits that reflect universal capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that benefit oneself and others, and enhance valued life outcomes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This paper will provide an overview of the growing science of character and critically examine the relevance of the science of character for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Specifically, we will offer key concepts, research findings, and interventions from the science of character that can provide a framework for future research and applications of character strengths to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The Science of Character

Beginning in the early 2000s, researchers began to focus on developing a scientific understanding of character. While the importance of character had been acknowledged throughout history, there had not been systematic attention to developing frameworks to identify, assess, and capitalize on strengths of character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Since this time, however, significant scholarship has been devoted to this topic and research has established the role of character strengths in understanding people and in promoting positive outcomes, including well-being, achievement, and leadership (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011). Further, a classification system for defining and categorizing character strengths emerged and provided guidance for researchers and practitioners working to build character strengths. This classification, the *VIA Classification of Strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) (formerly referred to as the "Values in Action Classification") was developed to provide a consensual nomenclature or descriptive "language" for understanding components of character and organizing them. Specifically, the *VIA Classification of Strengths* emerged from a three-year project involving 55 social scien-

tists designed to identify positive personality characteristics, organize them into a conceptual framework, and create valid instruments to assess them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Classification of Strengths includes 24 character strengths (see Table 1) organized into six overarching virtues (i.e., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) that researchers have suggested are universal across time and cultures (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Assessment tools, including the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) and the VIA Inventory of Strengths–Youth Version (VIA-Youth) (www.viacharacter.org), have been developed and studied across cultures (McGrath, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2006b; Shryack, Steger, Krueger, & Kallie, 2010; K. Singh & Choubisa, 2010; van Eeden, Wissing, Dreyer, Park, & Peterson, 2008).

Within the science of character, character strengths have been defined as positive, trait-like capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that benefit oneself and others (Niemiec, 2014), and also as "a family of positive characteristics . . . each of which exists in degrees" (Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 3). Virtues are viewed as core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers throughout time and, character strengths are seen as the specific psychological processes or mechanisms that define these virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Emergence of the science of character. The study of character strengths and virtues emerged with the development of the field of positive psychology, which developed as an alternative to the historical focus in the field of psychology on the disease model of human functioning (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006). The disease model has been described as focusing primarily on curing mental illness, whereas positive psychology emphasizes positive experiences, traits, and institutions and how strengths and capacities can be leveraged to make life more fulfilling and meaningful (Lopez & Snyder, 2011; Seligman, 2011). Just like the study of character strengths, the field of positive psychology has seen significant growth, with more than 20,000 articles published under this paradigm in the last two decades (Hart & Sasso, 2011). The mission of positive psychology has been described as measuring, understanding, and building on human strengths and virtues (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Critiques of positive psychology have been voiced, particularly related to concerns about an inadequate emphasis on negative experiences that people encounter in life (Held, 2004; Lazarus, 2003) or inadequate consideration of the range of virtues that define morality and moral behavior (Fowers, 2008). Diener (2009) argued that "positive psychologists do not ignore the negative in life. However, they maintain that often one form of solution to problems, and in some cases the most effective one, is to build on the positive rather than directly work on the problem" (p. 10). Positive psychologists hold that their goal is not to replace other lines of inquiry or to disregard challenging environmental circumstances, but instead to explore possible alternative solutions. Positive psychologists emphasize not only positive traits and experiences, but also ways that such traits and experiences can be used for addressing problems that are encountered, providing an alternative to the disease model of human functioning that has dominated the broader field of psychology through modern times (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Further, although there has been an explosion of research in positive psychology, there is an acknowledgement that further work is needed to fully capture the range of positive traits, experiences, and institutions that fall within the parameters of positive psychology in future research and practice (Lopez & Snyder, 2011), and that current conceptualizations of character strengths and virtues may need to be further developed as new knowledge emerges (McGrath, 2014).

Applications to Practice

Despite the acknowledged limitations of the science of character, researchers have found that multiple positive outcomes are predicted by character strengths (Harzer & Ruch, 2014; Vertilo & Gibson, 2014; Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2014), suggesting the potential utility of the approach. For example, academic achievement is predicted by temperance and perseverance. People who report higher zest for life, curiosity, and hope report greater life

TABLE 1

The VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

- Wisdom – cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
  - ○ **Creativity** [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
  - ○ **Curiosity** [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
  - ○ **Judgment** [open-mindedness; critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
  - ○ **Love of Learning**: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
  - ○ **Perspective** [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself/others
- Courage – emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
  - ○ **Bravery** [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what's right even if there's opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
  - ○ **Perseverance** [persistence, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persevering in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks
  - ○ **Honesty** [authenticity, integrity]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
  - ○ **Zest** [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
- Humanity - interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
  - ○ **Love** (capacity to love and be loved): Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing & caring are reciprocated; being close to people
  - ○ **Kindness** [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
  - ○ **Social Intelligence** [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives/feelings of others and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
- Justice - civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
  - ○ **Teamwork** [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
  - ○ **Fairness**: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness & justice; not letting feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
  - ○ **Leadership**: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
- Temperance – strengths that protect against excess
  - ○ **Forgiveness** [mercy]: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting others' shortcomings; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
  - ○ **Humility** [modesty]: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
  - ○ **Prudence**: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
  - ○ **Self-Regulation** [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions
- Transcendence - strengths that forge connections to the universe & provide meaning
  - ○ **Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence** [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
  - ○ **Gratitude**: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
  - ○ **Hope** [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
  - ○ **Humor** [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
  - ○ **Spirituality** [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose & meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

satisfaction and well-being (Park & Peterson, 2006b; Park et al., 2004). And, because of these associations, researchers have developed strategies to apply the descriptive framework of the VIA Classification to interventions to promote positive outcomes. Researchers have examined the impact of interventions designed to boost individuals' signature strengths–those strengths that are ranked highest by the person on character strength assessments. For example, one of the most researched interventions to emerge in the last 10 years from the positive psychology literature is the strategy "use your signature strengths in new ways each day." This exercise involves people taking the VIA-IS assessment that measures the 24 character strengths (see Table 1) and then choosing one of their highest ranking strengths in their results profile and use it in a new way each day for one week. In randomized, controlled trials, this exercise leads to increases in happiness and decreases in depression for six months (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2012; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). This exercise has been validated across a number of populations which have found benefit from it, including youth (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011), older adults (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2014), employees (Forest et al., 2012), people with traumatic brain injuries (Andrewes, Walker, & O'Neill, 2014) as well as across various cultures (Duan, Ho, Tang, Li, & Zhang, 2013; Mitchell, Stanimirovic, Klein, & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012).

Researchers have also developed interventions that focus on character strengths generally, rather than specific signature strengths. For example, studies of kindness have found exercises around "counting kindness" (counting the number of kind acts performed each day) increase happiness (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006) and offering "gifts of time" (helping/supporting three different people you would not have otherwise helped by giving the gift of your time) increases happiness and lowers depression (Gander et al., 2012). An intervention that targets the strengths of hope and perspective is called "one door closes, another door opens" in which individuals write about a moment in their life when a negative event led to unforeseen positive consequences, and also

led to increases in happiness and decreases in depression (Gander et al., 2012). The targeting of the strengths of humor and gratitude, have also revealed strong benefits, in which subjects either think of three funny things that happened to them each day and write about why they occurred (for the strength of humor) or three things they are grateful for and why they occurred (for the strength of gratitude) (Gander et al., 2012; Proyer, Gander, et al., 2014; Seligman et al., 2005). One study targeted those character strengths that have been found to correlate highly with life satisfaction (Park et al., 2004) and found that the training of curiosity, gratitude, hope, humor, and zest led to increases in life satisfaction relative to a group that focused on character strengths that correlate lower with life satisfaction and relative to a control group (Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2014). A focus on enhancing lower strengths in one's VIA Survey rank-order profile has also revealed positive results (Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009).

Another application of character strengths is strengths-spotting, which involves the careful, intentional observation of character strengths within the stories, interactions, and behaviors of others or within the cognition, affect, or behavior of oneself. Strengths-spotting occurs on two levels–oneself and others–and involves the labeling of the character strength(s) observed and the offering of a rationale or evidence for how each strength was expressed (Niemiec, 2014). Strengths-spotting is generally recommended as an initial step for practitioners and parents new to strengths-based approaches and assists in the building of a vocabulary or language of strengths and facilitates the creation of a "strengths mindset."

Another strategy, the Aware-Explore-Apply model (Niemiec, 2013, 2014) is a 3-phase approach to using character strengths. In the first phase, practitioners begin with helping the person build a general awareness of character strengths, breaking through strengths blindness and general unawareness. The next phase involves connecting the character strengths with previous experiences so that people understand how the character strengths contributed to positive and fulfilling events and accomplishments as well as in facilitating the management of problems and difficulties. This explore phase involves the individual understand-

ing how they use their character strengths in everyday life, from task to task, and from conversation to conversation. The explore phase also involves the individual looking to the future to consider ways the strengths might connect with future goals or future resolution of stressors and challenges. The final phase of this model, apply, is the action-oriented phase in which the individual behaviorally activates with their character strengths in a way that is meaningful to their life and/or aligns with their goals. These phases are viewed as an ongoing process that repeats, builds, and fosters an upward positive spiral of insight and growth (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998).

Applying Character Strengths and Virtues to People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Parallel Movements and Establishing a Need for Character Strengths and Virtues

The emergence of the science of character as an area of focus within the field of positive psychology mirrors, in many ways, shifts that have occurred within the disability field. Just as in the broader field of psychology, in the disability field there have been shifts from deficit-based models that focused on identifying limitations in functioning (Wehmeyer et al., 2008) to strengths-based approaches that recognize that people with disabilities have personal competencies that also need to be understood and leveraged to guide supports planning (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010). For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) specifically states that transition services provided to youth ages 16 and over to support the transition from school to the adult world must take into account the "child's *strengths*, preferences, and interests." This mandate is driven by a growing body of research that documents strengths that are present in youth with disability that can inform the transition process (Carter, Brock, & Trainor, 2014) and be used to develop meaningful IEP and transition goals informed by strengths based assessment tools (Epstein, 2004). Similarly, researchers have asserted that systems of supports and individualized supports plans for adults with disabilities

should be driven by a strengths perspective that presumes competence and designs supports accordingly, considering the person's strengths, interests, preferences, and life goals (Buntinx, 2013).

However, only a small body of literature has investigated specific traits and experiences associated with a strengths-based approach in youth and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Shogren, Lopez, Wehmeyer, Little, & Pressgrove, 2006; Skotko, Levine, & Goldstein, 2011; Wehmeyer, 2013), and rarely have people with intellectual and developmental disabilities been included in research in the broader field of positive psychology. For example, Shogren, Wehmeyer, Pressgrove and Lopez (2006) reviewed the application of positive psychology constructs to research in the intellectual disability literature between 1975 and 2004. Of these articles, only 15% included a construct associated with positive psychology as a primary focus although the percentage of articles examining a positive psychological construct increased over time. Further, Shogren (2013) reviewed articles published in the field of positive psychology to determine the degree to which disability (in general, not specific to intellectual disability) was represented in that literature base. She found only a limited focus on disability issues within *The Journal of Positive Psychology* where, from among 162 articles published between 2006 and 2011, only six articles (4%) explicitly mentioned people with disabilities or people with health related issues that could be associated with disability. Of the six articles, the majority focused on specific health related conditions that may or may be associated with disability (e.g., asthma, chronic illness, and cancer).

Although there is a growing theoretical emphasis on strengths-based perspectives in the disability field, there is a clear need for more specific examination of the application of approaches developed in the broader field of positive psychology to the disability field. While there are existing and emerging approaches in the disability field including educational interventions [e.g., positive behavior supports (Sailor, Dunlop, Sugai, & Horner, 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2010)], psychological interventions (e.g., interactive behavioral therapy (IBT); Tomasulo, 2014), and mindfulness in-

terventions (Niemiec, 2014) that emphasize the importance of proactive intervention that enhances personal competencies; minimal substantive attention has been given to strengths of character. Instead this work tends to focus more on interests (e.g., hobbies, activities individuals enjoy doing), resources (e.g., external supports such as friendships, community support, therapeutic support), and skills (e.g., positive behavioral skills, communication skills). Each of these categories of strength are very important for people with disabilities, however, we are arguing for scientists, educators, and practitioners to place greater attention on those qualities most central to the individual's identity–his or her character strengths–as this is an area that research in positive psychology suggests can enable people to thrive in their day-to-day lives. To do this, work is needed to take the assessments and interventions developed to address character strengths in the broader positive psychology field and examine and modify these approaches, as needed, for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Further, the related constructs across fields, such as thriving (Seligman, 2011) in positive psychology and quality of life (Schalock, Gardner, & Bradley, 2007) and self-determination (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Forber-Pratt, et al., 2015) in intellectual and developmental disabilities, need to be examined across populations. However, there still are not enough assessment and intervention development frameworks that specifically focus on character strengths that have been applied to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, enabling the assessment of character strength interventions and their impact on outcomes. In the following sections we will summarize the work that has been done on applying strengths of character to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities as well as explore the potential applications of what has been done in the broader field of positive psychology to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Finally, we will discuss future research and practice directions for strengths-based assessment and intervention for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Applying the Science of Character to People with IDD

Character Strengths-Based Assessment

A critical starting point for understanding character strengths in those with and without disabilities is having validated measures of character strengths and virtues. As mentioned previously, assessment tools, including the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) and the VIA Inventory of Strengths–Youth Version (VIA-Youth), have been developed and studied across cultures (McGrath, 2015; Park & Peterson, 2006a; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) although the majority of work has focused on people without disabilities. Preliminary work (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Lang, & Niemiec, 2014) has begun examining the use of the VIA-Youth in adolescents with disabilities, including youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Specifically, researchers have found that across youth with and without disabilities the same set of items can be used in meaningful and reliable ways, although specific modifications to the wording of questions and supports for responding may be needed for some youth with intellectual disability (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Forber-Pratt, & Palmer, 2015). However, youth with disabilities, across the board, rated themselves lower on each character strength (see Table 1) than youth without disabilities. While we would expect each student to demonstrate different profiles of character strengths, the finding that students with disabilities score less adaptively across all character strengths suggests that specific environmental factors may be influencing the beliefs youth with disabilities hold about themselves and their strengths. This replicates other research on constructs like self-determination that has also found that youth with disabilities rate themselves lower than their peers without disabilities (Shogren, Lopez, et al., 2006; Shogren et al., in press). Although the exact mechanisms for these effects are not understood, one hypothesis is that youth and adults with disabilities, particularly young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, are not given the experiences and supports to develop adaptive understandings of their self-determination and character strengths. Research in the area

of self-determination, for example, has found that if interventions to promote self-determination are implemented with adolescents with intellectual and learning disabilities, their self-determination levels increase (Wehmeyer et al., 2012).

Another assessment tool that examines character strengths is the Assessment Scale for Positive Character Traits - Developmental Disabilities (ASPeCT-DD; Woodard, 2009). This tool was developed for parents and support providers to complete, and assesses 10 character strengths, including empathy and courage, displayed by a person with intellectual or developmental disabilities. This tool differs from the VIA-IS and VIA-Youth as parents or support providers report, rather than the individual themselves. Further, it predates the VIA Classification of 24 strengths therefore is based on a literature review of positive traits discussed in the early years of the positive psychology field. The ASPeCT-DD has shown strong psychometrics, and provides a means for parents and support providers to understand character strengths. Further, when used in conjunction with the VIA-IS or VIA-Youth, both self- and other-report on character strengths are available and can be used to develop and evaluate strengths-based interventions.

Overall, further validation of character strengths assessments is needed, particularly with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Additionally, training and support is needed to enable educators and support providers to understand the potential of character strengths assessment, particularly given the tradition of using assessment to identify and define deficits in functioning to compartmentalize people into diagnostic categories that omit strengths (Rashid & Ostermann, 2009; Wright & Lopez, 2002). Further work is needed to validate and test the predictive validity of such tools, and explore their use across populations and after assessment tools for character strengths and virtues are validated with this population, a critical next step will be to determine how to effectively intervene to increase awareness of character strengths, and to promote the use of character strengths to enhance outcomes, as described in the next section.

Character Strength-Based Interventions

The previous section described the small, but growing, body of research on character strength assessment in people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Less work has been done on using information from character strength assessment tools to develop and test the efficacy of interventions to use character strengths to inform supports planning to promote valued outcomes, including quality of life outcomes. However, a number of interventions have been developed in the broader field of positive psychology, as described in earlier sections. These interventions focus on building on character strengths in the context of day-to-day life in the general population and need to be further examined to determine the appropriateness and needed modifications for the contextual demands experienced by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, namely the application of such interventions to supports planning and efforts to enhance quality of life outcomes (Shogren, Luckasson, & Schalock, 2014; Shogren, Luckasson, & Schalock, 2015).

In the general population, researchers have suggested that the use of character strengths by people in their daily lives has been associated with many positive outcomes and that understanding one's character strengths can serve as a means to build systems of supports to overcome barriers. Work is needed to develop strategies to enable people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to understand their character strengths and to embed these character strengths in educational and support provision. For example, existing exercises like strengths-spotting, "use your signature strengths in new ways each day" (Seligman et al., 2005), "counting kindness" (Otake et al., 2006), and "gifts of time" (Gander et al., 2012), could easily be integrated into educational and community contexts particularly if resources for educators, support providers, and family members were developed. Although research is needed, such interventions may address provide a way to address issues commonly identified related to building relationships between people with intellectual disability and their peers, as people with disabilities are often cast in roles of needing help, rather than giving help, limiting reciprocal

relationships (Snell & Brown, 2010). However, by creating structured ways for people with intellectual disability to use their strengths to contribute to the lives of their peers, the reciprocity of peer relationships could be enhanced.

Further, such approaches could be embedded in existing interventions in the field, for example, as part of person-centered planning process, people with disabilities (using the VIA) and their support providers (using a checklist of the 24 character strengths or an instrument like the ASPeCT-DD) could identify their signature strengths as part of a process of understanding themselves and their strengths and support needs. In positive behavior support interventions, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities could use self-monitoring strategies to count acts of kindness. As part of transition planning, youth with intellectual disability can explore what strengths give each person the greatest sense of hope (i.e., instillation of hope), how the person might use his or her strengths to navigate barriers, and how the strengths could be used to generate and implement possible solutions using the Aware-Explore-Apply model (Niemiec, 2013, 2014).

Woodard (2009) observed that "quality of life may be less determined by what you have, and more determined by what you choose to do with what you have" (p. 435). Thus, it might be that taking action with, and making the most of, one's internal character strengths is a key pathway, especially around navigating problems. Research has shown that for some outcomes it is the use of character strengths, over and above simply endorsing character strengths, that is most important (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). Research in the intellectual disability field suggests that setting goals is one way to take immediate action for the short-term or long-term, and that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can learn to engage in self-regulated problem solving to set and attain goals leading to enhanced self-determination and quality of life outcomes (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark, & Little, 2015; Wehmeyer et al., 2012).

Interventions to promote character strengths could be embedded in self-determination interventions, for example, goals can be created around character strengths in at least two general ways: the character strength could be the "means" to getting to a goal (i.e., the pathways) or the "ends" (i.e., the goal itself) (Niemiec, 2014). For example, if a person with an intellectual disability has a goal of attaining meaningful work, support providers could work with them to consider how each of the person's top character strengths can serve as direct pathways to reaching that goal, such as using curiosity to explore different avenues, social intelligence in connecting and developing relationship with people connected to job searches, and gratitude in the offering of appreciation for those that have given ideas and support. An example of the latter is if the person wants their goal to be "to boost their zest strength" or to "to improve upon their strength of self-regulation." In this case, one positive psychology exercise to support goal-setting and goal attainment is the "best possible self" exercise which has been associated with boosting the strength of hope/optimism (Meevissen, Peters, & Alberts, 2011). This exercise can immediately facilitate goal awareness and expression in that the individual is to imagine a designated point in the future (one month, one year, five years) in which they have reached their goal or vision of how they'd like their life to be; one variation of this exercise introduces a second step in which the individual then imagines the various character strengths they will need to use in order to make that best possible self a reality (Niemiec, 2014). Exploring ways to make these activities concrete and to use evidence-based supports from the disability field (e.g., pictures, self-management strategies) to promote self-direction are directions that need to be explored in future research. A variety of exercises designed to boost a handful of character traits in people with severe autism have been described by Groden, Kantor, Woodard, and Lipsitt (2011), such as modeling appropriate laughter to boost the strength of humor and the direct encouragement of the strength of kindness through a kind deeds program at school.

Another approach may be exploring character strengths overuse and underuse (Niemiec, 2014). This approach has been applied to people without disabilities, for example, a person might have a difficulty with procrasti-

nating on a paper they are writing, and upon further investigation, it is determined that the person is overusing their curiosity and love of learning strengths (e.g., doing Internet searches and exploring new areas rather than writing) and underusing their prudence and self-regulation strengths (e.g., not making a paper outline and struggling with resisting the temptation to do the Internet searches). The individual then explores how they might "temper" the overused strength with one of their signature strengths or "build up" one of their underused strengths. This conceptualization of strengths overuse and underuse applies to each of the 24 character strengths (see Grant & Schwartz, 2011, for a review) and offers a framework to explain or partially explain how problems and conflicts occur and persist. This approach could be embedded within positive behavior supports, focusing specifically on identifying strengths that may be overused or underused. Character strengths over and underuse has been examined in people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Samson and Antonelli (2013), in a study of 33 people with ASD, discovered humor to be a lower or underused strength, ranking 16th out of 24, whereas in a matched group of people without ASD it was 8th. Since the strength of humor is linked with hedonic happiness and positive emotions, an intervention such as "three funny things" for those people interested in boosting this lower strength might be considered. Such reframing was found to be useful not only for the participants with ASD, but also for people that supported them. Each of the 24 character strengths can serve as tools for reframing or what some scientists refer to as positive reappraisal (Garland, Gaylord, & Park, 2009). For example, stubbornness might be reframed as someone being perseverant and sticking with their idea while hyperactivity might be reframed as the strength of zest and curiosity. These reframes do not replace stubbornness or hyperactivity, rather they offer unique, positive perspective to help the support provider and the individual to view themselves from a different angle. New lines of questioning, strategizing, and interventions can then unfold from these reframes, including new ways of building support and instructional plans that capitalize on strengths.

Strengths-spotting is another approach that has been identified in the broader field of positive psychology, and this approach could be made concrete by taking examples from the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and creating scenarios that explicate character strengths, particularly as research has found when using the VIA-Youth that concrete descriptions of the character strengths make the assessment more meaningful for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Shogren, Wehmeyer, et al., 2014). This approach could be used by educators, family members, and support providers to label and provide opportunities for the naming of character strengths, which may enhance people with intellectual and developmental disabilities understanding of strengths in themselves and others. This understanding could then be linked with interventions to use understanding of one's strengths to overcome barriers and go after valued life goals.

Overall, there are multiple applications of strategies that build on character strengths that can enhance the systems of supports and outcomes experienced by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The preceding examples offer several ways that activities and research in positive psychology and related fields could be adapted and applied to the contexts within which people with intellectual and developmental disabilities live their lives. However, systematic development and evaluation of these approaches is needed in the intellectual and developmental disability field, and guidelines developed and evaluated to adapt such approaches to people with varying ranges of support needs. For example, as described previously, a guide for administering the VIA-Youth for adolescents with intellectual disability has been developed, drawing on research with youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities to make recommendations for how to modify questions to ensure valid responding (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Forber-Pratt, et al., 2015). Similar tools are needed for character strengths-based interventions.

Directions for Future Research and Practice

Focusing on character strengths has the potential to broaden the perspective of people

with intellectual disability, their families, and people that provide support regarding positive traits and attributes and the use of these traits and attributes in pursuing valued life outcomes. As mentioned previously, work has begun to validate character strength assessments in people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, however, more work is needed and assessment alone will not be sufficient to change the context of education and supports planning, interventions that build on character strengths will also be needed. Existing frameworks and tools, developed in the field of positive psychology, provide a basis upon which to modify and adapt existing interventions to make them relevant for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Further, there are natural opportunities to embed character strengths in existing approaches in the field (e.g., positive behavior interventions, self-determination interventions, transition planning, supports planning). It will be critical to contextualize such interventions in the lives and support needs of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, particularly related to ongoing efforts to promote strengths-based assessment and effective supports planning to enhance quality of life outcomes. Character strengths assessment and interventions has much to offer to these efforts. Preliminary research suggests that tools to assess character strengths are equally reliable and valid for those with disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and that modification (e.g., wording changes, cognitive supports) can be used to enable people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to understand character strengths. This preliminary work provides a strong framework that the field can build on to further explore and modify the application of methodologies for defining, assessing, and classifying character strengths. Having a common language of character strengths, relevant for those with and without disabilities, provides a means to provide universal interventions, with additional support as needed for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This common language of strengths, easily applied across disciplines and practices, broadens and deepens the dialogue from strengths approaches that solely focus on skills and re-sources to include the value of understanding strengths of character and virtues for enhancing systems of supports and personal outcomes. This is particularly important for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities who have traditionally been viewed through a deficit lens and not taught or supported to identify and build on their strengths, as reflected in low scores on assessments of character strengths.

Further, an emphasis on character strengths also has implications for those that support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. For example, researchers have found that promoting mindfulness in support providers, a strengths-based approach, can significantly and positively impact the provision of supports (N. N. Singh et al., 2009), changing the dynamic of the support relationship to one that is strengths-based. Overall, emphasizing character strengths can create a new framework for understanding and supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This framework has the potential to lead to greater awareness of strengths, and greater understanding of how to identify and build on strengths, in addition to improving outcomes people with disabilities. Understanding strength profiles can lead to interventions that might be helpful for enhancing specific strengths for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and those that support them. Moving forward, we recommend the field expand its focus beyond the assessment and remediation of deficits to approaches that give priority to the study and practice of character strengths in assessment and intervention.

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