Strengths Profiling: An Alternative Approach to Assessing Character Strengths Based on Personal Construct Psychology

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Abstract : Practitioners draw attention to people's character strengths to promote empowerment and well-being. This paper explores the possibility that existing approaches for assessing character strengths (e.g., the Values in Action survey; VIA-IS) could be even more autonomy supportive and empowering when combined with strengths profiling, an ideographic tool informed by personal construct theory (PCT). A PCT approach ensures that: (1) knowledge is co-created (i.e., the practitioner is not seen as the 'expert' who leads the process); (2) individuals are not required to 'fit' within a prescribed list of characteristics; and (3) individuals are free to use their own terminology and interpretations. A combined Strengths Profiling and VIA approach was used in a sample of homeless youth (aged 16-25) who are commonly perceived as 'hard-to-engage' through traditional forms of assessment. Strengths Profiling was completed face-to-face in small groups. Participants (N = 116) began by listing a variety of personally meaningful characteristics. Participants gave each characteristic a score out of ten for how important it was to them (1 = not so important; 10 = very important), their ideal competency, and their current competency (1 = poor; 10 = excellent). A discrepancy score was calculated for each characteristic (discrepancy score = ideal score - current score x importance), whereby a lower discrepancy score indicated greater satisfaction. Strengths Profiling was used at the beginning and end of a 10-week positive youth development programme. Experiences were captured through video diary room entries made by participants and through reflective notes taken by the facilitators. Participants were also asked to complete a pre-and post-programme questionnaire, measuring perceptions of well-being, self-worth, and resilience. All of the young people who attended the strengths profiling session agreed to complete a profile, and the majority became highly engaged in the process. Strengths profiling was found to be an autonomy supportive and empowering experience, with each participant identifying an average of 10 character strengths (M = 10.27, SD = 3.23). In total, 215 different character strengths were identified, each with varying terms and definitions used, which differed greatly between participants and demonstrated the value in soliciting personal constructs. Using the participants' definitions, 98% of characteristics were categorized deductively into the VIA framework. Bravery, perseverance, and hope were the character strengths that featured most, whilst temperance and courage received the highest discrepancy scores. Discrepancy scores were negatively correlated with well-being, self-worth, and resilience, and meaningful improvements were recorded following the intervention. These findings support the use of strengths profiling as a theoretically-driven and novel way to engage disadvantaged youth in identifying and monitoring character strengths. When young people are given the freedom to express their own characteristics, the resulting terminologies extend beyond the language used in existing frameworks. This added freedom and control over the process of strengths identification encouraged youth to take ownership over their profiles and apply their strengths. In addition, the ability to transform characteristics post hoc into the VIA framework means that strengths profiling can be used to explore aggregated/nomothetic hypotheses, whilst still benefiting from its ideographic roots.
Keywords : ideographic, nomothetic, positive youth development, VIA-IS, assessment, homeless youth

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