

Recreating Strengths

Recreando Fortalezas

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Franco Morales

Tamara Tauler

ABSTRACT: In contrast to the social representation of aging that makes it the time of losses, this paper aims to focus on the strengths that characterize this stage of life. Highlighting and boosting the specific strengths of older adults is a goal that includes theory, social representation and intervention. To this end, throughout this work, a conceptual review of the strengths and virtues in Psychology - especially Psycho-gerontology - is conducted. This revision will lead to a potential intervention proposal that aims at the registration, maintenance and promotion of the different strengths of character in the context of a workshop for the elderly. Finally, the impact of this proposal stands out from its practice. We hope this work will facilitate the task for other professionals to implement such interventions.

Keywords: Strengths, positive psychology, intervention, workshop, positive aging.

RESUMEN: *Por contraposición a la representación social que hace de la vejez el momento las pérdidas, el presente trabajo pretende focalizar en las fortalezas que caracterizan a esta etapa de la vida; resaltar y potenciar las fortalezas específicas de los adultos mayores es un objetivo que involucra teoría, representaciones sociales e intervención. Para ello, a lo largo del presente trabajo se realiza una revisión conceptual de las fortalezas y virtudes en la psicología y especialmente en la psicogerontología; para luego poder plasmar una propuesta posible de intervención que tiene por objetivo el registro, el mantenimiento y potenciación de las diferentes fortalezas del carácter en el contexto de un taller de adultos mayores. Por último, se destaca el impacto de esta propuesta a partir de la práctica de la misma. Se espera que este trabajo facilite a otros profesionales la tarea de poner en práctica este tipo de intervenciones.*

Palabras clave: *Fortalezas; Psicología Positiva; Intervención.*

RESUMO: *Em contraste com a representação social que faz com que a velhice seja entendida como perda, este trabalho tem como objetivo focar os pontos fortes que caracterizam esta fase da vida. Destacar e valorizar os pontos fortes específicos de adultos mais velhos é uma meta que envolve teoria, representações sociais e intervenção. Para este fim, ao longo deste artigo uma revisão conceitual das forças e virtudes em Psicologia e especialmente em Psicogerontologia é realizada; em seguida, ser capaz de dar forma a uma possível proposta de intervenção que visa ao registro, manutenção e aumento dos diferentes pontos fortes de caráter, no contexto de uma oficina para idosos. Finalmente, o impacto desta proposta destaca-se a partir de suas práticas. Deste trabalho é esperado que se possam beneficiar outros profissionais, na sua tarefa de implementar tais intervenções.*

Palavras-chave: *Pontos fortes; Psicologia Positiva; Intervenção.*

Introduction

Different theoretical and methodological changes in the study of adult development, coupled with strong support from empirical results have led to the convergence of a psychology field that studies the strengths and human potential.

Currently, it is called positive psychology; likewise, psycho-gerontology addresses the search of positive dimensions in aging (Hill, 2011; Lombardo, 2013).

The main goal of positive psychology is the study of well-being. Different interventions have been designed to work with the strengths of character in relation with both psychological and subjective well-being.

However, due to the negative view of the social representation, which falls on aging, we find the need to work on empowerment and promotion of this stage of life. In this context, the concept of strength and its multiple meanings introduce fresh air and allow us to question the widespread belief that there are only losses in old age.

In this regard, the aim of the workshop described in this article is twofold. The first objective would be to capitalize on the benefits, which have been demonstrated in general population, of the work on personal strengths. The second one would be to bring new meaning to old age as a stage with specific gains.

What are the strengths of character?

In psychology, the study of moral character was a difficult path during the twentieth century. Gordon Allport held that terms like "virtue" and "moral character" should be expunged from the scientific lexicon due to the huge burden of subjectivism and dogmatism (McCullough, & Snyder, 2000).

Just at the beginning of this century, and in order to give impetus to the scientific study of the virtues and character strengths, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) launched a handbook where they give a classification of moral character based on the answers about good living, and morally good behavior in different philosophical and religious traditions. For these authors, good character is formed by three levels of abstraction: 1) Virtue; 2) Strengths; 3) Topics where one can express strengths.

The virtues, being the most abstract of the components, are the core characteristics valued by thinkers and theologians. At a lower level of abstraction are the strengths associated with each of these virtues that are the channels through which virtue is demonstrated. On the more concrete level of abstraction are the situational issues that are the habits and specific areas through which people carry out their strengths (Cosentino, 2009).

The way in which Peterson and Seligman (2004) propose to think the moral character is closely linked to the personality trait theory in psychology.

For a strength to be considered, it should follow certain criteria:

1. a strength must contribute to the development of the good life for oneself and others;
2. it must be valued as morally good in itself, beyond the potential benefits;
3. its opposite must not be desired;
4. it must be observed in different contexts and situations over time;
5. it must be able to be differentiated;
6. it should take socially recognizable forms.

Therefore, they have come to identify six Virtues with their specific strengths, reaching a total of 24 character strengths that will be further developed in this work.

In old age we can also talk about strengths

Well-being is the main objective of positive psychology, therefore a number of studies have focused on detecting the positive consequences of the development of character strengths. The results have revealed that these strengths are associated with "good lives" whose indicators are usually personal growth, well-being, job satisfaction and achievement of goals (Gable, & Haidt, 2005).

For example, a study with 2087 participants revealed that those who had the strength of courage, kindness, and humor were less affected in their life satisfaction after an experience of physical illness. Likewise, people who have the strength of appreciation of beauty, excellence and love were less affected after an experience of psychological disorder (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006).

Summing up, as regards strengths and recovery, many studies suggest there is a positive relationship between all the strengths and well-being variables such as life satisfaction and happiness; and negative relationships with mental health problems such as depression (Karris, 2009).

Understanding the manifestation of strengths along the life course will allow us to better conceptualize the process of successful aging. We will analyze two conceptual lines that make us think of the potential benefits of these inquiries and their possible interventions.

Robert Hill (2011) proposes the model of positive aging, as an extension of the positive psychology movement focused on aging.

From this perspective, to capitalize on the strengths acquired by previous life experience in our lifespan would help detect protectors against declines in aging. In this model, the strengths of character are understood as latent resources to face the difficulties of aging. However, this model considers only the individual consequences of the study and intervention on the strengths of character in the last stage of life, neglecting social and community factors.

Today, older adults are not the same as decades ago; they are healthier, better educated and more open to new connections than previous generations. Against this background, Feliciano Villar (2013) created the concept of "generative aging"; for this author, the new interventions in old age should not be oriented only to the protection of the capabilities of older adults, but to their specific social and community capitalization.

Erikson's concept of *Generativity* gives meaning and framework to this new old age group. This proposal differs from the previous one, in articulating two types of mutual development: social development, those generative activities geared toward the other (family member, friend, acquaintance, community, society, etc.), and the individual ones, that include generative activity which implies personal significance processes and an increase of personal skills.

Workshop proposal: "Recreating Strengths"

Under the agreement between UPAMI (Integrated Aging University) with the School of Psychology of the National University of Mar del Plata, the four-month "Recreating Strengths" workshop has been implemented. This workshop has the following objectives:

1. To introduce the theoretical model of Positive Psychology and its inquiries regarding old age;
2. To record the different personal strengths;
3. To become aware of their usefulness in everyday life and personal story;
4. To encourage the optimal use of recognized strengths;
5. To generate shared experiences that enable seniors to acquire and develop different strengths;
6. To generate new affective bonds with peers.

The workshop's format proposes individual and group work instructions to facilitate interaction among participants. In this sense, we think the workshop as a place where the experience generates a subjective effect from the worked strengths, and where reflection facilitates the acquirement of affective bonds.

The individual activities are focused on the recognition of their own strengths and gradual optimization throughout the workshop. Group activities encourage the elderly to share life stories and exchange experiences.

The workshop is segmented in three distinct chronological stages: 1. Introduction to the workshop. 2. Work on the different virtues and strengths; 3. Closing and evaluation.

1. Induction of positive psychology and positive gerontology

In the first meetings, in order to convey the workshop objectives, we work on the formal patterns and dynamics of the meetings. The general framework of positive psychology and its specific consequences in the field of psycho-gerontology are also introduced. The intention here is to work on the different negative social representations that the workshop participants themselves share about old age. In this sense, this instance has a double objective, psychoeducational and of empowerment.

It is useful to introduce the workshop from its title. In this sense, working on the idea of associating meanings such as: reinvent, recreate, redesign, record, repair, re-signify, reinterpret, retry, among others. Thus, we try to make clear that the workshop aims to generate new and innovative experiences for participants. The classification of character strengths and virtues of Peterson, and Seligman's manual (2004) is also presented, introducing the six virtues to be developed. We recurrently refer to this list in order to frame the task.

Two qualities of the different strengths are stressed for paving the way to the rest of the workshop. The first one is that when we talk about strengths, they must inevitably mean a positive benefit for oneself and / or others. Never can a strength be used by the individual to harm others, or vice versa. The second is that the modalities where different strengths are expressed (the lower level of abstraction above mentioned) are multiple. This way, we guarantee the respect for different interpretations of strengths, moving away from a homogenizing perspective.

2. Work on the different virtues and strengths

The second half of the workshop focuses on the presentation and activities to work the different strengths and virtues of character. In order to go through Peterson and Seligman's (2004) proposal broadly, the work is organized around six virtues, devoting two to three meetings to each one; therefore, the workshop should be refined to explore just some strengths.

Under the premise that each strength can be expressed in different ways, we understand that giving a one-way perspective would mean to reduce and limit its possible manifestations. In this sense, it should be taken as a rule to remind participants to think of new ways to express the strengths and respect the diverse ways in which others (workshop participants or outsiders) make use of them.

The criterion for the selection of strengths to explore in every virtue depends on the characteristics of each group and the relational conditions that are available. In this paper, we present a proposal for intervention, but as it was previously mentioned, it is only one possibility among many that can come up from readers and workshop participants.

Here are the virtues and strengths that theoretically support our proposal.

Virtue 1 - Wisdom and Knowledge

Strengths under this virtue include positive dispositions relating to the acquisition and use of information in the service of a good life; in psychological terms they are identified with cognitive strengths. Many of the strengths corresponding to other virtues also include cognitive aspects; that is why many thinkers understand that this virtue governs in part the rest.

Creativity. It involves two essential components. First, a person must produce creative ideas or behaviors that are recognized as original, new, surprising or unusual. Second, these behaviors or ideas must also be adaptive, should generate a positive contribution to oneself and /or others.

Curiosity. It is the intrinsic interest in pursuing an experience. It involves action, persecution and regulation to one's own experience as an answer to challenging opportunities.

Open-mindedness. It is the willingness to actively seek evidence against one's perspective, one's own beliefs and goals, and thus to fairly assess that evidence.

Love of learning. It describes how a person becomes involved with new information and skills. The learning object for people with this strength may or may not imply a benefit or an immediate achievement.

Wisdom. It is different from intelligence; as it implies a higher level of knowledge, judgment and ability to counsel and it enables people to solve important and difficult problems about the meaning of life.

Proposed Activity n.º 1

With art resources – such as brushes, paint and canvas- participants are invited to do an artistic production based on an ambiguous stimulus (e.g., a non-figurative line on a canvas), thereby restricting to a low grade the possibility of expression. At the end of this activity, the instructor proposes that each of the participants create a story comparing their own painting with those of other participants. Thus, we put the dual role of creativity, originality and adaptiveness, into play. Also, the chance to see the difference in someone else's perspective is generated, thereby promoting open-mindedness.

Virtue 2 - Courage

These strengths put into practice the will to achieve goals against obstacles, both internal and external.

Courage. It implies the willingness to act voluntarily and courageously in a dangerous situation, when there are significant risks, in an effort to obtain or preserve a benefit for oneself or others.

Perseverance. It is the continuing of a voluntary action aimed at an objective beyond the obstacles, difficulties and discouragement.

Integrity. It means being true to oneself accurately representing intentions and commitments both for oneself and for others.

Vitality. It describes a dynamic aspect of well-being marked by a subjective experience of energy and relief.

Proposed activity n.º 2

To work integrity, courage and perseverance, we used the film "Temple Grandin", a true story of a woman who suffered from autism. She faced her own difficulties, through her ingenuity obtained a university degree, and achieved a scientific level invention. The film shows as a metaphorical resource the "doors" that the character has to go through to achieve her goals. This makes us think about which doors are yet to be opened.

Proposed activity n.º 3

Participants are invited to make a "real diary" of activities undertaken the previous week, and write their everyday activities on a table. Based on the table, participants are interrogated, for example: Am I comfortable with my activities? Are they too many or too few? Am I uncomfortable with any of them? What activities would I like to do and I am not doing? What activities do I think deserve more of my time and which less? We reflect inwardly on these questions and then discuss them in groups. Likewise, participants are also offered the possibility to build an "ideal agenda" designed from their own desire. Thus, an active stance towards life is promoted to raise vitality levels.

Virtue 3 - Humanity

The strengths corresponding to this virtue include positive dispositions manifested in pursuing relationships that involve care, tenderness and friendship. It implies positive social interactions with friends, relatives, acquaintances and even strangers. They are strengths that somewhere resemble those of justice, but, unlike them, are brought into play in one-to-one relationships.

Love. It represents a positive and intimate posture toward others in three levels: cognitive, behavioral and emotional. It can take three prototypical forms toward individuals who are our primary sources of affection and protection, to individuals who depend on us and to people who makes us feel passionate desire -whether sexual, physical or emotional.

Goodness. Generosity, nurturing, caring, compassion and selfless love are concepts strongly related to this strength and indicate a common orientation towards others.

Social intelligence. This strength refers to the ability to think abstractly, to acknowledge similarities and differences among things, to recognize patterns and see other relationships in regard to social ties. Empathy is a clear path showing this strength.

Proposed activity n.º 4

In this activity, we try to put into play the empathy of the participants. We show them images where they can see one or two people in a situation that triggers emotions. When faced to each image, we make them the following questions: What do I see? How do I feel? How do I know? What does each image make me feel? Does this move me to do something about it? With these questions, we try to activate the empathic ability in a particular situation in order to think about what other situations where we may use empathy. Since the "humanity" virtue is focused on the one-to-one bonds, empathy becomes an essential resource for everyday interaction.

Virtue 4 - Justice and Citizenship

It is considered that the strength of justice occur in interpersonal contexts, implying an optimal interaction between the individual and the community. If the group is smaller with more personal relationships, these strengths begin to converge with those of humanity.

Citizenship. It implies a sense of belonging and responsibility for the common good that goes beyond oneself.

Equality. Individuals who develop this strength believe that everyone should get their fair share, that it is wrong to use other people and that they would never deceive others.

Leadership. A quality that relates to the temperamental and cognitive attributes aimed at influencing and helping members of one's group.

Proposed activity n.º 5

Based on various biographies of important people shortlisted by the coordinators we asked the participants to draw the virtue these people have in common -namely, justice and citizenship. The examples used were Nelson Mandela¹, Estela Carlotto² and Susana Trimarco³. However, other more appropriate examples can be used to create the context and situation, respecting the selection criteria. The goal is to move from these exceptional examples of virtue of justice and citizenship and thus think of our daily actions.

Virtue 5 – Temperance

They are strengths that protect us from the excesses; against hatred, mercy; against arrogance, humility; against short-term pleasures, prudence; against extreme emotions, self-regulation.

Forgiveness. It represents a set of pro-social changes that occur in a person who was offended or harmed by someone close. It differs from the avoidance and revenge.

Humility. It primarily refers to the accurate esteem -not underestimation- of one's own achievements, talents or merits.

Prudence. It is a cognitive orientation toward one's own future, a way of practical reasoning and self-management to effectively achieve long-term objectives.

¹ Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1918-2013) was a South African lawyer, an activist against apartheid, a politician and philanthropist. He was the first black president to become president of South Africa, and also the first one to be elected by universal suffrage in this country.

² Enriqueta Estela Barnes de Carlotto (1930 -) Argentinian human rights activist and president of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

³ Susana Trimarco (1954 -) is Maria de los Angeles Veron's mother. Known as "Marita," she was a kidnapped young girl who was forced into prostitution according to the testimony of witnesses. For her persistence in the search of her daughter, Susana Trimarco was awarded different distinctions.

Self-regulation. It refers to the regulation, control or management of one's own responses (e.g., actions, expressions, impulses, desires, thoughts or emotions) to fit a certain pattern or meet certain objectives (e.g., ideals, moral standards, regulations in general, performance objectives or other people's expectations).

Proposed activity n.º 6

This exercise consists of two parts: 1) To remember circumstances in which oneself has been forgiven. For example, we tell participants to remember a situation in which they have hurt someone and then this person forgave them. We ask how the events occurred, how they were communicated their forgiveness, how they felt and what they have learned. The aim is to see the benefits of forgiveness. 2) Write an apology letter. For example, the workshop participants think of a recent situation in which they felt the need to ask for forgiveness. Then they should write a letter to the person they have hurt, describing what they did wrong and apologizing to them. This letter may or may not be sent.

Proposed activity n.º 7

We suggest that the group work on the following emotions: annoyance, anger, stress. We speak about each of them. Then we begin a debate on every emotion asking the following question: When do you feel anger? Under what circumstances do you feel this way? What was the reaction of people around you when you felt this way? What other strategies could you use? We give them some time to think about their own situations. Participants voluntarily contribute their experiences, especially those that trigger their reactions. Later, they have to complete a box where they explain the emotion (annoyance, anger, stress) they felt, the situation and their response. All expressions, even the craziest ones, are used in the brainstorming stage, without judgement. The more creative the best, but eventually we lead the participants to find assertive solutions. On the board, we write down their responses. Then they are asked to check their work and add, if necessary, an alternative answer.

Virtue 6 – Transcendence

The common denominator of these strengths is that they enable people to create connections in a larger universe than their own and they also provide meaning to their life.

Appreciation of beauty and excellence. It refers to the ability to find, recognize and feel subtle self-transcending emotions as fascination and related emotions.

Gratitude. Feeling thankful and joyful at realizing that one has benefitted from something.

Hope. It represents a cognitive, emotional and positive motivational attitude toward the future.

Humor. [playfulness] In this case, it implies enjoying games and laughter; bringing smiles to other people by creating humorous contradictions.

Spirituality. It refers to beliefs and practices that are based on the conviction that there is a transcendent (non-physical) dimension of life.

Proposed activity n.º 8

The activity begins by asking participants to think about one or more things in their life in which they have achieved some success. Then we tell them to think about the people who have made these successes possible, without excluding anyone, no matter how small their contribution has been and to write it down on a sheet of paper. The next step is to ask participants to share their thoughts about their own successes and explain the role other people have played in these achievements. To sum up this analysis, we can show the importance of social relationships, underlining the fact that no one is isolated, and that we are always in debt to those who have helped in our achievements. We can suggest participants to write a thank you letter to a person who has been relevant in their development.

Proposed activity n.º 9

The aim is to show how humor can take drama out of an unexpected situation, even a sad one, transforming it into a hilarious moment. As an example, we can tell about the Mexican poet Jose Emilio Pacheco's mishap, whose pants fell down when receiving the Cervantes Prize in 2009, at the University of Alcalá de Henares. The writer told reporters: "I did not get any suspenders for my trousers"; and he added: "Suddenly you are a human being like any other". The poet considered the story as "a good argument against vanity." This example illustrates a situation that could have been lived with shame and discomfort, but was taken with a sense of humor. By turning around the point of view of the experience, we take out all its drama. We can finish the activity by introducing some scientific reports or newspaper articles outlining the positive psychological and physiological effects of humor.

3. Closing and evaluation

In the last meetings, we suggest a closing activity with two integration tasks. The first task would be the presentation of different biographies of socially well-known people as an exercise to identify their strengths. However, it is important to make clear that we do not think strengths as only belonging to great men or women. The second activity would be to complete a self-report questionnaire where the primary strengths of each participant are evaluated. This activity takes place at the end of the workshop in order to avoid bias or limit any of the participant's perception of his/her abilities within the workshop. The closing assignment is to think about what activities help put into practice one's own primary strengths, and to analyze new ways in which these can be used. Thus, we give the possibility for each participant to find the way to make use of his/her strengths.

Conclusion

This work has introduced a theoretical review about what the strengths of character are. We have also stressed the importance in the elderly's development and the preservation and optimization of strengths due to their benefits at individual and social/community level.

The elderly find it beneficial to participate in these workshops, as an environment where to think and experiment different positive aspects of their personality. Finally, beyond the specific purpose of this workshop, any activity that promotes an active stance to face aging, both for workers in the gerontological field as for seniors, creates essential exchange and growth opportunities. We hope that this proposal will invite other professionals in the area to develop their own workshops.

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Recibido el 17/12/2015

Aceptado el 30/12/2015

Franco Morales – Docente investigador en la Facultad de Psicología de la UNMdP e integrante del grupo de investigación en Evaluación Psicológica. Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de Mar del Plata, Argentina.

E-mail: moralesfranco@live.com

Tamara Tauler – Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de Mar del Plata, Argentina.

E-mail: moralesfranco@live.com