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# Acting Strengths: The Development of Resilience and Character Strengths in Actors

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## **Keywords**

Positive Psychology, Actors, Resilience, Character Strengths, Passion, Development

## **Disciplines**

Acting | Fine Arts | Psychology | Theatre and Performance Studies

Acting Strengths: The Development of Resilience and Character Strengths in Actors

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University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Daniel Lerner

August 1, 2014

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An actor's work environment poses unique challenges that can drain personal resilience. Positive psychology research supports the development of resilience and the use of character strengths to bolster psychological resources that increase well-being in the face of adversity. This paper explores the history, mechanisms, and development of research on resilience and character strengths and their relationship to research on the lives of professional actors. I propose that developing character strengths and resilience creates potential pathways to cultivate well-being in actors and enables perseverance on the path to long-term career success.

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Memorably coined by Chris Peterson, I too have come to understand that “*other people matter*” (2006, p. 249).

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“The greatest glory in living  
lies not in never falling,  
but in rising every time we fall.”  
- Nelson Mandela

“Any idiot can face a crisis, it’s the day to day living that wears you out.”  
- Anton Chekhov

“I really need this job. Please, God, I need this job. I’ve got to get this show.”  
- A Chorus Line

### **Introduction**

Actors are storytellers and instruments of communication. Theatre was originally used as a mirror in order to challenge, cajole, express, and/or affirm human experience in medieval Europe as municipal governments started to foster the development of moral plays (Knight, 1997). Philosophers de Botton & Armstrong (2013) write that art is a record of observation born out of the human desire to accurately remember our experience and that good art preserves the essence of its subjects while investigating the self and a means of connection. Actors have a unique opportunity to participate in storytelling by bringing human experience to life for both personal and communal observation.

Egan and Greenwood (1825) contend that the life of an actor can be fascinating and that theatrical design often provides an effective spell for both the audience and the performer, fueling the passion of “theatrically bitten youths” (p. 3) to try their hand in this profession. They go on to assert that nineteen out of twenty actors who tackle this career will have a woeful experience:

The vicissitudes of the strolling player are lost sight of in the splendor of the theatres royal; nay, on the contrary, the stage struck hero calculates only upon the pleasure, ease, and large salaries obtained by some few performers, and pictures to himself a career of

one continued round of mirth and gait... The generality of the world see them go through their parts on the stage with perfect ease and apparent pleasure, without giving a thought to the labour, the study, the intense application necessary to imprint not only the words in the memory, but the character on the mind. (p. 3-4)

Almost two hundred years later, the profession retains such “vicissitudes” while adding others as actors and other performing artists face a challenging work environment and experience high levels of competition (Hamilton, 1997), occupational stress (Hamilton, Kella, & Hamilton, 1995) and performance anxiety (Clark & Agras, 1991; Hamilton, 1998). In addition, there is a consistent need to search for work (Hamilton, 1997). During a work search, actors typically experience high levels of rejection due to a larger number of performers than available jobs (Hamilton, 1997). These challenges can drain personal resilience and make it difficult to persist as a professional actor. Learning to bounce back from rejection and maintain motivation during challenging periods is crucial for long-term success in a theatre career.

Life can be unpredictable, and individuals cannot always choose personal circumstances. Throughout the course of their lives, most people will experience moments of challenge, disappointment, and failure alongside moments of joy, approval, and success. Norris and Sloane (2007) estimate that up to 90% of people will experience at least one serious traumatic event during their lifetime. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009; Southwick & Charney, 2012). In other words, resilience refers to an individual’s ability to bounce back from difficulties. Reivich and Shatté (2002) claim that everyone needs resilience because it can be used in a variety of ways for both major and minor challenges.

Resilience is a critical skill for actors to develop in order to cultivate personal well-being in a competitive work environment. Positive psychology offers empirically validated interventions including the identification and use of character strengths to increase well-being and resilience (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2012; Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). Resilience provides a psychological buffer in moments of adversity, is positively adaptive, and increases personal well-being (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). This paper will examine how positive psychology can aid professional actors in developing resilience and character strengths in order to increase well-being and perseverance for long-term success in a uniquely challenging career.

### **The Development and Pursuit of a Career in Theatre**

Many professional performing artists begin studying their particular domain of expertise as a child and continue training for close to a decade (Hamilton et al., 1995). Achieving elite levels of performance typically requires long-term, full-time, deliberate practice (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Lehman & Gruber, 2006). Deliberate practice is defined as engagement in specific activities that are explicitly designed to improve performance in a particular domain (Macnamara, Hambrick, & Oswald, 2014). The years of deliberate practice required for expert performance not only help performing artists master necessary skills but also help them cultivate high levels of discipline through sustained levels of hard work and the frequent self-denial required to focus on a particular domain (Hamilton, 1998).

While discipline and hard work are required for professional success, they do not guarantee it. A meta-analysis completed by Macnamara et al. (2014) found that deliberate practice only accounts for 21% of the variance in musicians' performance. They suggest other



internal factors that may comprise the remainder of the variance in achieving elite levels of performance such as optimal developmental periods, general intelligence, working memory capacity, and/or other individual differences. There is no clear-cut path to success in the performing arts.

In addition to the development of elite levels of performance, an actor must find work to thrive in a theatre career. Actors, like other professional performing artists, typically operate as independent contractors on short-term contracts. There is a near constant need to garner additional work by auditioning, and high levels of competition in the performing arts heighten instability (Hamilton, 1997). Less than thirty percent of professional performers in music and dance are engaged in full-time work (Hamilton et al., 1995). Celebrity status has the potential to bring more money and work options, but there is rarely long-term job security in the performing arts due to a constant influx of younger talent that is poised to take the place of current professionals (Hamilton, 1997).

Many of these challenges are illustrated beautifully in the musical, *A Chorus Line* (Bennett, Kirkwood, Dante, Hamlisch, & Kleban, 1995). Developed primarily through group discussions and shared personal stories of the actors who performed in its original production, *A Chorus Line* offers a view into the challenges and tensions of a career in theatre (Viagas, Lee, & Walsh, 2006). The opening number, “I Hope I Get It”, expresses the desperation an actor can feel during an audition when in need of work. The lyrics “God, I hope I get it. I hope I get it. How many people does he need?... Look at all the people. At all the people... I really need this job. Please, God, I need this job. I’ve got to get this show,” (Bennett et al., 1995) accurately represent the daily struggles an actor can face due to the fleeting and inconsistent nature of work in the performing arts.

It is difficult to earn a living as an actor due to high levels of competition and a limited number of available jobs. Actors Equity Association (AEA), the largest and most well established union for professional stage actors in the United States, reports that the performing arts community is facing a particularly challenging period (2013). Overall potential for employment and income for AEA members has steadily decreased since 2007. The total number of weeks worked on production contracts (the highest paying contract available for AEA members) is down a total of twenty-two percent. While there was a small increase in the total number of work weeks available from 2012-2013, a continued shift to lower-paying contracts contributes to a downward trend in member earnings. 42.8% of the union membership worked last year for an average of 16.7 weeks. In any given week, the average number of members working under an Equity contract was only 13.7%. This report helps to demonstrate the competitive nature of theatre, where there are many more professionals than jobs available. Earning a living in theatre has been, and will continue to be, a challenge for professional actors.

Due to high levels of competition, even the mastery and successful presentation of objective skills such as the ability to dance, sing, or play a musical instrument is not enough to ensure work in the performing arts. A variety of subjective factors may also be at play when an actor auditions for work. It is possible for actors' physical condition (height, weight, hair color, etc.) to impact whether or not they are hired for a particular job. Two or more actors who audition for the same role may be equally capable, but casting is subjective in nature. Being cast offers a form of positive feedback to the artist who is hired, but the artists who are not hired will most likely not receive any feedback from audition personnel (Hamilton, 1997) thus missing an essential opportunity to learn and develop skills and potentially increase motivation for future engagement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

### **Lack of Feedback and Motivation**

Ericsson and Charness (1994) list immediate feedback as an essential element of deliberate practice and the development of mastery. Professional performing artists cite ambiguous criteria for professional evaluations as a source of frustration (Hamilton et al., 1995). Perhaps this is because the lack of feedback given to professional performing artists stands in stark contrast to the consistent feedback given by mentors and instructors during the years of intense training as a student (Hamilton, 1997). A lack of professional feedback and high levels of competition make the performing arts a challenging work environment and increase levels of occupational stress (Hamilton et al., 1995).

As independent contractors, the search for continued success is a necessary component for many actors who seek a long-term career in the performing arts. Mullen, Davis, and Polatajko (2012) found that performing artists cite financial instability and pressure from societal norms as barriers to persevering in their careers. One additional barrier they propose is that while achieving personal goals provides significant joy and satisfaction in the moment, this satisfaction decreases over time (Mullen et al., 2012). Sustaining motivation for continued engagement over time is critical for the development of a career in theatre.

In order to thrive in what is typically a precarious work environment, actors must learn to handle the inevitable disappointment and stress that occurs alongside the joys and rewards of a career in show business (Hamilton, 1997). Many successful performers use goal setting, imagery training, cognitive anxiety management, self-talk, and regulation of physiological arousal to persist and perform in the face of criticism or during audition periods when feedback is lacking

(Hamilton, 1998). Research in the field of positive psychology is poised to assist actors and help them persevere in order to flourish in this uniquely challenging career.

### **A Brief Introduction to Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology aims to cultivate human flourishing and aligns with deep philosophical and theological traditions in addition to some previous psychological research. Aristotle examined the good life, considering eudaemonia (well-being) the outcome of virtuous habits that were developed through practice (Melchert, 2002). Eastern theological traditions stemming from Confucius, Lau-Tzu, and the Buddha emphasize a moral component of well-being and view meaning, purpose, and identity within the context of relationships and communities (Ivanhoe, 2013). Scientifically, positive psychology stems from work including William James' (1902/1985) studies on healthy mindedness, Abraham Maslow's (1954) on creativity and self-actualization, and Gordon Allport's (1937; 1961) on positive human characteristics of personality among others. These philosophical, theological, and psychological perspectives contributed to the understanding of human flourishing prior to the formal development of the positive psychology field and continue to ground current research (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

After the devastation of World War Two, the development of the Veterans Administration (now Veterans Affairs) and the National Institute of Mental Health shifted the empirical focus of psychology by funding research on pathology in an effort to assist a large number of veterans suffering from psychological dysfunction (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This economic and theoretical shift in the field of psychology began to focus research on the amelioration and elimination of psychological dysfunction and human suffering, causing a

majority of the field to adopt a medical model of human experience (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Returned to prominence in 1998 by then APA president Martin Seligman, positive psychology is first and foremost a scientific exploration. The field strives to use rigorous empirical data to describe, explain, predict, and cultivate what is best in people and aims to increase human flourishing through positive subjective traits, positive individual traits, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology calls for empirical research on human strengths and virtues while challenging practitioners to focus on and cultivate what is working well within individuals and communities. Seligman hopes this positive orientation will bring balance to psychological research and refocus the field towards two forgotten goals of psychology – to actualize high levels of human potential and to foster productivity and fulfillment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

As an applied science, positive psychology has grown rapidly since 1998. Rusk and Waters (2013) found the percentage of citable journal articles that reference positive psychology constructs rose from 0.94% in 1992 to 4.4% in 2011, and that the impact of positive psychology is reaching a breadth of domains including education, management, neuroscience, and public health. Positive interventions are designed to improve the quality of life both by preventing pathology and cultivating the elements of well-being, and a number of empirically validated positive interventions have been developed to cultivate human flourishing (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). According to Seligman's (2011) theory of well-being, PERMA, the elements of personal well-being include Positive Emotions, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning and Achievement. This theory encompasses many areas of research in the field of positive psychology.

A prominent scholar of positive emotions and well-being (Seligman, 2011), Barbara Fredrickson's "broaden and build" theory asserts that positive emotions are evolutionarily adaptive because they broaden our perspective both physiologically and cognitively and build personal resources that can be drawn on for future resilience (Fredrickson, 2009). Additionally, her research supports that as positive emotions broaden and build emotional resources they generate an upward spiral of emotion and promote well-being.

Another leading positive psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) studies engagement and holds that the optimal conscious experience, flow, comes through deep concentration when consciousness is ordered and attention is freely given to direct action toward a goal. He proposes that one can make themselves happy or miserable regardless of what is happening by changing the contents of consciousness attention, and that attention is therefore the most important tool to improving the quality of our experience.

A developed interest in well-being at work, spawned the field of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS). POS studies positive attributes, processes, and outcomes that help organizations flourish (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) established the theoretical framework of job crafting and suggest that task, relational, and cognitive crafting allow an individual to alter their work experience and increase well-being through meaningfulness at work. From an organizational perspective, an individual's engagement meaning at work can impact job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Wrzesniewski, Berg, & Dutton, 2010).

Character strengths are considered to be the basic building blocks of human flourishing (Wedding & Niemiec, 2008) and are a foundational aspect of positive psychology. The Mayerson Foundation created the Values in Action (VIA) Institute in 2000 to provide the

conceptual and empirical support for positive youth development in the field of education (Peterson, 2006). One of the primary goals of the VIA Institute was to develop *Character, Strengths, and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (CSV) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) in order to create a common language for character education. While character education is still an intentional focus of the VIA Institute, research has expanded to understand factors for optimal psychological functioning in effort to cultivate greater well-being (Peterson, 2006).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) write that good character allows humans “to struggle against and triumph over what is darkest within us” (p. 52). One of Seligman’s many contributions to the field of positive psychology is his research on learned optimism (1991), which supports the development of an optimistic explanatory style to increase personal well-being. Optimism is a core competency skill for the development of resilience which allows an individual to persevere and thrive in the face of adversity through positive adaptation (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Resilience helps to prevent depression (Gillham et al., 2007) and decreases psychological distress in moments of adversity thereby increasing personal well-being (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

### **The Development of Resilience**

Resilience is an important component of positive psychology as research in the area seeks to understand the factors that bring out the best in people during challenging experiences (Yates & Masten, 2004). Begun in the 1970’s with studying children who demonstrated positive developmental outcomes despite adverse circumstances (Garmezy, 1974), recent research has expanded to include the development of resilience as a preventative method to decrease psychological dysfunction and facilitate positive outcomes (Yates & Masten, 2004).

Some people thrive in moments of stress (Masten, 2001). Resilience allows individuals to adapt in healthy, flexible ways during adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). It is frequently found and arises from ordinary processes that use basic human protection systems as a protective factor in moments of adversity (Masten, 2001; Masten et al., 2009). Self-efficacy, positive relationships, effective problem solving, cognitive skill, and meaning are all examples of factors that can protect individual levels of resilience during adversity (Masten et al., 2009). While resilience used to be viewed as a trait that someone either did or did not possess (Reivich & Shatté, 2002), it is now believed that personal resilience can be developed (Alvord & Grados, 2005). Masten et al. (2009) claim that it is possible to foster resilience in order to prevent psychological damage and restore or compensate for the psychological risk associated with adversity. Further, they assert that the mastery of motivational systems and self-efficacy are essential to cultivate resilience and cite positive goals and asset-focused strategies as useful prevention methods for interventions that aim to increase resilience.

An individual's level of resilience is determined by both internal and external factors and is a complex, dynamic process (Southwick & Charney, 2012). Reivich and Shatté (2002) identify six empirically validated skills that bolster levels of personal resilience: emotional awareness and regulation, impulse control, optimism, flexible and accurate thinking, empathy and connection, and self-efficacy. Mastering as few as two or three of the skills of resilience can lead to beneficial outcomes such as increased productivity, energy, and over-all well-being (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

Reivich and Shatté (2002) hold that resilience occurs when an individual combines the belief that he or she can control events in life with the power to make desired change and accurate thinking. Self-efficacy is the belief that personal skill will result in desired outcomes



within a particular situation (Maddox, 2009). It provides a sense of control over one's environment and is critical to navigating chronic stress and building resilience (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Maddox (2009) asserts that self-efficacy is essential for personal well-being because people choose to engage in specific behavior and persist in the face of challenges when they believe that their actions will produce desired results. Self-efficacy beliefs are developed when we understand causal relationships and practice self-observation or awareness (Maddox, 2009). Beliefs can create self-fulfilling prophecies that either encourage or discourage action (Peterson, 2006). The belief that one can change and reach desired outcomes increases effort, persistence, and performance of tasks (Maddox, 2009). As desired outcomes become a reality through intentional action, self-efficacy is strengthened (Maddox, 2009).

In addition to self-efficacy, Reivich and Shatté (2002) cite the development of accurate thinking as a core competency of resilience. While mental shortcuts allow our brain to simplify sensory information and streamline decision making, they can also decrease the accuracy of our thoughts and are frequently responsible for common patterns of inaccurate thought that drain resilience. Cognitive behavioral therapy works to correct patterns of inaccurate thought that create psychological dysfunction in individuals (Beck & Greenberg, 1984).

The Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) (Gillham, Reivich, & Jaycox, 2008) is one of the most widely researched resilience training programs to date (Reivich et al., 2011). A cognitive-behavioral depression prevention program, PRP teaches skills such as the identification of inaccurate thinking and demonstrates a significant reduction in depressive symptoms at a two and a half year follow up when participants are compared to no intervention control groups (Gillham et al., 2007). Originally designed for educational environments and at-risk middle

school children (Seligman, 2012), PRP has been modified for use in the military (Reivich et al., 2011).

The U.S. Army's Master Resilience Trainer (MRT) is used to preventatively develop resilience skills in soldiers of the U.S. Army (Gillham, et al., 2008; Reivich et al., 2011). MRT was modeled after PRP and other empirically validated interventions from positive psychology such as identifying signature strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Reivich et al., 2011). In addition to promoting resilience by modifying an individual's cognitive response to stressors, Gillham et al. (2013) suggest that it may be just as helpful to cultivate resilience by developing character strengths. Fazio and Fazio (2005) assert that a strengths-based approach can help individuals recover from, and grow beyond, moments of trauma. One portion of MRT's curriculum is the identification of character strengths in the self and others and the use of character strengths to meet or overcome adversity (Reivich et al., 2011). Initial data supports that soldiers in units with MRT score significantly higher in resilience and psychological health after fifteen months when compared to units who did not receive the training (Lester, Harms, Herian, Krasikova, & Beal, 2011). Both PRP and MRT offer empirically supported models to increase resilience, and MRT specifically incorporates the identification and use of character strengths to increase personal levels of resilience in a population which faces adversity in a work environment.

### **Cognitive Distortions, Performing Artists, and Resilience**

Thinking traps are common patterns of inaccurate thought that increase psychological distress drain personal resilience (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Perfectionism and "all or nothing" thinking are two common thinking traps in performing artists who strongly identify with their

work (Hamilton, 1997). Perfectionism is driven by unrealistic expectations for performance, self-evaluative thought distortions, and rumination (Padham & Aujla, 2014). This exaggerated thought pattern creates a feeling that, if an achievement is not perfect, it is entirely worthless (Beck & Greenberg, 1984). Similarly, “all or nothing” thinking occurs when one neglects to see nuance in situations and inaccurately evaluates reality (Beck & Greenberg, 1984). Both perfectionism and “all or nothing” thinking make performers less likely to allow for disappointment in personal performance (Hamilton, 1997). When there is a discrepancy between the reality of an individual’s performance and the way they believe an ideal performance “should” be, self-esteem can drop draining resilience and increasing psychological distress (Hamilton, 1997; Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

Performance anxiety is pervasive among performing artists and can also impair resiliency (Clark & Agras, 1991). Commonly called “stage fright”, performance anxiety is said to be a manifestation of the psychological issues that arise from presenting oneself in public (Hays, 2002; Nagel, 1992). Ninety-seven percent of musicians surveyed by Clark and Agras (1991) reported that their performance was impaired due to performance anxiety. Hamilton (1998) suggests that poor training and preparation, inadequate stage experience, perfectionism, and/or competitive feelings can elevate the degree of performance anxiety experienced by an individual. One additional factor may be the audience itself. The relationship between a performing artist and the audience takes on a vital role during a performance, because success is not clearly defined and relies, at least in part, on the reaction of the audience to an individual’s performance (Conroy, Poczwardowski, & Henschen, 2001). Self-defeating thought patterns can cause performance anxiety and impair resilience (Clark & Agras, 1991; Hamilton, 1998).

Performing artists may be particularly susceptible to these cognitive distortions because their work is frequently a large part of a their identity (Hamilton, 1997). Unlike peers who experiment with a variety of roles and identities, performing artists typically find their primary means of autonomy, personal fulfillment, and creative expression in their work (Hamilton, 1997). This identification process can have both negative and positive effects. While personal identification can cause personal value to be tangled in personal performance (Hamilton, 1997), it can also fuel passion in performing artists (Vallerand et al., 2003).

### **Passion, Performing Artists, and Resilience**

Passion is an important element in positive psychology (Vallerand & Verner-Filion, 2013), resilience (Lafrenière, St-Louis, Vallerand, & Donahue, 2012), and the lives of performing artists (Hamilton, 1997). Vallerand et al. (2003) define passion as “a strong inclination towards an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (p. 757). Passionate activities are integrated into a person’s concept of their identity and considered self-defining (Vallerand et al., 2003).

Performing artists reference passion both explicitly and implicitly (Mullen et al., 2012). It is widely accepted that a dancer must be passionate to attain a professional career (Padham & Aujla, 2014) and Manturzewska (1990) found that a drive towards music was an important predictive factor for a musician to persevere and succeed as a professional. While, passion has the potential to ignite motivation, increase well-being, and provide a sense of meaning in everyday life, it has also been held responsible for inflexible persistence and the arousal of negative emotions (Vallerand et al., 2003).

This paradox led Vallerand et al. (2003) to pose a Dualistic Model of Passion that distinguishes between Harmonious Passion (HP) and Obsessive Passion (OP). HP arises from autonomous internalization, where an individual freely chooses to engage in the passionate activity and is associated with flexible persistence as well as an increase in positive affect. OP arises from a controlled internalization due to either inter- or intra- personal pressure such as social pressure or a need to create personal self-esteem and is associated with rigid persistence and an increase in negative affect.

Both types of passion increase persistence (Vallerand et al., 2003) and deliberate practice (Vallerand et al., 2007) potentially sustaining the motivation to engage in a difficult career such as the performing arts (Mullen et al., 2012; Vallerand, 2008). However, only HP is associated with an increased openness to experience and positive adaptation in moments of failure (Lafrenière et al., 2012) indicating it may, indeed, increase resilience. Additional beneficial outcomes of HP that may impact performing artists include an increase in vitality (Vallerand et al., 2003), better coping mechanisms (Rip et al., 2006), creative achievement (Luh & Lu, 2012), flow, and the absence of public self-consciousness (Carpentier, Mageau, & Vallerand, 2011). Due to the number of beneficial outcomes, the development of HP is of interest to positive psychology practitioners (Mageau et al., 2009).

Passion may not apply to a breadth of activities, but it is associated with those activities that bring meaning into our lives and help us to thrive (Vallerand, 2012). The innate drive to achieve success passion provides can help motivate performing artists to continue engagement in a passionate activity during challenging times. While more research is needed to understand the dynamic interplay of HP and resilience, HP may, indeed, cultivate resilience in actors.

### **Character Strengths: A Classification**

Focusing on what is right with people and pathways to human flourishing, Peterson and Seligman (2004) saw a need for a common language around human strengths. They recognized that the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) has been critically helpful to create collective understanding and progress in both the treatment and prevention of psychological disorders. Using the DSM as a model, Peterson and Seligman (2004), along with other contributors, collaborated to identify and name twenty-four universally preferred character strengths that are moral in nature in the CSV that was spearheaded by the VIA Institute. This common vocabulary of positive traits enables the identification and cultivation of good character and the psychological good life through strength-congruent activities. Their hope is for this classification to inform future research and make human virtues empirically measurable constructs that can be operationalized.

When assembling this classification of character strengths, Peterson and Seligman (2004) were careful to include only virtues that were valued across cultural traditions and supported by both historical and philosophical traditions. All twenty-four universally preferred character strengths in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification are categorized under six core virtues that emerged during their research: wisdom, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, and transcendence. Additionally, all twenty-four character strengths meet specific criteria for this classification and are fulfilling, morally valued, do not diminish others, have an opposite, are generally stable across time, have paragons and prodigies that exemplify this strength, are not held by all human beings, and are culturally cultivated through ritual (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). They are as follows: creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective, bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest, teamwork, fairness, leadership, love, kindness, social intelligence,

forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality. The character strengths and virtues classification is intended to be a descriptive “manual of the sanities” (Easterbrook, 2001, p. 23).

This classification is descriptive of the virtues that were ubiquitous across cultures and is not prescriptive in nature. It should be noted that not all cultures value each category equally; therefore, variability exists in how differing cultures prioritize the virtues in action. For instance, justice and humanity are consistently and explicitly nominated as they are ranked highly among every tradition that was examined. On the other hand, the virtues of transcendence were found to be ubiquitous but were only explicitly nominated by traditions that held meaning and purpose as a core value and ranked as a higher priority in religious cultures. Therefore, while every character strength in the classification is universal, different cultures value certain strengths over others.

### **Measurement**

The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is a widely used and empirically validated self-report assessment of character strengths in adults. The VIA-IS measurement tool was designed to help individuals rank their personal use of the twenty-four character strengths listed in Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) classification in order to identify the character strengths that they most frequently use as a pathway to virtue. The survey utilizes a fivepoint, Likert-style response system to measure a respondent’s personal endorsement of individual character strengths and has proven internal consistency (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Additionally, the VIA-Youth was developed to assess character strengths in young people between the ages of ten and seventeen (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The largest

challenge has been to keep this survey short enough so as not to burden students but long enough to maintain internal consistency and reliability.

While care was taken in the design of this assessment to guard against self-report bias, Buschor, Proyer, and Ruch (2013) offered the first empirical evidence to support a relationship between life satisfaction and both self and peer reported character strengths. This suggests that the data from self-report measures on character strengths can be replicated with peer-assessments on character strengths and is therefore not a methodological issue. Buschor et al. (2013) found that knowledgeable peers are able to observe and accurately assess character strengths in others. This evidence supports the fact that we have the ability not only to identify personal strengths but also to identify the strengths of others – what Niemiec (2013) calls “strengths-spotting”.

It is important to note that Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) classification of character strengths is not the only classification of strengths used in empirical research by psychologists. Peterson and Seligman (2004) actively differentiate strengths from talents and define strengths as trait-like pathways to fulfillment, while the Gallup Organization defines strengths as talents that can be refined with knowledge and skills and that can help individuals consistently perform at high levels (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The Gallup Organization’s classification and measurement tool, Strengthsfinder, identifies 34 themes of talents (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007) and focuses on strength development to increase engagement of employees and profitability of organizations (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Additionally, the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) works to extend the research and application of positive psychology theories, and their definition of strengths is a pre-existing capacity for feeling, thinking, and behaving that is authentic, energizing, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance (Linley, 2008). Their classification of strengths, Realise2, identifies sixty strengths.



The three classifications mentioned here all work to operationalize human strengths, develop empirical research for the growing field of positive psychology, and aim to cultivate increased well-being and excellence.

This paper will concentrate on Peterson & Seligman's (2004) classification of character strengths, because their measurement tool is the most widely used and psychometrically validated tool for character strengths available. Psychological research utilizing this classification supports the identification, development, and application of personal character strengths and demonstrates strong empirical evidence that the use of personal character strengths has beneficial outcomes, such as increased life satisfaction (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), engagement (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005), and performance (Dubreuil, Forest, & Courcy, 2014). Finally, this classification was used by MRT to demonstrate increased resilience (Lester et al., 2011).

### **Capitalizing on Character Strengths**

There is evidence that character strengths can and should be used more than they typically are. Everyone has character strengths, yet only 17% of people report using their character strengths most of the time each day (Buckingham, 2007). Individuals are capable of using any of the twenty-four character strengths ranked in the VIA-IS, however everyone has a tendency to utilize certain character strengths more than others. Signature strengths are character strengths that are deeply representative of an individual, and their use is both natural and energizing (Seligman, 2002). Signature strengths are not necessarily confined to someone's top five character strengths on the VIA-IS, but they tend to fall among an individual's highest ranked character strengths and are self-identified authentic pathways to happiness (Seligman, 2002).

Due to the tendency to underutilize personal character strengths (Buckingham, 2007), there is a potential for beneficial outcomes if individuals cultivate awareness and actively utilize signature strengths. Research has shown that the use of signature strengths can positively impact both well-being (Gander et al., 2012; Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013) and performance (Dubreuil et al., 2014).

Capitalizing on signature strengths may be particularly effective when the goal is to cultivate well-being and performance simultaneously. Seligman (2012) maintains that utilizing personal signature strengths increases positive affect, meaning, and personal accomplishment while leading to better relationships. Research demonstrates that the intervention “Using Signature Strengths in a New Way” (Seligman et al., 2005), where participants are asked to use one of their top five character strengths in a new way every day for a week, is associated with an increase in happiness and a decrease in depressive symptoms for six months (Gander et al., 2012). People who report having an opportunity to use their strengths at work are more likely to be engaged in their jobs (Rath, 2007). By garnering awareness and identifying strengths, it becomes possible to build on your strengths in action (Rath, 2007). There is additional research to support that the use of one’s signature strengths increases life satisfaction (Seligman et al., 2005), and it is possible to argue that the use of signature strengths increases all five elements of PERMA (Proyer et al., 2013).

### **The Development of Character Strengths**

The development of character strengths is a highly contextual phenomenon that aligns with personal goals, interests, values and situational factors (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan & Minhas, 2011). Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham, and Mayerson (2014) remind us that character

development is not one-size-fits-all and that the goal is to reveal and engage an individual's constellation of character strengths. Character strengths are considered similar to personality traits, which are generally stable across time but have the capacity for change and are enabled by certain conditions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Like personality traits, character strengths are plural in nature. Individuals typically express multiple character strengths simultaneously in a specific context and these combinations are highly individualistic (Niemiec, 2013).

Stemming from research on personality traits, Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) take a dynamic developmental approach to strengths-based interventions and acknowledge the potential influence of environmental factors. They contend that greater benefits are found when participants do not simply use character strengths but actively develop them over time through enhanced awareness, accessibility, and effort. This developmental approach is similar to the typical identify and use approach of strengths-based interventions in that both approaches assume that most people can and should utilize character strengths more frequently (Buckingham, 2007). One critical difference between the developmental approach and the identify and use approach lies in whether an individual believes that character strengths are stable traits or that character strengths have the potential to be developed (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011).

Merely describing an individual's character strengths can limit beneficial outcomes and may even lead people to underperform (Dweck, 2006; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Peterson & Seligman's (2004) classification of character strengths offers a common language for the identification of strengths, which is valuable for both empirical research and personal identification. However, if individuals believe their identified character strengths are stable traits, they may not exert effort in developing them (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin & Wan, 1999; Smiley &

Dweck, 1994). Maintaining an explicit growth mindset, or the view that core aspects of one's self are capable of development, while using character strengths can support beneficial outcomes. Once character strengths are identified as intrinsic to an individual, Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) argue that strengths fall into the category of self-theories and can therefore be associated with either a fixed or growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). This is one additional consideration for individuals and practitioners who hope develop character strengths and garner beneficial outcomes. It indicates that it is beneficial to focus on the development of strengths over time rather than seeing strengths as fixed traits.

Another reason to maintain a developmental approach and growth mindset when cultivating character strengths in individuals is known as strengths sensitivity (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2009). Strengths sensitivity may be due to an increased level of confidence and optimism of success in an individual that comes with the use of signature strengths (Proctor et al., 2009). If an individual experiences a failure or setback while working in areas of strength, the use of strengths may cause disappointment or distress.

Strengths based interventions are a potential avenue to cultivate resilience. However, an identify and use approach does not take into consideration the internal and external factors which may hinder outcomes. A dynamic, developmental approach combined with a growth mindset and an awareness of strengths sensitivity may lead to greater beneficial outcomes when using character strengths to cultivate resilience (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Proctor et al., 2009).

### **Possible Mechanisms for Character Strengths**

The benefits of strengths come from their use and not simply their identification (Quinlan, Swain, & Vella-Brodrick, 2012). Peterson and Seligman (2004) claim that character

strengths are largely intrinsically motivated as they are authentic to an individual. The use of signature strengths are said to be naturally energizing because they represent pathways to virtue that are particular to an individual (Seligman, 2002). Linley (2008) believes that the benefits from strengths use occur due to increased energy and authenticity, which is one aspect of the established criteria for character strengths by Peterson and Seligman (2004). Heightened energy allows for sustained effort and authenticity helps people feel genuine and aligned with tasks that utilize signature strengths (Linley, 2008).

It is also possible that the use of signature strengths may increase well-being because they serve to strengthen psychological needs such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Quinlan et al., 2012). Once again, this is consistent with Seligman's (2002) claim that the use of signature strengths is naturally energizing to an individual because fulfilling psychological needs such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy strengthens intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The use of signature strengths can tap into an individual's intrinsic motivation because they are concordant with an individual's interests and values (Linley, Nielsen, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). Linley et al. (2010) assessed the effects of signature strengths on goal progression, need satisfaction, and well-being. Their research indicates that the use of signature strengths supports goal progress that, in turn, helps to fulfill need satisfaction and generate increased well-being. This aspect of signature strengths is particularly helpful for performing artists where sustained motivation is critical to long-term success.

Buckingham (2007) presents an alternative theory and cites deep concentration as a potential pathway for the benefits derived from strengths use. This model claims that greater cognitive activity is responsible for the increased achievement associated with strengths use.

Duckworth et al.'s (2005) research supports this theory and demonstrates that the use of strengths is associated with increased engagement, concentration, and flow. More research is needed to tease out the mechanisms that drive the benefits obtained from the use of character strengths. Current research supports that the use of character strengths is both personally energizing (Seligman, 2002) and intrinsically motivating (Quinlan et al., 2012). In addition, the use of character strengths is associated with goal progression (Linley et al., 2010), increased engagement, concentration, and flow (Duckworth et al., 2005).

### **Character Strengths, Actors, and Workplace**

Research supports the use of character strengths in work environments for positive psychological and behavioral outcomes (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Linley et al., 2010). The active use of character strengths is associated with increased job satisfaction (Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010). High levels of the character strengths curiosity, zest, hope and gratitude all contribute to increased job satisfaction (Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, & Seligman, 2010). Further, the use of signature strengths increases life satisfaction (Seligman et al., 2005), and happy employees are more productive (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Zelenski, Murphy, & Jenkins, 2008). Linley et al. (2010) support this finding and demonstrate that employees who utilize their signature strengths at work have higher levels of energy.

In addition to an increase in personal energy, Gander et al. (2012) found that engagement and proactive work behavior are robustly correlated to the use of character strengths. Engaged employees are more likely to take personal initiative (Demerouti, Bakker, De Jonge, Janssen & Schaufeli, 2001) and are more motivated to learn (Sonnentag, 2003). The active use of an individual's signature strengths in a work environment is one potential way to cultivate proactive

work behavior (Els, Mostert, Van Woerkom, Rothmann, & Bakker, in press) or a self-started behavior that is persistent in the face of challenges which arise during the pursuit of a goal (Frese & Fay, 2001). Proactive work behavior has similarities to the concept of resilience, as it is a positive adaptation in a moment of challenge that results in increased persistence. The use of signature strengths increases both engagement and proactive work behavior and may assist motivation in entrepreneurial professions such as theatre (Frese & Fay, 2001).

The development of character strengths has the potential to increase self-efficacy and resilience in individuals and provide positive adaptation during times of challenge. Huta and Hawley (2010) support that the use of character strengths can buffer against psychological vulnerabilities such as anxiety and perfectionism that decrease well-being and drain resilience. Hope, kindness, social intelligence, self-regulation and perspective are all cited as buffers against the negative effects of stress and trauma (Park & Peterson, 2006; Park & Peterson, 2009). The development and active use of character strengths is one way to target and improve psychological resilience in individuals (Lester et al., 2011). This research is particularly useful to address the unique challenges of a career in theatre.

Dubreuil et al. (2014) found that individuals who use personal character strengths at work have increased levels of performance. Harmonious passion, energy and concentration operate as equally important mediators in the relationship between the use of character strengths and increased levels of work performance (Dubreuil et al., 2014). Limitations in this study include self-report measure of work performance and a cross-sectional design, which does not allow for causality. However, it is a start to research on mediators of strengths use and work performance and indicates a positive association between harmonious passion the use of character strengths.

One additional finding that may aid performing artists in the development of a career is that the character strengths of wisdom (creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective) are positively related to performance on a creative task as they increase ideation or the ability to generate possible solutions (Avey, Luthans, Hannah, Sweetman, & Peterson, 2012). This differs from the character strength of creativity, which is defined as originality (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) but both aspects of creativity can be useful in the performing arts. Avey et al. (2012) propose that the character strengths of wisdom provide psychological resources for employees to reduce stress and increase perspective.

The use of character strengths at work can increase job satisfaction (Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010), energy (Linley et al., 2010), engagement (Gander et al., 2012), proactive work behavior (Els et al., in press), performance (Dubreuil et al., 2014), and creativity (Avey et al., 2012). Research also supports an increase in intrinsic motivation (Quinlan et al., 2012) and concentration (Duckworth et al., 2005) from the use of character strengths. The development and use of character strength in performing artists may help artists cultivate resilience and persevere in a challenging career.

### **Conclusion**

The life of an actor has long presented unique challenges (Egan & Greenwood, 1825). In order to flourish amidst high levels of competition (Hamilton, 1997), occupational stress (Hamilton et al., 1995), and performance anxiety (Clark & Agras, 1991; Hamilton, 1998) actors need to positively adapt to adversity. Research in the field of positive psychology is poised to assist actors. Resilience can be developed and provide a psychological buffer in moments of



adversity (Alvord & Grados, 2005), and the cultivation of self-efficacy and accurate thinking are two pathways to bolster personal resilience and increase well-being (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

The identification, use, and development of character strengths can increase personal resilience (Gander et al., 2012; Lester et al., 2011; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Reivich et al., 2011), because the use of character strengths buffer against psychological vulnerabilities that decrease well-being and drain resilience (Huta & Hawley, 2010; Park & Peterson, 2006; Park & Peterson, 2009). The development and use of character strengths has the potential to increase resilience in actors enabling perseverance and well-being in a difficult career.

Performing artists tend to find their primary means of autonomy, personal fulfillment, and creative expression in their work (Hamilton, 1997), and there is research to support the use of character strengths at work for positive psychological and behavioral outcomes (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Linley et al., 2010). An increasing number of practitioners are using strengths-based interventions to cultivate well-being with clients (Biswas-Diener, 2009; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), and a developmental approach that maintains a growth mindset increases the potential benefits of strengths-based interventions (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011).

Additional benefits from the use of character strengths include increased life satisfaction (Seligman et al., 2005), job satisfaction (Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010), energy (Linley et al., 2010), concentration (Duckworth et al., 2005), engagement (Gander et al., 2012), intrinsic motivation (Quinlan et al., 2012), proactive work behavior (Els et al., in press), creativity (Avey et al., 2012), and performance (Dubreuil et al., 2014).

The development and use of character strengths in performing artists has the potential to cultivate resilience and enable perseverance for long-term career success. More research is needed to understand the relationship between resilience and the use of character strengths. The

character strengths of social intelligence, self-regulation, hope, and perspective appear to align with the skills of resilience skills by definition, and it would be interesting to see if the development of these character strengths resulted in increased resilience in individuals.

Additionally, the positive association between character strengths and harmonious passion (Dubreuil et al., 2014) may be a fruitful avenue for research to examine the relationship between motivation and resilience. Passion can motivate persistence (Vallerand et al., 2003), deliberate practice (Vallerand et al., 2007), and engagement (Mullen et al., 2012; Vallerand, 2008). Harmonious passion is also positively adaptive in moments of failure (Lafrenière et al., 2012) and associated with better coping mechanisms (Rip et al., 2006). Since performing artists reference passion both explicitly and implicitly (Mullen et al., 2012), research interested in the cultivation of resilience in performing artists should examine the relationships between resilience, harmonious passion and character strengths in more depth.

There will always be a proverbial *Chorus Line* (Bennett et al., 1995) where actors consistently search for work, face rejection, and withstand uncertainty. Fortunately, positive psychology is poised to provide actors with tools that promote positive adaptation in the face of adversity and sustain their passion for performing. The development of resilience and character strengths in professional actors can provide an essential psychological buffer to help actors persevere on the path to long-term career success and flourish in a uniquely challenging business.

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