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Relationship between character strengths and personality traits

Relações entre forças de caráter e traços de personalidade

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to determine which Character Strengths can be predicted by Personality traits using the instruments *Forças de Caráter* (Character Strengths Scale) and *Bateria Fatorial de Personalidade* (Factor Personality Questionnaire). A total of 217 university students, with an average age of 22 years participated in this study; 53% were female. The results indicated that the strengths Vitality, Gratitude, Persistence, Spirituality, Kindness, Humor, Social Intelligence, Citizenship, Fairness, and Creativity were best explained by the traits Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Moreover, Extraversion and Agreeableness were the traits that were most often associated with the Character Strengths. The findings were discussed in the light of relevant literature, and further studies were recommended.

Keywords: Evaluation; Personality; Positive psychology.

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi investigar quais Forças de Caráter podem ser preditas pelos traços de Personalidade, utilizando-se os instrumentos Escala de Forças de Caráter e Bateria Fatorial de Personalidade. Os participantes foram 217 universitários, sendo 53% do sexo feminino, com média de idade de 22 anos. Os resultados indicaram que as forças Vitalidade, Gratidão, Perseverança, Espiritualidade, Bondade, Humor, Inteligência social, Cidadania, Imparcialidade e Criatividade são melhor explicadas pelos traços Extroversão, Socialização e Neuroticismo. Ao lado disso, Extroversão e Socialização foram os fatores que mais se associaram às Forças de Caráter. Os achados foram discutidos à luz da literatura e novos estudos são sugeridos.

Palavras-chave: *Avaliação; Personalidade; Psicologia positiva.*

Character Strengths are positive psychological traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They were classified by Peterson and Seligman (2004) to represent positive stable traits over time.

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Character Strengths have been systematically studied based on Positive Psychology, more especially in the last two decades, although philosophers, theologians, and educators have considered them as elements of acceptable behavior in diverse cultures or societies to determine the characteristics of a good person (Banicki, 2014; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Park and Peterson (2009) emphasize that Character Strengths are important traits for human development and well-being since they can contribute to self-confidence, work orientation, social responsibility, and personal identity. Therefore, the authors consider them psychological ingredients that lead people to seek their own good and the good of others and of society.

The classification of human strengths created by Peterson and Seligman (2004) is denominated Values in Action Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues. Grinhauz and Solano (2015) emphasize that it promotes a common language facilitating Positive Psychology research. Accordingly, Hart and Sasso (2011) reported that there was a considerable increase in scholarly interest in Positive Psychology, leading to the significant growth in the number of empirical studies using quantitative methods.

Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined the following criteria for including a positive characteristic as a Character Strength: contribute to finding satisfaction and to the achievement of individual and collective happiness; be morally valued even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes; be stable across time; be conceptually and empirically distinct from other strengths, i.e., they are different characteristics; and be identified as a potential quality model to be followed (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Values in action classification includes 24 strengths described as follows. Critical thinking refers to looking or thinking beyond the obvious and examining things from all sides. Modesty refers to being humble; letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; do not seeking to be the center of attention. Fairness means treating all people the same according to notions of equality and justice. Appreciation of the beauty means noticing and appreciating beauty and excellence and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to science to everyday experience. Creativity means thinking of novel and productive ways to perform tasks, and specially, not being content in doing something in the conventional way if a different way is possible (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Forgiveness can be defined as giving people a second chance, not being vengeful, and forgiving those who have done wrong. Prudence is being careful about one's choices and not saying or doing things without thinking to avoid regrets. Hope means to believe that a good future is something that can be brought about; expect the best and work to achieve it. Spirituality means having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of real life, which tends to provide comfort. Perspective (wisdom) refers to having ways of looking at the world that makes sense to oneself and to others. Authenticity is taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions and speaking the truth and present oneself in a genuine way. Humor can be understood as liking to laugh and tease and bringing smiles to other people. Self-regulation involves regulating what one feels and does and controlling one's actions and emotions (Ruch & Proyer, 2015).

Love of learning is related to the mastering of new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally, taking advantage of any learning opportunity offered. Bravery is the quality of being brave, not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain. Leadership involves encouraging a group of which one is a member maintaining good relations within the group and organizing group activities. Gratitude refers to being thankful for the good things that happen in one's life. Persistence refers to persisting in a course of action despite the obstacles; finishing projects on time; not getting distracted while working; and taking pleasure in completing tasks (Singh & Choubisa, 2010).

Curiosity means exploring and discovering subjects and topics and finding them fascinating.

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Citizenship can be understood as working well as a member of a group or team and, particularly, being loyal to the group, doing one's share. Kindness is about being generous, doing favors and good deeds for others, and helping and taking care of people. Love means valuing close relations with others, especially with those who are reciprocal in sharing and caring (MacDonald, Bore, & Munro, 2008).

Social intelligence is being aware of the motives and feelings of oneself and other people and knowing what to do to fit into different social situations. Vitality refers to the energy that is perceived to emanate from the self. Some authors have pointed out that vitality has emerged as an important idea in the conception of subjective energy and that it is related to psychological and somatic factors (Bostic, Rubio, & Hood, 2000).

Since strength is considered an individual characteristic observed in several different situations and is stable over time, Park and Peterson (2004) have acknowledged the existence of theoretical correspondence between Character Strength and Personality traits. Thus, this study aims to investigate the relationships between the constructs seeking to examine these relationships and determine which traits are the best predictors of strengths.

Park and Peterson (2004) argue that strengths can be considered as positive traits of Personality, particularly in the Big Five or Five-Factor Model (FFM), which includes five dimensions of personality encompassing the habitual way of thinking, acting, and feeling in everyday life situations, i.e., an individual's typical pattern of attitudes and behaviors which are therefore organized into measurable traits. Traits are also psychological characteristics that are stable in the different types of human behavior. However, changes can be caused by interactions between people and systems in the social environment or by the influences of motivational, affective, or behavioral aspects (McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & John, 1992).

With regard to the FFM, the first dimension, Extraversion, refers to preferred personal interactions and mood states that are more intensely experienced, including from more talkative, optimistic, and sociable individuals to more reserved, independent, and self-contained individuals. Agreeableness concerns interpersonal orientation ranging from compassion to antagonism, referring to affable, empathetic, and generous people and those who are suspicious, selfish, and arrogant. Conscientiousness, is related to impulse control, discipline, and persistence, including responsible, organized and zealous individuals, as well as hedonists, disinterested, and absent-minded people. Neuroticism is associated with levels of personal adjustment and emotional instability, mainly regarding self-perception self-esteem and the way the individual responds to emotional distress; it may include vulnerable, depressive, and anxious individuals or restrained and peaceful ones. Finally, Openness to experiences is associated to the tolerance and appreciation of new ideas and experiences, including people who are curious, creative, and versatile and those who are rigid, inflexible, and conventional (McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & John, 1992; Nunes, 2005; C H. S. S. Nunes, Hutz, & M. F. O. Nunes, 2010; Vasconcelos & Hutz, 2008).

As for the relationships between the constructs, which were investigated by the two instruments used in the present study, other studies have found that creative and curious people showed high levels of Openness to experiences and agreeableness (King, Walker, & Broyles, 1996; J. Neto, Neto, & Furnham, 2014). Modest and kind individuals had high levels of Openness to Experiences (Neto et al., 2014; Paunonen, 2003) and Agreeableness (Ashton & Lee, 2005). Other authors, Haslam, Bain, and Neal (2004) and Wood, Joseph and Maltby (2008), found that people who scored high on Agreeableness showed higher levels of Gratitude, Self-regulation, and Prudence. Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, and Ross (2005) found that Forgiveness and Hope were negatively correlated with Neuroticism and positively correlated with Agreeableness and positively correlated with Extraversion, to a lesser extent. The findings of MacDonald et al. (2008) and Neto et al. (2014) show that Neuroticism was negatively correlated with Hope and Courage, and Agreeableness was related to Spirituality, Kindness, and Vitality.

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Based on the discussion above, the objective of this study is to identify the Character Strengths that can be predicted by the Personality traits using the *Forças de Caráter* (EFC, Character Strengths Scale) (Noronha & Barbosa, 2016; Noronha, Zanon, & Dellazzana-Zanon, 2015) and the *Bateria Fatorial de Personalidade* (BFP, Factor Personality Questionnaire) (Nunes et al., 2010).

Method

Participants

A total of 217 university students (53% female) aged between 18 and 52 years (Mean – *M* = 22.15, Standard Deviation – *SD* = 4.68) participated in this study. In 18 protocols, the information regarding their age was not provided. The respondents were Architecture and Urbanism (9.7%), Computer Science (8.3%), Law (18.0%), Civil Engineering (25.8%), Physiotherapy (22.6%), Music (6.5%) and Psychology (9.2%) students enrolled at universities in the states of *São Paulo* and *Minas Gerais*.

Instruments

Escala de Forças de Caráter (Noronha & Barbosa, 2016): It aims at evaluating the 24 Character Strengths. Initially, 72 items were created to measure the 24 strengths based on the model of classification proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The final version of the scale consists of 71 items answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (does not describe me well) to 4 (describes me very well); the higher the sum score of each character strength item, the more strongly developed this character strength is. Some examples of items include: *"I do things differently"* (Creativity), *"I can create a positive teamwork environment"* (Leadership), and *"Good things await me in the future"* (Hope).

Noronha et al. (2015) carried out a second-order factor analysis using the 24 strengths to investigate the number of factors in the scale.

First, a parallel factorial analysis of the main components indicated that there were three factors. Subsequently, the factor analysis using the Maximum Likelihood method indicated only one factor. Based on another analysis investigating retention factors, the authors determined that this scale is a one-dimensional solution instrument. Bartlett's sphericity test was significant, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was 0.93, which is considered good; alpha Cronbach coefficient was 0.93, indicating high reliability of the scale.

Bateria Fatorial de Personalidade (C. H. S. S. Nunes et al., 2010): It is composed of 126 items describing feelings, opinions, and attitudes. It was created to evaluate Personality based on the FFM. The answers are recorded on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (this statement does not describe me at all) to 7 (this statement describes me perfectly), according to how much the individual identifies with each statement. Some examples of items include: *"I get involved with others quickly"* and *"I'm an insecure person"*. The dimensionality of BFP was assessed using exploratory factor analysis to evaluate the five factors, and Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to experience had, respectively, eigenvalues of 10.4; 7.75; 7.10; 6.12 and 4.59, indicating 7.97%; 6.01%; 5.64%; 4.86%, and 3.65% of the total variance, respectively. The Cronbach alpha values ranged from 0.74 for Openness to experiences to 0.89 for Neuroticism, which indicates good degree of internal consistency (reliability).

After obtaining approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the two universities, the participants signed the Informed Consent Form and data were collected. The instruments were administered collectively in classrooms with approximately 30 students each and lasted approximately 35 minutes.

In order to identify which Personality traits are the best predictors of Character Strengths, the data were analyzed using simple linear regression analysis (Enter method). Regression analysis was used to investigate possible relationships between dependent variables (Character Strength) and

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independent variables (Personality traits according to the FFM). Since this is an exploratory study, each strength was evaluated separately on a Brazilian sample; no research involving the EFC was found in the literature (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Results

In the simple linear regression analysis using the Enter method, the Character Strengths were considered as dependent variables and the five Personality traits were considered as independent variables. The results were analyzed based on predictive power. Since all character strengths were predicted by personality traits, although some at lower levels, only prediction values that explained at least 30% of the variation, i.e., 10 character strengths, were considered for discussion. They were organized in two blocks (more significant strengths and less significant strengths) to facilitate presentation. Table 1 shows the character strengths predicted by the trait and the percentage of variation explained, i.e., the adjusted coefficients of determination (R^2) between 40% and 44%.

With regard to the personality traits as predictors of Vitality, the adjusted coefficient of determination (R^2) value was 0.446 explaining 44%

of the variation [(F (3.209) = 56.144, p = 0.001)]. It can be seen from Table 1 that the traits that with the greatest predictive power were Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism; a negative correlation was found for Neuroticism. As for Gratitude, the adjusted coefficient of determination (R^2) was 0.411, which explained 41% of the predictive power of the traits [(F (3,212) = 49,218, p = 0.001)]. The traits Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Openness to experiences proved to be statistically significant predictors. However, there was negative correlation between the strength Gratitude with the trait Openness to experience.

Table 1 also shows that the adjusted coefficient of determination (R^2) of personality traits as predictors of Persistence was 0.039, explaining 40% of the variation [(F (4.210) = 33.975, p = 0.001)]. All traits were predictors of this character strength, except for Openness to experiences; a negative R^2 value was found for Neuroticism. Table 2 shows regression values that indicate variations between 30% and 37% for the Character Strength predicted by the Personality traits.

As can be seen from Table 2, 7 character strengths were most strongly predicted by the Personality traits evaluated. The adjusted coefficient of determination (R^2) of personality traits as predictors

Table 1

Linear regression coefficients for the character strengths predicted by personality traits explaining 40% – 44% of variation

Character Strengths	Personality Traits	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p
		B	SD	$Beta$		
Vitality	Variable	2.470	1.485		1.663	0.098
	Extraversion	1.407	0.152	0.481	9.273	0.001
	Neuroticism	-0.920	0.151	-0.331	-6.111	0.001
	Agreeableness	0.630	0.211	0.160	2.987	0.003
Gratitude	Variable	-2.300	1.559		-1.475	0.142
	Agreeableness	1.974	0.215	0.495	9.189	0.001
	Extraversion	1.085	0.166	0.366	6.532	0.001
	Openness	-0.569	0.221	-0.146	-2.575	0.011
Persistence	Variable	1.429	1.223		1.168	0.244
	Extraversion	0.938	0.118	0.435	7.945	0.001
	Conscientiousness	0.612	0.128	0.272	4.775	0.001
	Neuroticism	-0.260	0.118	-0.127	-2.213	0.028
	Agreeableness	0.322	0.161	0.113	2.001	0.047

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of Spirituality was 0.364, explaining 37% of the variation [($F_{(4.209)}$ = 29.874, p = 0.001)]. The best predictors of Spirituality were Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Neuroticism with significant positive values, whereas Opening to experiences had significant negative values. The adjusted coefficients of determination (R^2) of the strengths Kindness and Humor were 0.359 [($F_{(2.209)}$ = 58.426, p = 0.001)] and 0.363, [($S_{(2.212)}$ = 60,282, p = 0.001), respectively, explaining 36% of the variation. The traits Agreeableness and Extraversion were the strongest predictors of these strengths.

It can also be seen from Table 2 that the adjusted coefficient of determination (R^2) of Social Intelligence was 0.325, explaining 32% of the variability [($F_{(3.209)}$ = 33.571; p = 0.001)]. The best predictive traits were Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. The adjusted coefficients of determination (R^2) of the strengths Citizenship and Fairness were 0.310 [($F_{(3.212)}$ = 31.699, p = 0.001)] and 0.299 [($F_{(3.211)}$ = 30.035, p = 0.001)], explaining 31% and 30% of the variation, respectively. The best predictors of these strengths were Conscientiousness, Extraversion and Agreeableness. Finally, the adjusted coefficient of determination (R^2) of Creativity was 0.295, explaining 30% of the variation [($F_{(4.207)}$ = 21.695, p = 0.001)]. Their predictors were

Table 2
Linear regression coefficients for the character strengths predicted by personality traits explaining 30–37% of variation

Character Strengths	Personality Traits	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p
		B	SD	Beta		
	Variable	-3.963	2.161		-1.833	0.068
	Agreeableness	2.053	0.270	0.445	7.612	0.001
Spirituality	Extraversion	1.338	0.203	0.389	6.586	0.001
	Openness	-1.016	0.268	-0.226	-3.795	0.001
	Neuroticism	0.443	0.190	0.136	2.338	0.020
	Variable	-2.668	1.109		-2.406	0.017
Kindness	Agreeableness	1.793	0.190	0.525	9.458	0.001
	Extraversion	0.668	0.141	0.263	4.745	0.001
	Variable	-1.052	1.139		-0.924	0.356
Humor	Extraversion	1.487	0.144	0.567	10.329	0.001
	Agreeableness	0.624	0.195	0.176	3.207	0.002
	Variable	-2.661	1.303		-2.042	0.042
Social Inteligence	Extraversion	1.311	0.157	0.483	8.370	0.001
	Agreeableness	0.608	0.214	0.166	2.834	0.005
	Conscientiousness	0.406	0.196	0.142	2.402	0.017
	Variable	-3.890	1.293		-3.008	0.003
Citizenship	Conscientiousness	0.924	0.167	0.328	5.531	0.001
	Extraversion	0.720	0.155	0.269	4.637	0.001
	Agreeableness	0.864	0.211	0.240	4.094	0.001
Variable		-0.266	1.082		-0.246	0.086
	Conscientiousness	0.860	0.140	0.368	6.149	0.001
Fairness	Agreeableness	0.858	0.177	0.287	4.855	0.001
	Extraversion	0.273	0.130	0.123	2.095	0.037
	Variable	-0.879	1.374		-0.640	0.523
	Extraversion	0.801	0.160	0.314	4.998	0.001
Criativity	Conscientiousness	0.568	0.171	0.206	3.314	0.001
	Openness	0.673	0.210	0.200	3.211	0.002
	Neuroticism	-0.329	0.152	-0.134	-2.170	0.031

Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to experiences; there was a statistically significant positive correlation with Neuroticism.

Table 3 summarizes information regarding the personality traits with the strongest predictive power of the Character Strengths. Extraversion, followed by Agreeableness, had the highest correlations with the Character Strengths, while Openness to experiences and Neuroticism, had the least correlations.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the degree to which Character Strengths can be predicted by Personality traits. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Park and Peterson (2009) there are theoretical correlations between the constructs and Character Strengths can be construed as positive traits of Personality. In addition to representing individual characteristics, there are elements that indicate some overlap, such as stability and interpretation and expression of feelings and thoughts. However, there is no consensus on the traits that are most strongly correlated with each one of these character strengths (Haslam et al., 2004; King et al., 1996; Neto et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2008).

The prediction values that explained at least 30% of the variations were discussed here since

these values are considered important in Psychology research (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013); of the 24 character strengths, 10 met this criterion. It is also important to mention that the models with greater prediction power potential were composed of at least two character strengths. Accordingly, two considerations can be made based on the research problem.

The first one refers to the concept of traits, as reported by McCrae and John (1992). These authors believe that the Five-factor model has some advantages, such as enabling the integration of a wide array of personality constructs and facilitating communication among researchers of many different orientations. Therefore, the traits can be distinguished from other constructs. The Values in Action classification, proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), also demonstrated that a common language in terms of descriptors would stimulate research, including studies addressing the differences between the positive characteristics. A second consideration concerns the fact that at least two traits are needed to predict character strengths, indicating that the constructs are not identical.

Extraversion and Agreeableness were the best predictors of the Character Strengths, corroborating the findings of Depaula, Azzollini, Cosentino and Castillo (2016). However, these authors investigated Extraversion and Openness to experiences only. The former concerns personal

Table 3
Summary of the linear regression coefficients for the character strengths predicted by personality traits

Character strengths	Extraversion	Conscientiousness	Agreeableness	Openness	Neuroticism	R^2
Vitality	+		+		-	0.446
Gratitude	+		+	-		0.411
Persistence	+	+	+		-	0.390
Spirituality	+		+	-	+	0.364
Kindness	+		+			0.359
Humor	+		+			0.363
Social intelligence	+	+	+			0.325
Citizenship	+	+	+			0.310
Fairness	+	+	+			0.299
Creativity	+	+		+	-	0.295

Note: +: positive; -: negative.

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interactions and frequently experienced mood states, and positive affect is its conceptual core. These two traits together define interpersonal experiences. The results obtained agree with those of Neto et al. (2014), who, investigated the relationships between Personality and Character Strengths and found four groups of strengths. Among the interpersonal strengths, as defined by the authors, there are 6 character strengths that were also found in present study, namely Vitality, Persistence, Kindness, Humor, Citizenship, and Fairness. Moreover, Persistence and Social Intelligence are included in the Leadership strengths, which are also related to interaction with others.

Additionally, our findings partially corroborate those of Haslam et al. (2004). In examining the relationships between Character Strengths and Personality traits, these authors found that the strengths previously classified by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as humanity and transcendence are associated with Openness to experiences; thus, Gratitude, Spirituality, Kindness, and Humor are also included.

The negative contribution of the trait Opening to experience to the strength Gratitude deserves special consideration. Accordingly, as pointed out by Nunes et al. (2010), people who score low on Openness to experiences tend to have conservative or traditional beliefs and attitudes, besides being unreceptive to new ideas. The authors argue that there is a negative relationship between this strength and religious beliefs. Thus, it can be hypothesized that people with high level of Gratitude may have characteristics related to religious/spiritual beliefs, which would explain the result obtained. However, further research on this aspect is needed.

Based on the aforementioned discussions, although all character strengths could be predicted, it was found that not all of them were accurately predicted by the Personality traits, suggesting that the associations between the constructs need further investigation. The present study is a contribution to Positive Psychology since considerable amount of research has been conducted on Personality traits. One limitation of this study is the fact that the sample is composed of university students only, which hinders the generalization of the results to the general population. Another limitation is that there is no national research available addressing the relationship between the constructs studied.

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