

SATOSHI SHIMAI, KEIKO OTAKE, NANSOOK PARK,
CHRISTOPHER PETERSON and MARTIN E.P. SELIGMAN

CONVERGENCE OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN AMERICAN AND JAPANESE YOUNG ADULTS

ABSTRACT. We investigated cultural influences on the distribution of character strengths, gender differences in character strengths, and the relationship of happiness to character strengths. Young adults from the United States ($n=1099$) and Japan ($n=308$) completed the English or Japanese versions of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths. American and Japanese showed similar distributions of the 24 strengths measured: Higher strengths included love, humor and kindness, and lesser strengths included prudence, self-regulation, and modesty. Gender differences across cultures were also similar: Females were more likely than males to report strengths of love and kindness, whereas males were more likely to report bravery and creativity. In both samples, associations with happiness were found for zest, hope, curiosity and gratitude. The present study is a first step in an international study of character strengths, and we discuss the ubiquity and variation of character across culture.

KEY WORDS: character, culture, happiness

INTRODUCTION

Recently, positive psychology has focused on character strengths as central to a life of engagement, absorption, and flow (Seligman, 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths* describes 24 positive character strengths, which are hypothesized to be ubiquitous across culture and history (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The accompanying *VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)* asks individuals to report the degree to which statements reflecting each of the strengths apply to themselves (Peterson et al., 2005). Preliminary investigations demonstrate acceptable reliability and increasing validity of the VIA-IS (Peterson and

Seligman, 2004). For example, in a study using a nomination procedure, people were asked to identify individuals whom they believed to possess a given strength to a notable degree. These individuals in turn completed the questionnaire without being told why. People nominated as a paragon of a given strength usually scored higher than those not nominated with respect to that strength. We conclude that the VIA-IS has a modicum of validity by the known-groups procedure.

The present study begins to ask empirically if these strengths really are ubiquitous by examining the VIA character strengths and their correlates in a Japanese sample, using a translated version of VIA-IS. Like the original English version, the Japanese VIA-IS has good internal consistency and test–retest reliability. All items were translated, back-translated, and then carefully examined by one of the developers of original VIA-IS, so the Japanese VIA-IS has the same face validity as the original inventory. Additional evidence of validity is shown by convergence between scale scores on the Japanese VIA-IS and nominations by informants (Otake et al., 2003).

The specific purpose of the present study was to examine three aspects of similarity and/or dissimilarity of the VIA character strengths between young adults in Japan and the United States. First was the distribution of character strengths. The literal translation of VIA-IS items into Japanese was straightforward, presumably because of convergence in the words used to describe character strengths across cultures, so we expected that the profile of the strengths – from most to least frequently endorsed – might be similar as well among American and Japanese respondents.

The second comparison was in terms of gender difference in character strengths. In American samples, there are gender differences with respect to some of the character strengths included in the VIA Classification. For example, females are more like to express their positive emotions in human relationships (Stoppard and Gruchy, 1993), and males are more likely to be brave or, at least, are more expected to be brave (Miller, 2000). Therefore, the second question was whether gender differences in VIA-IS scores were similar for American and Japanese young adults.

The third issue we examined was the relationship between character strengths and subjective happiness across the two cultures. In general, character strengths should be associated with well-being (Seligman, 2002), but culture may influence which character strengths are most closely linked to happiness (Diener et al., 2003). For example, positive feelings are related to interdependent human relationships among Japanese but to independent relationships among Americans (Kitayama et al., 2000). Because some strengths – for example, forgiveness, modesty, and self-regulation – are especially likely to serve collectivist purposes, they may play a more important role for happiness in Japan than in the United States.

METHOD

In the fall of 2002 and the winter of 2003, thousands of adults completed questionnaires online at the Authentic Happiness Website (www.authentichappiness.org), including the 240-item *VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)*, a self-report questionnaire that uses 5-point Likert-style items to measure the degree to which respondents endorse each of the 24 strengths of character in the VIA Classification (10 items per strength). It takes about 30 min to complete.

For the present study, 18 to 24-year-old young adults from the United States were selected from among the participants who completed the VIA-IS online. Of these 1099 young adults (312 males, 787 females), and 88% were or had been college students. Within this sample, 789 also completed the *Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999).

To create the *Japanese VIA-IS*, the first author translated the English VIA-IS into Japanese and had the translations independently verified by two other Japanese psychologists. After small modifications, the Japanese version of VIA-IS was back-translated, and all items were examined by one of the developers of original VIA-IS in order to check the fidelity of the literal translations. The Japanese 240-item *VIA-IS* also uses 5-point Likert-style items. The reliability of the Japanese VIA-IS has been described elsewhere in detail (Otake et al., 2003). In short, most of scales have satisfactory *alphas* (> 0.70), except

for self-regulation (0.67), honesty (0.66), and modesty (0.59). Across a 5-week period, the Japanese VIA-IS subscales showed substantial test–retest correlations ($r_s = 0.67$ to 0.87).

In the fall of 2002 and the winter of 2003, the same time period during which the American participants completed measures, Japanese undergraduate students completed the translated survey in paper-and-pencil form as a class requirement in introductory psychology courses at several universities in Japan. Most also completed the *Japanese Subjective Happiness Scale*, a translated version of the scale completed by the American subjects (Shimai et al., 2004). A total of 308 Japanese students (133 males, 175 females) completed the Japanese VIA-IS, and 245 of them also completed the Japanese Subjective Happiness Scale. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years.

RESULTS

There were three major findings: First, the distribution of character strengths by relative rank was quite similar in the two cultures. Second, gender differences were also similar. And third, the relationship of the strengths to happiness was similar.

The absolute scores of all 24 character strengths were higher for American (overall $M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.35$) than Japanese research participants (overall $X = 3.13$, $SD = 0.33$) ($t[1336] = 23.93$, $p < 0.001$), so we used ipsative (rank order) scores for the character strengths in our analyses (cf. Park et al., 2004). That is, for each respondent, his or her scale scores were ranked from 24 (top) to 1 (bottom). Ipsative scoring preserves the relative relationships among strengths for each individual, and eliminates the apparent tendencies to exaggerate among Americans and/or to be restrained among Japanese. Table I shows the mean ranks and standard deviation of the 24 character strengths among American and Japanese young adults.

The distributions were highly similar, as shown by the high correlation between the mean ranks across the two cultures (Spearman ρ correlations = 0.71 for males and 0.78 for females, $n = 24$, $p_s < 0.001$). (Not shown for the sake of economy of presentation are the actual frequency distributions of these ranks,

TABLE I
Distribution of character strengths by mean ranks (24 = top, 1 = bottom)

Strength	United States ($n = 1099$) $X \pm SD$	Japan ($n = 308$) $X \pm SD$
Kindness	17.4 ± 5.5	17.7 ± 5.3
Love	16.6 ± 6.1	17.0 ± 6.3
Humor	16.1 ± 6.8	14.2 ± 6.2
Authenticity	15.9 ± 5.3	13.7 ± 5.6
Gratitude	15.5 ± 6.0	19.2 ± 4.8
Open-mindedness	15.1 ± 6.0	14.8 ± 6.1
Fairness	14.6 ± 5.7	17.1 ± 5.2
Perspective	14.6 ± 5.5	9.5 ± 5.6
Social intelligence	14.3 ± 6.0	13.7 ± 5.8
Teamwork	13.4 ± 6.2	11.4 ± 7.3
Hope	13.3 ± 6.3	15.0 ± 5.9
Leadership	12.6 ± 5.7	11.7 ± 6.0
Persistence	12.1 ± 6.9	13.3 ± 6.9
Appreciation of beauty	11.7 ± 7.5	13.6 ± 7.6
Creativity	11.0 ± 7.3	10.8 ± 7.5
Zest	10.8 ± 5.5	9.3 ± 4.7
Love of learning	10.6 ± 7.5	13.1 ± 6.9
Religiousness	10.6 ± 8.2	5.0 ± 5.3
Bravery	10.1 ± 6.2	11.0 ± 5.8
Forgiveness	9.9 ± 6.8	9.7 ± 6.4
Curiosity	9.8 ± 5.5	8.3 ± 4.7
Prudence	8.7 ± 6.0	11.2 ± 6.6
Modesty	8.1 ± 6.8	10.9 ± 6.7
Self-regulation	7.7 ± 5.9	9.6 ± 6.2

which were essentially the same in both samples. The ipsative ranks of kindness, love, humor, gratitude, open-mindedness, fairness, and hope were skewed toward higher ranks in both samples; curiosity, forgiveness, modesty, self-regulation, bravery, and prudence were skewed toward lower ranks; authenticity, social intelligence, teamwork, leadership, persistence, zest, and perspective had bell-shaped distributions; and appreciation of beauty, creativity, love of learning, and religiousness had U-shaped distributions). Both American and Japanese young adults ranked kindness, love, and gratitude quite high, and they

ranked forgiveness, curiosity, prudence, modesty, and self-regulation quite low. There were small differences as well: American were more like to rank highly strengths of humor, integrity, and perspective, whereas Japanese were more likely to rank highly strengths of gratitude, fairness, and hope. Although religiousness was ranked relatively low in both samples, it was especially low among the Japanese.

Gender differences were analyzed by computing, for the ipsative scores of each character strength, a two-way between-subjects ANOVA with culture (US, Japan) and gender (male, female) as the grouping variables. Ten of the 24 strengths showed significant gender effects (Table II). Females had higher ranks than males for the strengths of kindness, love, gratitude, teamwork, and appreciation of beauty. On the other hand, males had higher ranks than females for open-mindedness, perspective, creativity, bravery, and self-regulation. Among these, significant effects of culture were found in some cases, but there were *no* interactions between culture and gender. In other words, gender differences (and similarities) in character strengths were essentially the same in the two cultures.

TABLE II
Gender differences in character strengths

Strengths	United States (<i>n</i> = 1099)		Japan (<i>n</i> = 308)	
	Male <i>X</i> ± <i>SD</i>	Female <i>X</i> ± <i>SD</i>	Male <i>X</i> ± <i>SD</i>	Female <i>X</i> ± <i>SD</i>
Open-mindedness	16.62 ± 5.66	14.50 ± 6.03	16.65 ± 6.13	13.48 ± 5.77 *
Perspective	15.67 ± 5.17	14.17 ± 5.52	10.36 ± 6.02	8.82 ± 5.26 *, #
Kindness	15.64 ± 5.80	18.09 ± 5.23	16.79 ± 5.83	18.36 ± 4.78 *, #
Love	14.82 ± 6.21	17.25 ± 5.99	14.33 ± 6.72	19.07 ± 4.98 *
Creativity	13.80 ± 6.96	9.84 ± 7.08	12.72 ± 7.68	9.39 ± 7.09 *
Gratitude	13.72 ± 6.29	16.17 ± 5.77	17.07 ± 5.52	20.70 ± 3.51 *, #
Teamwork	13.20 ± 6.52	13.55 ± 6.10	10.27 ± 7.69	12.29 ± 6.93 *, #
Bravery	11.69 ± 6.27	9.51 ± 6.09	12.54 ± 6.16	9.78 ± 5.24 *
Beauty	10.92 ± 7.58	12.04 ± 7.51	11.98 ± 7.47	14.78 ± 7.56 *, #
Self-regulation	8.83 ± 6.24	7.31 ± 5.76	11.21 ± 6.66	8.31 ± 5.54 *, #

Statistical results of ANOVAs: *gender, $p < 0.001$; #country, $p < 0.05$. No significant interactions were found.

Finally, partial correlations were computed between the ipsative scores of the 24 VIA strengths and scores on the Subjective Happiness Scale, controlling for gender (Table III). There were several strengths consistently and substantially related to subjective happiness – zest, hope, curiosity, and gratitude – in both American and Japanese samples. In contrast, modesty had a strong *negative* correlation with happiness among both Americans and Japanese, which means that having modesty as a signature strength was associated with less happiness. Also, there were relatively small but statistically significant negative correlations between happiness and the ranks of several other strengths (authenticity, fairness, and teamwork) in both countries. Overall, the results of these correlation analyses show that character strengths have comparable relationships to happiness in both countries.

DISCUSSION

We compared three aspects of character strengths between young adult respondents from the United States and Japan. In general, strong convergence and similarity of character strengths across cultures emerged. Top ranked strengths in one nation tended to be high in the other, and bottom ranked strengths tended to be low in both nations. Moreover, proportions of people who were high or low with respect to different strengths were nearly identical in both countries for most of character strengths.

Gender differences in character strengths were essentially the same in the American and Japanese samples. That is, females were more likely to endorse kindness, love, gratitude, teamwork, and appreciation of beauty, whereas males were more likely to endorse open-mindedness, perspective, creativity, bravery, and self-regulation. That females were more likely to express positive interpersonal emotions is consistent with the previous findings (Stoppard and Gruchy, 1993). Sugihara and Katsurada (2000) suggested the possibility that the role of Confucianism in Japanese culture increases the importance of integrity, righteousness, and kindness for males. However, we found similar gender differences in kindness for both Americans and

TABLE III
Partial correlations between character strengths and happiness

Strengths	United States		Japan	
	<i>(n</i> = 789)		<i>(n</i> = 245)	
	Rank	Scale	Rank	Scale
Zest	0.44*	0.65*	0.22*	0.36*
Hope	0.40*	0.62*	0.16*	0.36*
Curiosity	0.23*	0.51*	0.22*	0.39*
Gratitude	0.22*	0.51*	0.16*	0.42*
Love	0.13*	0.46*	0.06	0.27*
Perspective	0.12*	0.45*	0.11	0.32*
Humor	0.12*	0.43*	0.07	0.27*
Religiousness	0.11*	0.36*	0.14*	0.29*
Forgiveness	0.06	0.37*	0.03	0.25*
Social intelligence	0.05	0.38*	0.14*	0.32*
Persistence	−0.02	0.31*	−0.08	0.12
Leadership	−0.03	0.36*	−0.06	0.14*
Self-regulation	−0.05	0.35*	−0.14*	0.10
Kindness	−0.04	0.33*	−0.12	0.15*
Bravery	−0.04	0.32*	−0.02	0.19*
Teamwork	−0.10*	0.29*	−0.15*	0.11
Creativity	−0.10*	0.23*	−0.17*	0.33*
Appreciation of beauty	−0.13*	0.22*	−0.01	0.22*
Authenticity	−0.14*	0.31*	−0.16*	0.11
Fairness	−0.16*	0.28*	−0.13*	0.16*
Love of learning	−0.16*	0.15*	0.04	0.24*
Open-mindedness	−0.23*	0.20*	0.05	0.27*
Prudence	−0.28*	0.12*	−0.09	0.13*
Modesty	−0.36*	−0.04	−0.37*	−0.15*

Partial correlations control for gender. Scale refers VIA scale score and rank refers VIA scales scored ipsatively (24 = top through 1 = bottom).

Japanese, and no gender differences with respect to authenticity or fairness.

Given that happiness might be expected to be deeply influenced by culture (Diener et al., 2003; Kitayama and Markus, 2000), it is notable that the relationship between strengths and happiness also agreed across the two countries. High zest, hope, and curiosity were closely related to subjective happiness in both countries. Gratitude also had a strong link to happiness,

consistent with the previous research (Emmons and Crumpler, 2000; Park et al., 2004). Lu et al. (2001) found that “human-heartedness” was related to happiness among Chinese but not among British individuals. However, we found that forgiveness, which more-or-less corresponds to human-heartedness, showed little correlation with happiness in either sample.

The rank of modesty showed strong negative correlations with happiness among both Americans and Japanese: Young adults who rated their own modesty as high were less likely to be happy. This finding raises questions about the utility of modesty even in Japan, a culture high in interdependence and interpersonal engagement (Kitayama et al., 2000). Tangney (2000) suggested that true modesty is not associated with low self-regard, but now we wonder whether this was wishful thinking on her part.

Although convergence of character strengths across two cultures is salient, there are several differences between American and Japanese results. The biggest difference was found with respect to religiousness. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in religiousness and spirituality and their relationship to health (McCullough et al., 2000). There are many discussions about the definition of religiousness and spirituality (Tsang and McCullough, 2003), and the VIA scale items are not exempt from criticism. Some of these items embody assumptions of Western religions, e.g., a belief in one God. However, most Japanese are influenced by a mixture of Buddhism and Shintoism and thus find the sacred in the mundane. Thus, if we were revise the VIA items accordingly, future Japanese respondents might show higher scores.

The second point we need to consider is that for all of the VIA strengths, Americans consistently had higher absolute scores than Japanese. It is thoroughly implausible to take these findings at face value, so we need to look deeper for an interpretation. These results seem similar to the “false uniqueness effects” among American described by Kitayama and Markus (2000). They suggested that the effect is strongly influenced by the self-enhancing culture in North America. However, the present results show American elevation not only for outer-directed strengths like kindness or love but also for inner-directed strengths like modesty and self-regulation.

This is the first international investigation of the VIA character strengths. One limitation of our findings is that our participants were young adults, common participants in a much more global culture than their parents or grandparents (Rozin, 2003). Thus, they may not be perfect representatives of their two cultures.

We conclude that the VIA strengths show considerable and striking commonality in both Japan and the United States. We do not know if this will be true as we extend this work to more and more nations. Nor do we know the source of the commonality. Such similarity might stem from the fact that both cultures are literate and industrial, or that both reside in the same modern global village. Intriguingly, however, it just might be that commonality of strengths and virtues is a fact of human nature.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present study was conducted while the first author was a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. We acknowledge the support of the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation in creating the Values in Action Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to the development of a scientific knowledge base of human strengths.

REFERENCES

- Diener, E., S. Oishi and R.E. Lucas: 2003, 'Personality, culture, and subjective well-being: Emotional and cognitive evaluations of life', *Annual Review of Psychology* 54, pp. 403–425.
- Emmons, R. and C.A. Crumpler: 2000, 'Gratitude as human strength: Appraising the evidence', *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19, pp. 56–69.
- Kitayama, S. and H.R. Markus: 2000, 'The pursuit of happiness and realization of sympathy: Cultural pattern of self, social relations, and well-being', in E. Diener and E.M. Suh (eds), *Culture and Subjective Well-being* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA), pp. 113–161.
- Kitayama, S., H.R. Markus and M. Kurokawa: 2000, 'Culture, emotion, and well-being: Good feelings in Japan and the United States', *Cognition and Emotion* 14, pp. 93–124.
- Lyubomirsky, S. and H.S. Lepper: 1999, 'A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation', *Social Indicator Research* 46, pp. 137–155.

- Lu, L., R. Gilmour and S. Kao: 2001, 'Cultural values and happiness: An east-west dialogue', *The Journal of Social Psychology* 141, pp. 477-493.
- McCullough, M.E., W.T. Hoyt, D.B. Larson, H.G. Koenig and C. Thoresen: 2000, 'Religious involvement and mortality: A meta-analytic review', *Health Psychology* 19, pp. 211-222.
- Miller, W.I.: 2000, *The Mystery of Courage* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts).
- Otake, K., S. Shimai, N. Utsuki, A. Ikemi, C. Peterson and M.E.P. Seligman: 2003, October 3, Development of the Japanese version of the Values in Action (VIA) Strengths Scale: Validity and reliability. Poster presented at the Second International Positive Psychology Summit, Washington, DC.
- Park, N., C. Peterson and M.E.P. Seligman: 2004, 'Strengths of character and well-being', *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 23, pp. 603-619.
- Peterson, C., N. Park and M.E.P. Seligman: 2005, 'Assessment of character strengths', in G.P. Koocher, J.C. Norcross and S.S. Hill, III (eds), *Psychologists' Desk Reference* 2nd edn., (Oxford University Press, New York), pp. 93-98.
- Peterson, C. and M.E.P. Seligman: 2004, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Classification and Handbook* (Oxford University Press, New York) Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rozin, P.: 2003, 'Five potential principles for understanding cultural differences in relation to individual differences', *Journal of Research in Personality* 37, pp. 273-283.
- Seligman, M.E.P.: 2002, *Authentic Happiness* (Free Press, New York).
- Seligman, M.E.P. and M. Csikszentmihalyi: 2000, 'Positive psychology: An introduction', *American Psychologist* 55, pp. 5-14.
- Shimai, S., K. Otake, N. Utsuki, A. Ikemi and S. Lyubomirsky: 2004, 'Development of Japanese Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) and its validity and reliability', *Japanese Journal of Public Health* 51, pp. 845-853.
- Stoppard, J. and C.D. Gruchy: 1993, 'Gender, context, and expression of positive emotion', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 19, pp. 143-150.
- Sugihara, Y. and E. Katsurada: 2000, 'Gender-role personality traits in Japanese culture', *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 24, pp. 309-318.
- Tangney, J.P.: 2000, 'Humility: Theoretical perspectives, empirical findings and directions for future research', *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19, pp. 70-82.
- Tsang, J. and M.E. McCullough: 2003, 'Measuring religious constructs: A hierarchical approach to construct organization and scale selection', in Lopez (ed.), *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures* (American Psychological Association, Washington, DC), pp. 345-360.

Address for Correspondence:

SATOSHI SHIMAI

Kobe College,

Japan

KEIKO OTAKE

*Tohoku Gakuin University,
Sendai-City, Japan*

NANSOOK PARK

*University of Rhode Island,
Kingston, RI, USA*

CHRISTOPHER PETERSON

*Department of Psychology
University of Michigan,
525 East University, Ann Arbor, MI, 48109-1109,
USA*

E-mail: chrispet@umich.edu

MARTIN E.P. SELIGMAN

*University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia, PA, USA*