

Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 3

8-18-2010

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Recommended Citation

LaFollette, Alison M. (2010) "The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths: A Test Summary and Critique," *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/gjcp/vol2/iss1/3>

The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths: A Test Summary and Critique

Allison M. LaFollette

Abstract: The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) is a self-report assessment intended to measure an individual's possession of 24 character strengths. Since the test's development in 2004, one million people have taken the VIA-IS and it has been translated into ten languages. The test shows good reliability on measures of internal consistency and test-retest correlations and correlates substantially with self-nominations of strengths. Though the test shows few psychometric differences among the major U.S. census groups, culture-bound virtues that the VIA-IS does not assess for should also be taken into consideration. The VIA-IS allows counselors to gain a more comprehensive view of clients by providing a common language for discussing strengths.

Currently, few comprehensive reviews of strength-based assessments exist for clinicians that want to obtain a holistic view of their clients. The following test summary and critique examines the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), a psychometric measure designed to help clinicians identify client strengths. Included in the review is basic information such as author and publication date, the tool's psychometric properties, interpretative comments and issues, and an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses for clinicians to consider.

TEST SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE

- I. Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)
 - a. Author/developer: Christopher Peterson & Martin E. P. Seligman
 - b. Publisher: Values in Action Institute (<http://www.viacharacter.org>)
 - c. Date of publication of test: 2004
 - d. Other Forms: An alternate form of the VIA-IS exists for young people ages 10 to 17 and is called the VIA Youth Survey. In addition there is a shorter form of the VIA-IS known as the Brief Strengths Test which has one item for each scale.



II. Description of Instrument

- a. Type of instrument and purpose: The VIA-IS is a self-report assessment designed to measure the degree to which an individual possesses character strengths.
- b. Scales
 - i. Number and types of items: The VIA-IS has 24 scales measuring the strengths of creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality, love, kindness, social intelligence, citizenship, fairness, leadership, forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality. There are ten questions per scale with three items being reverse-scored. The examinee is asked to rate each question on a 5 point scale (“1 = very much unlike me” through “5 = very much like me”).
 - ii. Scoring: Scores are formed by averaging the relevant items for each subscale.
 - iii. Scale and score interpretations: Higher numbers on a scale reflect more of the strength.
- c. Administrative consideration
 - i. Reading level: 8th grade
 - ii. Time: approximately 30-40 minutes
 - iii. Qualifications of test administrator: Familiarity with and understanding of the character strengths.
 - iv. Administration procedures: The client must register online at <http://www.authentic happiness.com> or
 1. <http://www.viacharacter.org> to take the VIA-IS.
 - v. Costs associated with tests/manuals, etc.: A brief report is free on <http://www.viacharacter.org> or <http://www.authentic happiness.com> with registration. A 17-page report can also be obtained from <http://www.viacharacter.org> for

clients at the cost of \$40 per report for 10, \$35 per reports for 11-20 reports, or \$30 for over 21 reports by purchasing a code from the Values in Action Inventory. *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004) by Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman serves as a manual to the VIA-IS and related tests and can be purchased online for \$70.

d. Psychometric properties

- i.** Norms: The normative sample consisted of 150,000 U.S. adults who responded to the VIA-IS using the internet. The group was comprised of 66% women, 34% men, and the ethnic make-up of respondents approximated the percent of each in the U.S. population. The typical respondent was 35 years of age, married and employed and has completed some post-high school schooling.
- ii.** Reliability: All scales show internal consistency with Cronbach's alphas greater than .70. Test-retest correlations for all scales over a 4-month period are substantial ($> .70$) and approach their internal consistencies.
- iii.** Validity: The VIA-IS was developed out of the Wellsprings and Gallup Organizations StrengthsFinder measure and from a small group of undergraduates who generated examples of behaviors that reflected character strengths. Items for scales were suggested by experts in the field of positive psychology, presenting lists at positive psychology conferences, collecting inventories of virtues and strengths, and identifying virtue-relevant messages. Self-nominations of strengths correlate substantially ($r = .5$) with the matching scale scores for all 24 strengths. In three large-sample studies, the scales correlated modestly with rewarding aspects of work, love, and play. With the exception of wisdom and knowledge, strengths correlate robustly with life satisfaction.
- iv.** Gender/racial/ethnic differences: Current psychometrics indicate no significant ethnic difference among the major U.S. census



groupings (African American, Asian American, European American, Latin@, Native American). With the exception that African Americans typically score higher than other groups on spirituality.

III. Interpretive considerations and issues

Though the 24 strengths the VIA-IS assesses are cross-culturally relevant it is important to remember that there is enormous variability within cultures in terms of what an individual esteems. In addition, there are culture-bound virtues like glory, magnificence, and duty, that the VIA-IS does not assess for (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The *Character Strengths and Virtues* handbook provides information on gender, cross-national, and cross-cultural aspects for each strength where research is available. It is thus important for counselors to be aware of cross-cultural research trends and to evaluate if, or to what extent, these trends are relevant to the client being assessed.

Regardless of a client's presenting concern, the VIA-IS can provide valuable information on strengths that the client already possesses. After strengths are identified, the counselor and client can work collaboratively to determine how these strengths may be integrated the treatment plan. The counselor may use the VIA-IS to increase the client's awareness of internal strengths while considering external barriers that may be preventing the client from using strengths to the fullest.

IV. Evaluative comments

a. Strengths

One of the greatest strengths of the VIA-IS is that it creates a common language for discussing strengths with clients. Strengths have been linked to better immunosuppressance, heath outcomes, and mortality (Lopez,

Snyder, & Ramussen, 2003), however the DSM-IV-TR provides little information on looking at strengths, and primarily gives clinicians the ability to describe negative aspects of a client's life (Lopez et al., 2006). To gain a more comprehensive picture of clients, an Axis VI has been proposed by some for future versions of the DSM which would evaluate individual's strengths along dimensions (Lopez et al., 2006). Without any clear indication of when, or if, Axis VI will be included in the next version of the DSM, the VIA-IS can assist counselors until that time with identifying strengths.

While there are very few, if any assessments, that are valid for all populations, the VIA-IS makes a conscious effort to be relevant across cultures (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). First, the developers extensively examined previous attempts at classifying virtues from an interdisciplinary approach. Second, they gathered material from ancient and current cultures examining the virtues that were and are promoted. Third, they consulted with expert colleagues to investigate the meaning of each entry within its cultural context. Lastly, they looked for historical and cross-cultural convergence, and obtained it across six core virtues of courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom. Comparisons of the US ratings of character strengths on the VIA-IS to 54 nations indicate that strengths are rank ordered in similar degrees within the US and around the world (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006) supporting cross-cultural convergence.

Character Strengths and Virtues (2004) by Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman serves as a handbook for the VIA-IS and is impressive in the scope of information it provides. The book offers information on the definition of the strength phrased in terms of behavioral criteria, the



theoretical/research traditions that have studied the strength, and individual difference measures. It also offers information on known correlates of each strength, how the strength manifests across the lifespan, and known interventions that foster strengths. Furthermore, the Values in Action Institute website is a central location for more recent research on the VIA-IS (Peterson, 2009).

b. Weaknesses

The VIA-IS like all assessments, however, has its limits. One such limit is that the VIA-IS takes 30-45 minutes to complete and test takers must answer all 240 questions to obtain results. For test takers that are easily distracted or find focusing difficult, the task of completing a lengthy and relatively time-consuming test may prove difficult. The aforementioned may require that the counselor be present while the client is taking the VIA-IS to help refocus to the client. Another limitation of the VIA-IS is that it is currently only available online and a valid e-mail is needed to register. Thus, clients must have computer and internet access and literacy to take the test. Lastly, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the VIA-IS, the 600+ page handbook, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004), may seem unmanageable for some counselors. Counselors with limited time to gain a comprehensive understanding of the character strengths may prefer to obtain an extended profile report for their clients results. However, the extended profile report, if desired, is only available from www.viacharacter.org for a cost of \$30-40 which may be beyond the financial means of some clients or agencies. Despite the limitations of the VIA-IS, it has demonstrated sound psychometric properties, has been well-researched with a variety of populations, and is a valuable tool for counselors who want a more complete diagnostic picture of clients than the current DSM can offer alone.

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Alison obtained a Bachelor's in Psychology from Truman State University. After completing her Master's at Marquette University, she will begin pursuing a PhD in Counseling Psychology at the University of Kansas. Alison's research and clinical interests center on the utilization of positive psychological interventions to increase subjective well-being and prevent future development of mental illness in various populations.