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ABSTRACT

The science of well-being has catalyzed a tremendous amount of research with no area more robust in application and impact than the science of character strengths. As the empirical links between character strengths and positive outcomes rapidly grow, the research around strength imbalances and the use of strengths with problems and conflicts is nascent. The use of character strengths in understanding and handling life suffering as well as emerging from it, is particularly aligned within second wave positive psychology. Areas of particular promise include strengths overuse and strengths underuse, alongside its companion of strengths optimal use. The latter is viewed as the golden mean of character strengths which refers to the expression of the right combination of strengths, to the right degree, and in the right situation. This paper discusses these constructs, maps out each across 24 universal character strengths, and deliberates on reasons for overuse and underuse. Practical strategies for counselors to support clients in the pursuit of optimal strengths use and the management of overuse and underuse are outlined. These include thoughts on wise interventions, the tempering effect, the towing effect, direct questioning, mindfulness, strengths-spotting, the use of a leading strengths model (aware-explore-apply), and eliciting feedback from others.

Introduction

The middle way.
The golden mean.
The doctrine of the mean.
The goldilocks principle.

Across time and cultures, the good life or the fulfilled life has rested in the balance between the extremes of too much and too little, as captured in the principles noted above from the wisdom of the Buddha, Aristotle, Confucius, and even popular fairytales, respectively. The application of this idea with universal character strengths is a bullseye for approaches to personal development and counseling and in modern day language is referred to with terms such as the optimal use of strengths, the strengths zone, balanced strengths use, the golden mean of character strengths, and the sweet spot of strengths (Niemiec, 2018).

Positive psychology, or the science of well-being, is "nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216). It is an umbrella term for those theories and research studies involving what makes life worth living (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One of the foundations of this science is the VIA work – the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and the VIA Inventory of Strengths (known colloquially as the VIA Survey). VIA was previously used as an acronym for "values in action," however, now stands on its own. The word, in Latin, means "the way" or "by means of," and is apropos for the bridging function of this character strengths work which is to *bridge* science and practice and to provide a *pathway* to well-being and the various positive outcomes humans pursue.

Character strengths are positive traits existing in degrees that are reflected in our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and are predispositions toward moral excellence (Park et al., 2004). Good character is not the absence of deficits, rather is a family of positive characteristics (Park & Peterson, 2009). The VIA Classification of Character Strengths is the result of a three-year process involving 55 scientists interested in exploring the question: What's best in human beings? (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The result was 24 character strengths, nesting under six larger categories of virtues, which were defined by these researchers as those core characteristics valued by philosophers and theologians over the centuries. The VIA Inventory of Strengths is the free, scientifically valid measurement tool that assesses the 24 strengths; it has been taken by approximately 8 million people, translated into 41 languages, and is taken by someone in the world every 15 seconds. There are now 15 valid measures of character strengths and virtues freely available to researchers (see McGrath, 2017, for the technical manual). The science continues to mount on this grouping of positive traits and over the last several years, well over 500 peer-reviewed articles have been published describing, exploring, or applying these character strengths and consistently discovering a wide range of well-being outcomes associated with them (Niemiec, 2018; VIA Institute, 2019).

Counseling psychologists and therapists who become aware of this work are scrambling to understand and apply this new science that now has a myriad of best practices to help clients. While counselors are naturally curious about the transformative well-being and depression findings around individuals' highest character strengths called signature strengths (e.g., see meta-analysis by Schutte & Malouff, 2018) as well as the value of understanding all the general categories of strengths a client has (i.e. referred to as talents/intelligences, skills, resources/supports, values, and interests/passions; Niemiec, 2018), there is a third area that captivates the attention of practitioners. It is the concepts of strengths overuse, underuse, and optimal use. In other words, clients (and practitioners) will often bring forth their best personality traits too strongly or too weakly in a given situation and can be guided to discover the optimal use of these character strengths. The optimal use of character strengths provides a pathway for individual well-being and life satisfaction as well as management of problems (Freidlin, Littman-Ovadia, & Niemiec, 2017).

The overuse, underuse, and optimal use of strengths are closely aligned with second wave positive psychology (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016; Wong, 2011) which focuses on the science and practice around confronting, navigating, and transcending suffering and life problems as well as learning how positive character, resilience, mindfulness, and meaning can bring illumination to such problems. In the field of character

strengths, there is the dialectic of learning and growing from the positives of these qualities as well as from the imbalances of these qualities (when strengths are brought forth too strongly or too weakly). It is in this dialectic in the pursuit of balance in strengths expressions (Wong, 2016) that second wave positive psychology and character strengths synergize and offer new wisdom of exploration and application reflecting both ancient philosophies and contemporary research. According to a recent theory of character strengths, in order to discover thriving, a person must both make the most of and create opportunities in life as well as handle and overcome life adversities; the person's character strengths are an immediate mechanism for doing so through a variety of functions including priming, buffering, reappraisal, mindfulness, appreciation, and resilience (Niemiec, 2019a). For this paper, I'll expand upon these theories of thriving and second wave positive psychology through the exploration of the latest concepts, research, and practices around the imbalance (overuse and underuse) and balance (optimal use) of our character strengths. These ideas and findings offer a new perspective on suffering and point toward a path of growth therein (e.g., Freidlin et al., 2017; Littman-Ovadia & Freidlin, 2019).

Underuse of character strengths

As character strengths are positive traits that bring benefit to ourselves and others, if we do not bring forth a particular character strength in a situation, we are not bringing enough of ourselves, central parts of our personality, to the situation. This common phenomenon in which we are not bringing forth one of our strength capacities in a particular situation and there is a resulting negative impact on ourselves or others is referred to as the *underuse of character strengths* (Niemiec, 2018). The well-being benefits of enhancing character strengths use, as shown in multiple interventions studies, are clear (e.g., Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013; Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In addition, there are numerous studies showing distinct benefits across life domains, such as work productivity (Harzer & Ruch, 2014), improved coping and less stress at work (Harzer & Ruch, 2015), multiple positive classroom behaviors (Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2016), improved relationships (Lavy, Littman-Ovadia, & Bareli, 2014), and positive physical health outcomes (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2013).

A person can underuse any of the 24 character strengths, not only the strengths lowest in their strengths profile. Examples of underuse of character strengths include the person who does not bring forth much bravery to stand up for someone being teased, not enough perseverance and quickly gives up on a work project, no forgiveness to someone who wronged them that is asking for a release from their burden, or only minimal curiosity in not asking many questions to support someone who is struggling.

The reasons for such underuse are myriad and based on individual personality and contextual factors. One person might not have the skill to bring forth a given strength to match it well for the situation at hand (see Stichter, 2015, for the virtue as a skill model). Another person might not have the mindful awareness that they could or should act. For still others, it might be simple oversight that they forgot to use their strengths, that they perceive their strengths are undervalued by others, or that they are afraid they will be judged or not accepted if they use their strengths

(e.g., if they bring forth honesty or bravery to confront someone they will be met with anger). In many cases, individuals experience strength erosion where the character strength has faded over time from a lack of attention or use which may be related to situational factors (e.g., having a job that does not allow for curious questioning or creative expression) or personal factors (e.g. giving priority to other strengths, inattention to one's strengths, or a traitlike preoccupation with the negative). The underuse of character strengths often comes down to an issue of capacity – the person, for one reason or another, has not fully developed their capacity for use of one or more of their strengths.

The issue of capacity is one of mindset and behavior. A *mindset capacity* for character strengths is one in which the individual is aware of their strengths, is informed by their own skills and knowledge to bring them forth, is proactive in looking for opportunities to use them at difficult times, mundane times, and positive times, and pursues a mindset around a balanced approach between too much and too little. The *behavioral capacity* refers to the individual readily taking action in using their character strengths in a range of settings, with people, and when alone. This means the person is practiced in using strengths in the past and their mindset of looking for ways to use character strengths at times of opportunity and adversity is brought into actionable behaviors in their life. These two capacities interrelate and mutually enhance one another; as the individual builds a mindset capacity for strengths, the capacity for strengths-based behaviors widens, and as the person puts a strength into behavioral action the mindset potential grows.

Table 1 offers several lenses of the different dimensions of underuse and overuse for each of the 24 character strengths.

Overuse of character strengths

Scientists have found that a wide range of variables that we typically view as "positive" can go too far (Le et al., 2011). Despite the positive valence of all 24 character strengths, this applies to each of the character strengths which appear to have an upper limit (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). Described as the "too-much-of-a-good-thing-effect," empirical evidence shows there is this upper limit to individual creativity, task performance, job performance, satisfaction, team innovation, and leadership effectiveness, to name a few (Busse, Mahlendorf, & Bode, 2016). In addition, this has been applied to virtuous goals (i.e., positive-oriented goals such as eating healthy, getting organized, sharing a personal issue); in one study, the researchers found that people who set and planned around one virtuous goal in their life did better than those who set and planned around six virtuous goals (Dalton & Spiller, 2012).

The overuse of some of the 24 character strengths has been given more attention than others as reflected in studies on leadership (Antonakis, House, & Simonton, 2017), humor (Bitterly, Brooks, & Schweitzer, 2017), and creativity (Clark & James, 1999), in particular. Research on couples who perceive their partner is overusing their character strengths is associated with negative variables such as relationship dissatisfaction (Kashdan et al., 2018).

When a strength is overused, it is having a negative impact on oneself or others so can no longer be considered a positive strength – it has become something else – such

Table 1. A language for understanding the overuse and underuse of character strengths.

Character strength	Underuse	Overuse
Creativity	Conforming; plain/dull; unimaginative	Eccentric; odd; scattered
Curiosity	Bored; uninterested; apathetic; self-involved	Nosy; intrusive, self-serving
Judgment/Critical Thinking	Illogical; naïve; unreflective; closed-minded	Narrow-minded; cynical; rigid; indecisive; lost in one's head
Love of Learning	Smug; complacent with knowledge or growth; uninterested	Know-it-all; elitist; overwhelming
Perspective	Shallow; superficial; lacking confidence	Overbearing; arrogant; disconnected
Bravery	Cowardly; unwilling to act; unwilling to be vulnerable	Risk-taking; foolish; overconfident; unconcerned of others' reactions
Perseverance	Lazy; helpless; giving up	Stubborn; struggles to let go; fixated
Honesty	Phony; dishonest; inauthentic; lacking integrity	Self-righteous; rude; inconsiderate
Zest	Sloth-like; passive; sedentary; tired	Hyper; overactive; annoying
Love	Isolating; cut-off from others; afraid to care; not relating	Emotional overkill; misaligned with others' needs; sugary sweet/touchy-feely
Kindness	Indifferent; selfish; uncaring to yourself; mean-spirited	Compassion-fatigue; intrusive; overly focused on others
Social Intelligence	Clueless; disconnected; socially naïve; emotionally insensitive	Over-analytical; self-deception; overly sensitive
Teamwork	Self-serving; individualistic; going it alone	Dependent; lost in groupthink; blind obedience; loss of individuality
Fairness	Prejudice; partisanship; complacency	Detached; indecisive on justice issues; uncaring justice
Leadership	Follower; compliant and mousy; passive	Bossy; controlling; authoritarian
Forgiveness	Vengeful; merciless; easily triggered by others	Permissive; doormat; too lenient or soft
Humility	Arrogant; braggadocio; self-focused; heavy ego needs	Self-deprecation; limited self-image; subservient; withholding about oneself
Prudence	Reckless; thrill-seeking; acting before thinking	Stuffy; prudish; rigid; passive
Self-Regulation	Self-indulgent; emotional dysregulation; impulsive; undisciplined; unfocused	Constricted; inhibited; tightly wound; obsessive
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	Oblivious; stuck in autopilot; mindlessness	Snobbery; perfectionistic; intolerant; unrelenting standards
Gratitude	Entitled; unappreciative; self-absorbed	Ingratiation; contrived; profuse; repetitive
Hope	Negative; pessimistic; past-oriented; despair	Unrealistic; Pollyanna-ish; head in the clouds, blind optimism
Humor	Overly serious; stilted/stiff; flat affect	Tasteless/offensive; giddy; socially inappropriate
Spirituality	Lack of purpose or meaning in life; disconnected from what is sacred; unaware of core values	Preachy/proselytizing; fanatical; rigid values; holier than thou

Adapted from Niemiec (2014, 2018). The VIA Classification of 24 strengths is copyright VIA Institute on Character and used with permission.

as a negative habit or trait (Niemiec, 2018). For example, the overuse of curiosity in asking a fearful new client far too many questions about a sensitive area is no longer the positive trait called curiosity, it has entered into intrusiveness or being nosey. Often, when a person is overusing their character strengths they have brought the strength to the wrong situation (Peterson, 2006) and have lost the bigger picture reality of the situation, misinterpreting the people around them or the surrounding context. The person high in perseverance may become stuck in the modus operandi of their determined nature to finish a project while each of their teammates conclude the project cannot be completed and the team must simply give it up and face the sunk costs; but, the persevering person (no longer using the positive trait of perseverance and instead

using stubbornness or a negative fixation) keeps going despite a negative impact on their health and the team.

Individuals are naturally interested in expressing themselves and desire to express their most central qualities to others (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Kim & Ko, 2007; Rogers, 1951). When this is done without mindful attention of themselves or the situation, the result can be a mindless overplay of their best qualities which has a negative impact on others. A variety of factors might partially explain why someone may be overusing their character strengths. Virtues scholar, Nancy Snow (2016) offers the concepts of forcing, impulsivity, overthinking, and perfectionistic standards as ways virtues can become overplayed or unbalanced. These can be explained and applied to character strengths in the following ways. Forcing: An individual might pressure oneself to forgive someone else when it doesn't feel right, or force in humor when it's socially inappropriate. Impulsivity: Someone may impulsively use their zest without thinking of the impact on others first thing in the morning before others have had their coffee. Overthinking: An individual might become riddled with indecisiveness by overthinking the multitude of scenarios by means of their strength of judgment/critical thinking. Perfectionistic standards: The person high in appreciation of beauty and excellence may find themselves constantly upholding unrealistic or imbalanced standards with their work projects or in their relationships. As with underuse, the sometimes subtle phenomenon of overuse of character strengths can vary in many ways due to individual differences and situational factors.

A model of optimal use of character strengths: emerging research

Thousands of years ago, Aristotle (4th BCE/2000), a practical philosopher, emphasized an approach to living, working, playing, and relating that was characterized by a balance in virtuous expression, a golden mean. The emphasis was placed on virtues being the positive and desirable balance between two opposites, that of excess and deficiency. Modern day researchers in strengths have reignited this work as an important component of strengths-based approaches (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Linley, 2008; Niemiec, 2014; Rashid & Seligman, 2018) and is aligned with the direction of what other scholars in the field have argued for (Fowers, 2008; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). The lead researcher of the development of the VIA Classification and VIA Survey, Chris Peterson (2006), offered some thoughts on an alternative *DSM* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) by hypothesizing "disorders" of character strengths with dimensions he named strength exaggeration, absence, and opposite. For example, for the strength of bravery, he named its exaggeration as foolhardiness, its absence as fright, and its opposite as cowardice. In testing this hypothetical approach with practitioners, educators, and scholars across the globe, this model fell flat, repeatedly, from a practical perspective, often leading practitioners feeling the approach was too erudite, complex, and confusing. Yet, it provided a good foundation for important revisions.

In echoing Aristotle's golden mean and continuum concepts, Niemiec (2014) revised the framework by simplifying it to overuse, underuse, and optimal use for the 24 character strengths, while expanding its application not solely to psychopathology but as applicable to all human beings. Figure 1 shows this model as a continuum for

Figure 1. Continuum of character strengths underuse and overuse, along with optimal use (Niemiec, 2019b).

strengths use where the further one goes off-center in either direction there is more steep and serious overuse and underuse. As this is a shift in degree in each direction, there are degrees of optimal use for a given situation and subtle shifts to where the strengths use begins to slowly impact oneself or others in a negative way to where the use becomes overuse or underuse. This model has consistently shown to be a strong fit for strengths-based practitioners across the globe for a number of reasons, including 1) Clarity and accessibility of the constructs and language, i.e., the words for overuse and underuse are readily understandable and diverse thereby affording easy accessibility for client's understanding and insights; 2) The precision of the model; i.e. a continuum of strengths use with overuse and underuse on either end of a spectrum and optimal-use in the center is easy to explain and digest. This contrasts with the previously mentioned model in which constructs around "absence" and "opposite" sometimes overlapped and confused practitioners and clients; 3) The ease of informal assessment for clients; e.g. a practitioner might quickly ask a client, How are you overusing your strengths with that stressor? Were you underusing your bravery in that situation?; and 4) The ease of application for clients; e.g. Let's explore what optimal use of curiosity might look like with your distressed colleague or How might you use your social intelligence to boost your gratitude in your next conversation with your mother? 5) Other developments include a formal measurement tool to assess these constructs and subsequent research support for this model of overuse, underuse, and optimal-use, to be shared later in this section.

In order to qualify as overuse or underuse, the character strength must be causing sub-optimal or a negative impact of some kind upon oneself or others. As this is a continuum of use, the degree of the impact will vary based on the severity of the strengths overuse or underuse. An important distinction to note is these concepts are distinct from what is termed the "misuse of character strengths" or the "dark side" which refers to the malevolent use of character – the use of a strength with the intention of manipulating or harming another person (Niemiec, 2018). While the person who overuses or underuses their character strengths has been mindless in the moment or has miscalibrated their strengths, this is not a deliberate intention to harm; in contrast, the person who misuses strengths is using their capacities in a devious or manipulative way to harm others. For example, an individual may use their social intelligence to tune in to another person's vulnerability areas of need and take advantage of them. Another person might use their creativity in an e-mail scam intending to steal money from a bank account while another individual might use their curiosity or humor with the intention of charming and disarming someone and then abducting them. Research has also supported this notion of misuse or the dark side and examined certain character strengths from this perspective. For example, several studies have examined "malevolent

creativity," defined as the deliberate intention to harm, such as an employee stealing company secrets to bring down a company that is doing good (Cropley, Kaufman, White, & Chiera, 2014). The misuse of courage/bravery has also been explored and explained as "bad courage" as when an individual sees a particular goal as good, whereas society views that particular goal as harmful (Pury, Starkey, Kulik, Skjerning, & Sullivan, 2015). A terrorist expressing bravery as a suicide bomber with a clear intention to harm would be one example of this character strength being misused.

As mentioned, there have been a number of scholars theorizing about overuse and underuse, however, until recently no empirical studies had been conducted. Following the creation of a measurement tool, Overuse, Underuse, Optimal Use of Character Strengths (OUOU) survey (Freidlin et al., 2017), a number of researchers have begun experimental studies. The first empirical study to examine such character strengths imbalances found that the overuse and underuse of character strengths were significantly associated with less flourishing, less life satisfaction, and greater depression while the optimal use of character strengths was associated with greater flourishing and life satisfaction, and less depression (Freidlin et al., 2017). This study also found that the underuse of strengths was far more of a problem across each variable than the overuse of character strengths; however, both overuse and underuse were independently substantial. A second study replicated each of these previous findings (Littman-Ovadia & Freidlin, 2019). In addition, these two studies examined combinations of overuse and underuse with different psychological disorders. The first study took a fresh look at social anxiety disorder, through these lenses. A particular combination of six overuse/underuse phenomena correctly sorted 87.3% of people as either having or not having social anxiety disorder. This combination was the overuse of social intelligence and humility, and the underuse of humor, social intelligence, self-regulation, and zest (Freidlin et al., 2017). The second study brought a new lens to obsessive-compulsive disorder and found the combination of the overuse of judgment, social intelligence, appreciation of beauty and excellence, fairness, and prudence, as well as the underuse of forgiveness and self-regulation, to correctly sort 89.3% of people into those that have or do not have clinical levels of OCD (Littman-Ovadia & Freidlin, 2019). These studies underlie what might be termed *strengths overuse and underuse clusters* as these particular clusters of imbalance revealed new insights into these well-studied, established disorders. While these results need to be replicated before further conclusions are drawn about these disorders or treatment protocols developed, they point to unique pathways to advance, complement and support existing research and practice in diagnosing and treating people with psychopathology and other problems.

Optimal strengths use, therefore, reflects the balance among minor or major extremes. It assumes that in each situation of any context, a strengths sweet spot or strengths zone, no matter how narrow for the circumstance, can be pursued by counselors and clients for benefits relating to well-being and problem management. Ultimately, the movement toward such a "golden mean" means to apply the right combination of character strengths to the right degree and in the right situation (Niemiec, 2014). Table 2 offers some language for each strength that describes optimal strengths use and the essence of each strength. In addition, the three most highly correlated character strengths are offered for each strength to provide additional insight around the potential of optimal strengths use, as the reality is character strengths are expressed in combinations rather than in isolation of one strength at a time. These

Table 2. The optimal use of character strengths.

Character strength	Optimal use	Top character strength correlates
Creativity	Uniqueness that is practical; original, clever, imaginative	Curiosity; bravery; perspective
Curiosity	"Explorer," intrigued, open, novelty-seeker	Zest; love of learning; creativity
Judgment/Critical Thinking	Seeing 360 degrees of details; analytical, detail oriented, open-minded, rational, logical	Perspective; prudence; honesty
Love of Learning	Going deep with knowledge; information-seeking; lifelong learner	Curiosity; appreciation of beauty & excellence; judgment/critical thinking
Perspective	Sees and offers the wider review; wise; integrating viewpoints beyond one's own	Social intelligence; judgment/critical thinking; hope
Bravery	Facing fears; confronting adversity; valor	Perspective; social intelligence; honesty
Perseverance	Task completer; persistent and gritty; overcoming all obstacles	Self-regulation; honesty; hope
Honesty	True to oneself, authentic to others; truth-sharer and seeker; sincere; without pretense	Perseverance; perspective; kindness
Zest	Enthusiasm for life; happy; active; energized	Hope; curiosity; gratitude
Love	Genuine, reciprocal warmth; connected; relational fulfillment	Gratitude; kindness; zest
Kindness	Doing for others; caring; compassionate; generous; nice and friendly	Gratitude; teamwork; leadership
Social Intelligence	Tuned in, then savvy; knowing what makes others tick; empathic; emotionally intelligent	Perspective; leadership; bravery
Teamwork	Participative; contributing to group efforts; loyal; socially responsible; collaborative	Leadership; kindness; fairness
Fairness	Champions equal opportunity for all; care- and justice-based; moral concern	Leadership; teamwork; forgiveness
Leadership	Positively influencing others; organizing groups; leading around a vision	Fairness; teamwork; kindness
Forgiveness	Letting go of hurt when wronged; giver of second changes; accepting shortcomings	Fairness; leadership; teamwork
Humility	Clear view of oneself; focuses attention on others; sees own limitations; modest	Prudence; fairness; honesty
Prudence	Wisely cautious; thinks before speaks; planful; goal-oriented; risk-manager	Judgment/critical thinking; humility; honesty
Self-Regulation	Self-manager of vices; mindful; disciplined	Perseverance; zest; hope
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	Seeing the life behind things; awe/wonder in the presence of beauty; admiration for excellence; elevation for the goodness of others	Gratitude; curiosity; love of learning
Gratitude	Attitude of thankfulness; connected; appreciating positives	Kindness; love; hope
Hope	Positive expectations; optimistic; confidence in goals and future	Zest; gratitude; perspective
Humor	Laughter/joy with others; seeing the lighter side; playful	Social intelligence; zest; kindness
Spirituality	Connecting with the sacred; pursuing life meaning; finding purpose; expressing virtues	Gratitude; hope; zest

Content gathered from Niemiec (2018).

correlations come from a dataset of more than 458,000 subjects from the VIA Institute database and analyzed by McGrath (2013).

Discovering optimal use: practical approaches for counselors

Initial points of reflection

While the area of character strengths interventions is evolving and rapidly expanding in terms of practical applications for practitioners to use (see Niemiec, 2018), evidence-based

interventions focusing on the constructs of strengths overuse, underuse, and optimal use are embryonic. The intention here is to offer new perspectives and strategies in these areas for purposes of boosting well-being and bringing balance and reappraisal to problems. The approaches offered here are based on the emerging research as well as feedback from large numbers of workshop participants across the globe and from pioneering practitioners using these constructs.

A few considerations of note prior to deploying these interventions: overuse and underuse are neither purely deficit-based, in the same way as labeling a psychological or medical disorder, nor are they purely strength-based, in the same way as labeling a character strength. They sit in a grey area between these approaches as they reinterpret or reframe problems, labels, and challenges while simultaneously focusing on something that is positive yet imbalanced or problematic in a situation. Overuse and underuse of character strengths provide a radical yet practical reframe for diagnoses, problems, and other forms of suffering – they are not a replacement to these approaches but are complementary.

A practical consideration for counselors is to be attuned to client biases and tendencies toward the negativity mindset, self-criticism, and perfectionism. The topics of overuse and underuse are important for such clients on the impossible pursuit of perfection as the framing of such issues with strengths language can be positively impactful (e.g., a perfectionistic manager may come to see her behavioral patterns as the overuse of appreciation of beauty and excellence while the highly self-judging teacher might learn to view his patterns as the underuse of self-forgiveness and the underuse of self-kindness). That said, if such clients instead turn the overuse and underuse of character strengths into another pathway for self-deprecation or failed perfectionistic pursuits as they explore with futility every nuance of their life from the perspective of strengths overuse/underuse, the counselor may need to weave in additional approaches. In such cases, training in self-compassion can be a good complement to working on overuse and underuse and is an area with mounting scientific support (Neff & Vonk, 2009).

Another area of psychological science that can inform these approaches is known as wise interventions. The new science of wise interventions refers to the creation of simple activities that target an underlying psychological issue and act like a change lever in a specific context (Walton, 2014). Practitioners can look to apply questioning, activities, and homework around strengths overuse and underuse tailored to the right situation and time for their clients' unique needs and areas of development.

A final point of reflection is not only are strengths overuse and underuse subjective by nature and subject to our own and others' interpretations (although science attempts to be objective), strengths overuse and underuse are not always a bad thing. In some situations, we might intentionally overuse or underuse a character strength because it supports a longer-term goal, it preserves another person's feelings, is our preference for a particular situation, or it is simply the best we can do and we fall short. For example, a person might feign their strength of humor to fit into an uncomfortable social situation or bring forth an uncharacteristic level of kindness (but less honesty) in order to help a struggling friend. Recent research has found that we can successfully make such changes to our personality by "acting as if" (i.e., faking it) with the trait we are desiring to express (Blackie, Roepke, Forgeard, Jayawickreme, & Fleeson, 2014; Fleeson, 2001; Fleeson, Malanos, & Achille, 2002). Paradoxically, the individual is intentionally trying to play up (or in their mind overplay or underplay) their typical level of humor or

another strength to benefit themselves or others. In some cases, as long as it does not have the intention to do harm, it may be the optimal strengths use for that situation.

Direct questioning

Practitioners can systematically and strategically integrate questions on character strengths, and strengths overuse, underuse, and optimal use into their initial interviews, assessments, and discussions with clients. This gives the practitioner a more complete view of their clients as well as an immediate understanding of the client's potential inner resources to draw out to help them reach the goals of their counseling and to manage the obstacles and problems along the way. Many practitioners begin by having clients complete the free VIA Inventory of Strengths (www.viacharacter.org) before, during, or after a session and then review the client's results. This serves as the catalyst for strengths exploration. It is generally recommended to first spend time understanding the client's reactions to the results of this assessment as well as exploring the use of strengths. After the client has come to endorse and appreciate their various character strengths, *then* it might be useful to explore overuse and underuse of strengths. Here are some lines of questioning to elicit insights for clients, specific to strengths overuse and underuse:

- What does it look like when you bring forth one of your top strengths – your signature strengths – too strongly? How does that overuse impact others? Yourself?
- What does it look like when you forget to use one of your character strengths or you bring it forth too weakly? How does that underuse impact others? Yourself?
- Share a recent problem or stressor. Which of your character strengths were you overusing that may have contributed to the issue? Which of your character strengths were you underusing?
- When was a recent situation in which you feel as if you did not bring your best self forward? (likely taps into underuse).
- Has the use of your character strengths ever gotten you in trouble? How so? (likely taps into overuse).
- Consider a time when someone at home or work said they were upset or frustrated with you. If you look at the situation honestly, what character strengths do you think you were underusing there? Overusing?
- When do you find that you get irritated or upset by others? Are you overplaying or underplaying any of your character strengths in these situations?

Implement the strengths model of AEA

The Aware-Explore-Apply model (AEA) is the typical process by which practitioners and clients work with character strengths (Niemiec, 2014, 2018). The actions of these three steps were shown in a controlled intervention study to boost strengths use and well-being among workers (Dubreuil et al., 2016). The first phase is the cultivation of awareness to break strengths blindness patterns and support the client in coming to see they have a variety of positive qualities. Next is the exploration of these strengths as past use, future use, current use, use with problems, and use at good times are explored. The third phase involves gathering one's learnings and insights from the earlier phases

and making a plan by setting goals and taking action. This model can be applied to not only strengths use but to overuse and underuse. Within this model, an exploration of strengths overuse and underuse can naturally be woven in. By use of questions and points of dialogue similar to those mentioned in the previous section, the practitioner supports the client in newfound points of awareness and exploration around their strengths overuse and underuse. The apply phase then takes a number of forms from using a strategy mentioned in this section to keeping a self-monitoring log or journal on overuse/underuse to discussions with others exploring situation in which strength imbalances emerged.

Mindfulness

When it comes to strengths overuse and underuse, everything starts with awareness. The practice of mindfulness is that first step that brings clients to understand themselves from a new lens. Mindfulness practice catalyzes what's referred to as "beginner's mind" which means to see oneself, others, tasks, and routines as if for the first time, which in turn, helps to catalyze learning and growth (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013). Mindful strengths use is the type of integration in which the lens of mindfulness helps individuals to see the context, notice the dynamics of the people in it, and not only be aware of character strengths but to bring them forth strongly and in an optimal way (Niemiec, 2014).

Aristotelian philosophers have explained that Aristotle's (2000) concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom, involves managing the imbalance of virtues and strengths so that they do not turn into vices and negative habits. Some have said phronesis can be best interpreted and understood as mindfulness (McEvilley, 2002). One evidence-based, 8-week program that systematically integrates mindfulness and character strengths and involves a focus on optimal strengths use amidst overuse and underuse is called mindfulness-based strengths practice (Niemiec, 2014; Pang & Ruch, 2019). In this way, phronesis might be viewed as the balance of strengths through mindfulness.

Ultimately, mindfulness helps clients discover optimal strengths use. A practitioner might describe stories or scenarios of optimal strengths use to support clients in understanding not only the ease of strengths use but the feasibility of optimal use. This is also where a client might be queried about their role models for certain strengths such as the paragon in their life for humility, their role model for love, characters from movies or television shows that exemplify creativity, and media personalities that show strong social intelligence or bravery. Such stories offer an additional lens for discovery of optimal strengths use. For examples of optimal strengths use and stories of strengths use and overuse, across the 24 character strengths, see Niemiec and McGrath (2019). For 1,500 examples from movies displaying the 24 character strengths, see Niemiec and Wedding (2014).

Strengths-spotting

A staple activity in the practice of character strengths is known as strengths-spotting. This refers to the labeling of the character strengths that are observed in someone (or in oneself) along with a rationale or description as to how the strength is being seen in action. This is often one of the first activities practitioners will deploy with clients (Linley, 2008). Research has pointed to the benefits of strengths-spotting, for example in the

education setting, positive student outcomes that were explained by teachers' strengths-spotting of students included classroom engagement, needs satisfaction, and positive affect (Quinlan, Vella-Brodrick, Gray, & Swain, 2018). In addition, couples who spotted the strengths of their partner (and expressed appreciation for those strengths) had greater relationship satisfaction, needs satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment (Kashdan et al., 2018). Indeed, placing attention on others through strengths-spotting is not only a staple of balanced work in the practice of character strengths, it is often the first step in helping clients get comfortable with the language of character strengths and learning strengths fluency (Niemiec, 2018).

An extension of this activity is to engage in overuse-spotting, underuse-spotting, and optimal use-spotting. When a practitioner notices a client is overplaying their kindness to the point of being a doormat, this is pointed out. When a client is underplaying forgiveness by not giving someone who committed a minor offense a second change, this is explained and explored. Likewise, when a client stands up for themselves to a family member, it can be shared that this might be a marker for the optimal use of bravery for the client's future interactions with that particular family member.

As any situation presents the opportunity to examine the underuse and overuse of character strengths, it is most likely that a combination of underuses and overuses are dynamically occurring. For some clients, it might be useful to point out more than one strength within such dynamics. For example, hypothetical underuse combinations were offered for the popular "7 deadly sins" framework such as gluttony involving the under-use of self-regulation and prudence while sloth being captured by the underuse of zest and perseverance, among other strength dynamics (Niemiec, 2019a). While such approaches do not immediately transform or remedy every problem, they provide a new lens for understanding the conflict or the stressor at hand.

Strengths-spotting sets the stage for a focus on the other person. The emphasis of character strengths practice and second wave positive psychology is not a selfish, prideful approach, rather it is an approach that involves both an honest and humble view of self but also a focus on the well-being of others (Wong, 2016). Character strengths can be used as relational virtues to bring benefit to others (Veldorale-Brogan, Bradford, & Vail, 2010). For example, one of several character strengths interventions that's used in this way is the following: choose a top, signature strength, think about how it could be used to bring benefit to one's relationship partner (or colleague or friend), and then take this other-oriented action accordingly (Niemiec, 2018).

Feedback from others

Humans have an uncanny ability to naturally display a number of biases which partly involve assuming they understand themselves well, whereas in many cases involving self-knowledge it is others that understand us more clearly; this is referred to as the introspection illusion (Pronin, 2009). This makes it especially tricky for individuals to identify their own strengths overuse (and underuse) patterns. Therefore, it is crucial for individuals to receive feedback on their behavior. Feedback on strengths (and weaknesses) from a variety of sources has been shown to promote self-development through resources relating to positive emotions, relationships, and agency (Spreitzer, Stephens, & Sweetman, 2009). Clients can be encouraged to gather honest feedback about their

actions from trusted others. The feedback can then be examined in discussions looking for patterns of strength imbalance. This feedback is then woven into the practitioner's behavioral observations which might further validate the feedback from others.

The Character Strengths-360 activity can also be conducted (see Niemiec, 2014, 2018). This involves the client systematically gathering character strengths feedback from a variety of people in the client's life about their character strengths and individuals make note of the client's top strengths and give examples of each. Practitioners could invite the clients to add two additional questions to receive feedback from others:

- Which, if any, character strengths do you see me bring forth too strong where it may sometimes have a negative impact on me or others?
- Which, if any, character strengths do you perceive that I don't bring forth strong enough where that underuse may sometimes have a negative impact on me or others?

The results on the original Character Strengths-360 are typically examined alongside the client's results on the VIA Inventory of Strengths. This combination can give insights into potential areas of optimal use as well as overuse and underuse, however, the addition of the two questions just mentioned would provide more direct insights for clients interested in exploring their potential patterns of strength overuse and underuse.

A corollary to this gathering of feedback on overuse and underuse from others involves a willingness of the client to be vulnerable. Vulnerability involves the client hearing honest feedback from others about the client's shortcomings, imperfections, and struggles – to hear about times when they have brought a strength too strongly and it negatively impacted others at work or home (overuse) and to hear different perspectives where the character strengths seemed to be slacking (underuse). While challenging for some clients to hear, it is in these human experiences where not only optimal strengths use can be facilitated but also positive growth, new discoveries, authenticity, and deeper life meaning are primed for development (Wong, 2017).

The tempering effect

The tempering effect refers to the use of one character strength to temper or manage an overused strength. The most common scenario is likely to be the use of a balance-oriented strength to temper an overused signature strength. Balance-oriented strengths are those that harmonize other strengths, weaknesses, and internal tensions (Bacon, 2005), such as perspective, self-regulation, prudence, fairness, or humility. For example, if an individual realizes they are overusing their curiosity by posing too many questions to each new person they meet, they can deliberately turn to a strength such as self-regulation. Self-regulation helps the individual to press pause on the impulse to be curious and simply start by listening and observing, hence gently tempering the curiosity overplay. For another person, it's the strength of humility that tempers the curiosity by placing the emphasis on the other person and their needs, while another individual might use social intelligence as the tempering strength to carefully read the situation before offering the curious questioning.

For decades, scholars in virtue and strengths have observed that these positive qualities can be *corrective* to correct or balance a temptation or vice (Goleman, 1997; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Yearley, 1990). Self-regulation can counterbalance too much creativity in a situation while zest can counterbalance too little curiosity; meanwhile, bravery can counterbalance prudence overuse while gratitude can counterbalance too much judgment. Humility is a surefire strength to balance the underuse of honesty and social intelligence can balance humor overuse, to name a few examples.

A practitioner might pose the following questions to clients to tap into the tempering effect:

- Which of your character strengths might you use to balance out or to manage that overused strength? How might you take action?
- Think of a situation in which you overused a strength in the past and you found a way to bring it forth in a more balanced way or you brought forth other strengths to replace it. What character strengths were involved in tempering or managing it? Which strengths did you need to bring forth?

The towing effect

The towing effect refers to the boosting up of a strength with a higher strength – to tow along the underused strength and bring it along for the ride. While not an empirical finding, hypothetically, any strength could be used to boost up another strength that is desired to be enhanced. The most common example is a client wanting to boost up one of their lower strengths that they are underusing and they deliberately turn to one of their most energizing signature strengths to give it that boost. A client might use their signature strength of creativity to brainstorm new ways they might use more of their lower strength of gratitude in their life. Another client might use their love of learning to read books and study material online on how they can express their lowest strength of humility more in their life. Another individual might use their signature strength of curiosity to tow along their lower strength of bravery by asking themselves questions about the potential positive outcomes of brave actions, curiously exploring what brave actions might look like in a particular scenario, and curiously thinking of the person being helped, the goodness of the action (Pury, 2008).

A practitioner can pose the following questions to clients to tap into the towing effect:

- Which of your signature strengths might you use to boost one of your lower strengths? How might you take action?
- Think of a situation in which you underused a strength in the past and you found a way to bring it forth more strongly. What character strengths were involved in giving it a boost?

Conclusion

Throughout the centuries and across cultures, there has been ancient wisdom reflecting something akin to a golden mean – a balance among too much and too little – for not only a variety of positive attributes and outcomes but our innermost characteristics such

as our character strengths and virtues. The field of positive psychology has brought theorizing to these issues of balance (Wong, 2011) and striving toward a middle way or an alternative framing using character strengths to explain psychopathology and problems (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Niemiec, 2014; Peterson, 2006; Rashid & Seligman, 2018; Seligman, 2015). This was reinforced by researchers showing the existence of the construct of the "too much of a good thing effect" (Busse et al., 2016), and by other researchers citing studies for the overuse of numerous character strengths (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). It was only recently that the first empirical studies examining overuse, underuse, and optimal use of character strengths emerged (Freidlin et al., 2017; Littman-Ovadia & Freidlin, 2019). Not only did these studies show the constructs were connected with well-being and depression in the expected directions but preliminary patterns aligned with psychopathology were found.

This synergy of deep historical roots alongside strong theorizing and new empirical research, as well as the substantial enthusiasm of practitioners across the globe delving into these nuances of our character, points to an important horizon for further empirical and intervention studies. This horizon is also bright for applications by practitioners interested in helping clients explore the dynamics of their character strengths and utilize new pathways to make the most of these phenomena (e.g., the tempering effect and the towing effect) to create greater balance, well-being, and problem management.

Ultimately, the overuse, underuse, and optimal use of character strengths are theoretical constructs which can only go so far in addressing the nuances of what make us human. Yet, these nuances hold important wisdom for growth. At the least, this work in character science provides an immediate and comfortable reframing for clients' struggles offering clients new avenues of hope and empowerment; and at best, we are at the onset of a transformative new framework that will help humanity solidly embrace long-lasting harmony and flourishing while transcending conflicts and suffering.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Ryan M. Niemiec, Psy.D. is a leading figure in the education, research, and practice of character strengths that are found in all human beings. He's education director of the VIA Institute on Character, a global, non-profit organization in Cincinnati that advances the latest science of character strengths. Ryan is author of nine books including the practitioner-focused books, *Character Strengths Interventions, Mindfulness and Character Strengths*, and *Positive Psychology at the Movies*, as well as the consumer-oriented books *The Power of Character Strengths* and *The Strengths-Based Workbook for Stress Relief*. He's penned 80 scholarly or peer-reviewed articles and given over 700 presentations on positive psychology topics across the globe. He's an award-winning psychologist, annual instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, and adjunct professor at Xavier University. Ryan received a "distinguished early career award" from the American Psychological Association in 2011, and was granted Fellow status of the International Positive Psychology Association in 2017.

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