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Character Strengths and the PERMA Framework: A Comprehensive Approach to Human Flourishing

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Abstract. The quest for human flourishing has, within positive psychology, evolved from a narrow focus on happiness to a multicomponent conceptualization of well-being, as exemplified by Martin Seligman's PERMA model. This paper examines the role of character strengths, as identified in the VIA classification, as the foundation for developing the five elements of PERMA: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Through systematic review of empirical research, theoretical literature, and psychometric analysis, this review confirms the specific interactions among well-being facets and strengths. It also considers the application of such understanding in key areas, testing the expanded PERMA+4 model for workplace flourishing and positive education interventions for student development. The results confirm that character strengths are functional mechanisms for well-being development, with distinctive strengths predicting specific PERMA outcomes. The availability of validated measures, like the PERMA-Profiler, facilitates accurate measurement and personalized interventions. The article concludes that the combination of character strengths and the PERMA model offers a robust, evidence-based framework for promoting human flourishing across diverse contexts, while also identifying cultural and methodological considerations for future research.

Keywords: PERMA framework, Human flourishing, Positive psychology

1. Introduction

As the foundation of positive psychology, the pursuit of personal and social well-being has evolved from the sole focus on the hedonic concept of happiness to a more complex, multifaceted understanding of how humans can flourish. Such evolution is clearly demonstrated by American psychologist Martin Seligman's PERMA framework, which posits that human well-being is constructed through the composition of five distinct, measurable dimensions: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning and Accomplishment. Grounded in the cornerstone belief that frames character strengths as the core pathway to reach the state of well-being, Seligman's framework provides a significant advancement in how we could conceptualize and pursue a "good life" [1]. This essay explores the empirical interaction between character strengths and the PERMA framework, thereby examining the potential application of this model in everyday contexts—such as workplaces and educational settings—analyzing the psychometric tools developed to measure these constructs, and considering cultural and developmental applications. Ultimately it aims to propose a

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holistic, multi-dimensional approach to fostering human flourishing across diverse contexts and populations. In practical terms, this study offers insights into how organizations and educational institutions can foster environments that support human flourishing. By understanding the role of character strengths in promoting PERMA, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions that enhance employee well-being and improve student success.

2. Character strengths as the base of PERMA

Developed by psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman in 2004, the Values in Action (VIA) Character Strengths framework offers an exhaustive classification of 24 positive traits that are universally valued and cherished across diverse cultures and time periods. These traits were organized under six core virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These virtues serve as pathways toward human excellence, enabling individuals to thrive beyond mere survival.

Seligman's PERMA theory emerged from this foundation, proposing that these classified character strengths act as active mechanisms through which the five dimensions of well-being are cultivated and sustained [2]. In this paradigm, a notable shift took place; instead of the "correction of what's wrong" in previous well-being frameworks, Seligman focused on "building what's right and maintaining it" with people. The theoretical link suggests that character strengths are not just correlated with but are causal factors in well-being; when individuals identify and exercise their character strengths, they naturally foster and enhance their positive emotions, deepen engagement, strengthen relationships, find meanings, and achieve accomplishments.

Empirical research has consistently supported this proposition through various methodological approaches. Researchers Wanger, Gander, Ruch, and Proyer conducted two large-scale studies that demonstrated positive correlations between all 24 character strengths and all 5 PERMA dimensions, with particularly strong correlations for specific pairings [3]. Their results showed both general and specific relationships which indicates that while some strengths like zest, hope, and curiosity provide universal support for multiple PERMA criteria, others show domain-specific efficacy.

Starting with the first criteria, Positive emotion (P) and the character strengths of zest, hope, humor, and curiosity demonstrated the strongest correlation. These strengths facilitate the experience of positive affect—such as pleasure, joy, and contentment—through diverse mechanisms: zest provides energy and enthusiasm for life, hope assures a positive expectation for the upcoming, humor creates laughter and lightheartedness, and curiosity leads to the drive of exploring new experiences. Research indicates that individuals who consistently exercise such strengths exhibit a greater tendency to adopt positive thinking patterns and demonstrate higher emotional resilience when facing difficulties [4].

Engagement (E) was most strongly predicted by character strengths such as persistence, zest, curiosity and self-regulation—traits crucial for attaining flow states. These capacities enable deep immersion in activities through sustained attention, enthusiastic involvement and a continued interest free from distractions. Studies across diverse domains (work, sports, arts) consistently show that individuals who leverage these strengths report more frequent and intense flow experiences, characterized by complete absorption, loss of self-consciousness and distorted time perception during activities. The criteria Relationship (R) showed the strongest connections to love, kindness and teamwork: inherently interpersonal strengths that foster social collaboration and community building. Love enables and persists a profound emotional connection with others while teamwork supports collaborative successes. Research has started to identify the tangible biological evidence that justifies the operation of such strengths, including oxytocin release during acts of kindness and

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neural activation during empathetic responses. Meanings (M) was found most associated with spirituality, gratitude, and appreciation of beauty. These strengths connect individuals' sense of self to concepts larger than themselves. Spirituality helps individuals understand their position in broader systems (e.g., family, society, nation), gratitude fosters an appreciation for positive aspects of life and appreciation of beauty links individuals to aesthetic excellence. Longitudinal studies indicate that these strengths contribute significantly to what psychologists term "eudaimonic wellbeing"—a sense of purpose and meaning that transcends mere momentary pleasure. Finally, the virtues of persistence, zest and hope best correspond to the criteria of Accomplishment (A), as they are vital for setting long-term goals and motivating individuals to pursue them, thereby fostering a sense of achievement.

3. Psychometrics of PERMA

The development of valid and reliable measurement tools has been vital to advancing both research and practice with the PERMA framework as a foundation. The PERMA profiler, developed by Butler and Kern, represents the most widely used operationalization of Seligman's theories. This profiler follows a rigorous scale construction procedure, including item generation based on theoretical definitions, expert review for content validity, exploratory factor analysis to establish dimensionality, and confirmatory factor analysis to verify the hypothesized structure.

The 23-item PERMA profiler assesses the five dimensions with three items each, plus an additional measure of overall well-being with one item, negative emotion with three items, loneliness with one item and physical health with three items. This structure enables both profile analysis across domains and composite scoring. A 0–10 response scale, aligned with OECD guidelines for well-being measurement, is applied to generate the final overall score. Psychometric evaluations across multiple large samples (total $N > 31{,}000$) have demonstrated strong internal consistency for the overall scale ($\alpha = .94$) and acceptable to good reliability for each subscale (α ranging from .72 for Engagement to .90 for Meaning). Test-retest reliability over two-week periods showed stability coefficients ranging from .65 to .88 for the various domains. The measure exhibits strong convergent validity, correlating highly with established well-being measures including the Satisfaction with Life Scale ($r = 0.79$), Flourishing Scale ($r = 0.84$), and subjective happiness ($r = .83$) [5]. Importantly, multi-trait multi-method analyses have confirmed that these relationships hold even when controlling for method variance, supporting the construct validity of the measure.

The PERMA-Profiler's key innovation is its multidimensionality--rather than providing a single composite wellbeing score, it generates a profile across the five domains. This allows for nuanced assessment that reveals an individual's unique pattern of strengths and vulnerabilities. For example, a person might show high Accomplishment and Engagement but lower Relationships, suggesting that interpersonal development should be a focus for intervention. This profiling capability has proven particularly valuable in applied settings where targeted interventions are more effective than one-size-fits-all approaches.

In addition to the Profiler, several other measures have been developed to assess PERMA in specific contexts. The Workplace PERMA-Profiler adapts the framework for organizational settings by adding items relevant to work domains. The PERMA-H Profiler adds physical health as a sixth dimension for healthcare applications. Youth versions have been developed for school settings, and brief versions are available for large-scale survey research. These measurement advances have enabled more sophisticated research questions about how well-being develops and functions across different populations and contexts.

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4. PERMA's application in workplaces

While providing a powerful model for general well-being, PERMA's specific applications in areas such as workplaces have necessitated contextual expansion. Donaldson, Van Zyl, and Donaldson proposed the PERMA+4 framework, which is the original PERMA enhanced with four new, contextually essential criteria: physical health, mindset, environment, and economic security. Such expansion is rooted in the systematic reviews of workplace well-being literature, analyses of positive psychology interventions, and qualitative research with employees across diverse industries [6].

To start with, physical health encompasses biological, functional, and psychological health assets that sustain performance. This dimension includes not only the absence of illness but also the presence of resilience, vitality, and energy. Studies focusing on workplaces have shown that physical health interventions (ergonomic improvements, wellness programs, and sleep hygiene training) could significantly enhance job performance, reduce absenteeism, and lower healthcare costs for both employees and organizations.

Mindset includes both fixed versus growth mindset while considering the idea of psychological capital or PsyCap, defined as a higher-order construct comprising hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism [7,8]. In workplaces, a growth mindset combined with PsyCap enables employees to view challenges as opportunities for development while enhancing their overall psychological well-being and job performance. PsyCap has received particular attention in organizational contexts, with analyses showing significant relationships with job satisfaction, commitment and job performance.

Environment refers to the interplay of physical and psychological workplace characteristics that affects well-being. Physical environments include elements like lighting, noise level, air quality and workplace design—factors linked to cognitive performance, mood, and stress levels. Psychological environment encompasses the sense of safety, organizational justice and supportive leadership—factors associated with employee engagement, innovation, and retention.

Economic security addresses the perception of financial stability; this includes income adequacy, job security, and protection against unexpected economic shocks—such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While the diminishing returns of income on happiness beyond survival needs has long been considered a key factor of well-being, studies have also shown that economic security, whether real or perceived, generates significant stress that impairs other aspects of well-being. Research during economic downturns has particularly highlighted how financial worries can dominate employees' psychological states, impairing concentration, decision-making, and interpersonal functioning.

The development and validation of the Positive Functioning at Work (PF-W) scale to measure this expanded framework entailed rigorous psychometric testing across diverse samples and cross-cultural validation protocols. Donaldson and Donaldson empirically confirmed that this nine-factor model exhibited excellent psychometric properties, including strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$ for the overall scale), test-retest reliability, and measurement invariance across job functions and industries [9]. The scale showed convergent validity with established measures such as job satisfaction, work engagement, and organizational citizenship behavior, and discriminant validity against measures of burnout, stress, and turnover intentions. Most importantly, predictive validity studies demonstrated that the PF-W scale predicted key organizational outcomes, including 25% of the variance in turnover intentions, 31% in job performance, and 38% in work engagement. These substantial percentages indicate that the PF-W scale effectively predicts key organizational outcomes, highlighting its significant value for assessing workplace functioning and guiding interventions. These relationships held even after controlling for demographic variables and negative

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affectivity, suggesting that the PERMA+4 framework captures unique variance in workplace functioning beyond traditional predictive factors.

The PERMA+4 model therefore represents what the authors term "Positive Organizational Psychology 2.0"—a more comprehensive, systemic approach that moves beyond individual-focused interventions to address the organizational structures, policies, and cultures that foster flourishing. It suggests that employers must create workplace ecosystems that simultaneously develop psychological resources (PERMA), physical vitality (Health), adaptive thinking patterns (Mindset), supportive surroundings (Environment), and material stability (Economic Security). This comprehensive approach recognizes that employee flourishing is both an ethical imperative and a strategic advantage that fuels organizational success via a range of interconnected mechanisms, including enhanced creativity, improved collaboration, reduced turnover, and increased customer satisfaction. The PERMA+4 model, by integrating psychological resources, physical vitality, adaptive thinking patterns, supportive surroundings, and material stability, represents a holistic approach that not only promotes individual well-being but also fosters a positive organizational culture. This aligns with the concept of Positive Organizational Psychology 2.0, which emphasizes creating workplace ecosystems that support both employee flourishing and organizational success through comprehensive, systemic interventions.

5. PERMA's application in education and youth development

The integration of the PERMA framework and character strengths theory is particularly useful in education, as it aligns with the goals of positive education—recognizing schools as environments for holistic child development, not just cognitive skill acquisition. Leontopoulou's study on students in Greek universities during their country's economic crisis brought on by the pandemic aimed to examine how character strengths and the PERMA model function as protective factors amid adversity [10]. Researchers emphasize several key mechanisms through which character strengths promote well-being in challenging educational contexts.

First, strengths such as curiosity, love of learning and perseverance enable students to maintain high levels of academic engagement despite external stressors. Second, strengths with a social focus —such as kindness, teamwork, and social intelligence—foster social support networks that provide essential emotional support for students during difficult times. Third, transcendental strengths like gratitude, hope and spirituality helped students find meaning and maintain a positive outlook amid current difficulties.

Therefore, the educational applications of this study could lead to the development of future education programs that integrate PERMA and character strengths into the curriculum, with the following key components:

1. Explicit teachings of character strengths which help students develop a clear awareness of their own virtues, thereby enhancing self-efficacy and well-being. Strength-spotting exercises could be applied to train students to recognize strengths of themselves and peers to reach such a goal.

2. Integration of character strengths into the school curriculum. History class might explore stories of human resilience, literature class might have hope in novels as a topic, and science class might study the curiosity of scientific research. This technique teaches academic motivation and character development simultaneously.

3. PERMA-driven school policy and practice create institutional environments for well-being. This may include relationship-building rituals (e.g., advisory programs), meaning-making activities (e.g., service learning), recognition systems that highlight non-academic development, and physical environments that encourage engagement and positive emotions.

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4. A well-being curriculum explicitly teaches skills for flourishing across the five domains. Positive emotion skills include mindfulness, savoring, and gratitude practices. Engagement skills focus on achieving flow through balancing challenge and skill level. Meaning skills help students connect learning to personal values and larger purposes. Accomplishment skills teach goal setting, growth mindset, and perseverance strategies.

The implementation of these interventions has produced promising results at all levels of education. At the primary level, interventions in positive education have demonstrated improvements in social skills, emotional regulation, and academic engagement. At the secondary level, research has demonstrated reduced depression and anxiety, increased life satisfaction, and improved academic performance. At the tertiary level, interventions have promoted student retention, mental health, and career readiness. The Greek financial crisis case study particularly illustrates how positive education can build resilience resources to help young people thrive amid extreme adversity. Participants who had been taught character strengths and PERMA competencies were more likely to maintain well-being, remain at school, and envision positive futures despite the adverse context. This suggests that positive education may be particularly beneficial for economically disadvantaged, socially disrupted, or otherwise vulnerable populations—groups where traditional protective factors may be compromised.

6. Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that character strengths play their role as foundational mechanisms through which the five dimensions of PERMA wellbeing are cultivated and sustained. A strong and often specific relationship between character strengths and dimensions of the PERMA framework has been confirmed through the empirical evidence provided above. The development of validated psychometric tools, such as the PERMA-profiler and other contextual adaptations like the PERMA+4 framework designated for workspaces, provides a solid foundation for applying this knowledge in practical scenarios like organizations and schools, enabling targeted interventions to foster human flourishing. However, several limitations warrant attention. First, current research relies heavily on self-reported and cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Second, the cultural applicability of the VIA classification and PERMA model, despite their intended universality, requires further validation across more diverse, non-Western populations. Future research should prioritize experimental designs to firmly establish causal relationships between character strengths and PERMA outcomes. Investigations should also focus on the long-term efficacy of strength-based interventions and explore how different strengths influence well-being outcomes, aiming to develop a more holistic understanding of human flourishing.

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