

BRIEF REPORT: Short Form of the VIA Inventory of Strengths: Construction and Initial Tests of Reliability and Validity

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Abstract

Assessment of character strengths became a focus of both research and clinical practice with the emergence of positive psychology at the beginning of the 21st century. The VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), a self-report instrument, has emerged as the primary instrument for measuring personal strengths and virtues. However, use of the instrument has been compromised by its 240-item length. This study created a briefer version consisting of 120 items, using the 5 items with the highest corrected item-total correlations. The new 120-item version demonstrated reasonable reliability and validity, based on three samples of people who completed the original VIA-IS and two additional samples who completed only the new developed short form.

Keywords: VIA Inventory Of Strengths, Character Strengths, Positive Psychology.

The focus in positive psychology on improving current functioning, rather than on recovery from a diminished level of functioning, has encouraged the investigation of character strengths, durable individual differences that manifest in thought, feeling, and behavior in various degrees in different people. Although similar to personality traits, character strengths are thought to be different because of the moral and cultural value placed on them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Based on a comprehensive literature review and professional consensus, Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a classification of character strengths, called the VIA Classification, which includes 24 character strengths, each related to one of the following six broader virtues: (a) wisdom and knowledge (includes the strengths of creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective); (b) courage (including bravery, honesty, perseverance, zest); (c) humanity (including kindness, love, social intelligence); (d) justice (including fairness, leadership, teamwork); (e) temperance (including forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation); and (f) transcendence (including appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality). Using this model as their starting point, they developed the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), a 240-item self report instrument consisting of 24 scales representing the character strengths, each composed of 10 items. Items are completed on a 5-point scale from *very much like me* to *very much unlike me*. All items are keyed in the same direction. The VIA-IS provides a dimensional representation of each character strength.

When subjected to empirical data analysis, the VIA-IS scales showed satisfactory psychometric properties for all 24 strengths, with Cronbach's α generally higher than .70 (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Littman-Ovadia, & Lavy, 2012). In addition, the VIA-IS scales showed adequate test-retest reliability, and validity as gauged using ratings by significant others and various indicators of well-being (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Ruch et al., 2010).

One obstacle to the use of the instrument has been its length. It takes about 45 minutes to complete the long form 240 items. Furnham and Lester (2012) developed a short 24-item self-rated measure of character strengths on which participants estimated their scores on a normal distribution, with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15 points, on each the strength accompanied by a brief description/explanation, for example, "able to regulate emotions,

nonimpulsive” for the strength Self-Regulation. Their sample consisted solely of college students. Recently, Ruch, Martínez-Martí, Proyer and Harzer (2014) described the Character Strengths Rating Form (CSRFB), a 24-item German-language questionnaire with a 9-point Likert scale (from 1 = *not like me at all* through 9 = *absolutely like me*) that measures the 24 VIA-strengths. A sample item is: “Curiosity (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience): Curious people take an interest in all ongoing experience in daily life for its own sake and they are very interested in, and fascinated by, various topics and subjects. They like to explore and discover the world, they are seldom bored, and it’s easy for them to keep themselves busy.”

However, these single item measures do not allow calculation of the reliability of each strength using traditional methods, and the median correlation for the homologous scales in the Ruch et al. (2014) sample was moderate (= .56, range = .41 to .77) (Furnham & Lester, 2012 did not compare their single item measure with the original VIA-IS). In the present study we developed a 120-item short version of the VIA-IS based on those items with the largest corrected item-total correlations from the original 10 questions per scale.

Table 1
Short Form Item Numbers.

Scale	5-item version
Beauty	65, 89, 113, 137, 185
Courage	7, 55, 79, 127, 223
Creativity	4, 52, 100, 124, 148
Curiosity	49, 97, 121, 145, 193
Fairness	61, 85, 109, 181, 229
Forgiveness	48, 72, 120, 168, 192
Gratitude	66, 114, 162, 186, 210
Honesty	9, 57, 105, 129, 225
Hope	19, 67, 91, 163, 211
Humor	70, 94, 118, 166, 238
Kindness	34, 58, 82, 154, 178
Leadership	38, 62, 110, 158, 182
Learning	50, 98, 146, 194, 218
Love	35, 83, 131, 155, 179
Modesty	69, 93, 165, 189, 237
Openness	75, 123, 147, 171, 195
Perseverance	8, 32, 80, 128, 176
Perspective	102, 126, 150, 198, 222
Prudence	64, 136, 160, 184, 208
Self-Regulation	15, 39, 63, 111, 135
Social Intelligence	29, 53, 77, 149, 197
Spirituality	20, 44, 68, 140, 212
Teamwork	84, 156, 180, 204, 228
Zest	95, 119, 143, 215, 239

In consideration of the fact that most studies involve multiple measures and that therefore some researchers may choose greater practicality for a relatively small tradeoff in terms of psychometrics, the purpose of the present study was to introduce a shorter version of the VIA-IS and conduct an initial evaluation of its performance.

METHOD

Participants and Measures

The derivation sample (Sample 1) consisted of 458,998 adults who completed the VIA-IS instrument online between 2005 and 2008 at the Authentic Happiness website, or between 2008 and 2011 at the VIA Institute on Character website. The sample was restricted to respondents who identified their location as the United States. The sample was 66.46% female with a mean age of 34.36 ($SD = 14.13$). The short version (the VIA-120) was developed by choosing the five items from the original 10 items per scale with the highest corrected item-total correlations in Sample 1 (see Table 1).

Samples 2 and 3 consisted of people who completed the original VIA-IS. Sample 2 included 301 individuals who accessed the VIA Institute website in 2010 and agreed to complete a series of questionnaires in addition to the VIA-IS. The sample was 75.42% female with a mean age of 42.78 ($SD = 13.35$). Though no restriction was placed on the country of origin, 61.33% of the participants in the sample were U.S. residents. In addition to the VIA-IS, members of this sample completed a 48-item self-report measure of behavioral acts relevant to the 24 strengths (two acts per strength), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977).

Sample 3 consisted of 385 individuals who accessed the VIA website in March 2011 and in addition to the VIA-IS volunteered to complete a measure of Flourishing (Diener et al., 2010) that is intended to gauge success in various life pursuits. This sample was 68.57% female and 54.29% U.S. residents, with a mean age of 42.69 ($SD = 12.16$).

Samples 4 and 5 consisted of people who completed only the short version of the instrument (the VIA-120), as this is considered best practice in short form validation (Smith, McCarthy, & Anderson, 2000). Sample 4 consisted of 726,771 individuals from around the world who completed the short form online during 2013-2014. This sample had an average age of 34.61 years ($SD = 12.63$); was 63.97% female and 36.03% male; and was highly educated, with 56.42% reporting a college degree or greater.

Sample 5 consisted of 507 U.S. residents who accessed the VIA Institute website in 2014 and agreed to complete a series of questionnaires in addition to the short form. This sample had an average age of 42.51 years ($SD = 12.00$); was 85.4% female and 14.6% male; and was highly educated, with 82.2% reporting a college degree or greater. In addition to the short form, members of this sample completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

Reliability was evaluated by comparing coefficient alpha values of the original scales (VIA-IS) completed in Sample 1, with those of the short form (VIA-120) in the same sample, and with those of the VIA-120 when administered independently (Sample 4). Validity was evaluated by comparing correlations with the additional scales (Activities, SWLS, CESD, Flourishing) of the original VIA-IS scales with those of the VIA-120 scales in the same samples (Samples 2, 3) and by comparing correlations of the original VIA-IS with PA and NA (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012) with those for the VIA-120 when administered independently (Sample 5). Validity was also evaluated by comparing factor analysis results of the VIA-IS conducted using Sample 1 (McGrath, 2014).with those for the VIA-120 when administered independently (Sample 4).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Internal Consistencies and Correlations with homologous Strengths

Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's α) of the 24 original scales, in the derivation sample (sample 1), ranged from .75 (honesty, teamwork) to .91 (spirituality), with a mean of .83 (Sample 1). This was similar to the average internal consistency coefficient of .79 of the 24 VIA-120 scales ranged from .69 (leadership) to .90 (creativity) (See Table 2). When the short version

Table 2
Reliability and Validity Statistics.

Scale	Version	Reliability	<i>r</i> with	Validity			
			Original	Activities	SWLS	CESD	Flour
Beauty	Original	.87		.72	.00	-.00	.22
	5 items	.85	.94	.68	.01	-.02	.18
Courage	Original	.85		.50	.18	-.21	.44
	5 items	.80	.93	.39	.11	-.16	.29
Creativity	Original	.90		.50	.17	-.16	.28
	5 items	.90	.95	.42	.18	-.18	.31
Curiosity	Original	.84		.59	.36	-.36	.55
	5 items	.82	.93	.57	.41	-.36	.56
Fairness	Original	.79		.47	.15	-.09	.32
	5 items	.71	.91	.40	.14	-.07	.29
Forgiveness	Original	.89		.67	.19	-.21	.34
	5 items	.83	.95	.65	.19	-.19	.33
Gratitude	Original	.84		.60	.38	-.33	.58
	5 items	.83	.92	.52	.44	-.37	.60
Honesty	Original	.75		.49	.23	-.18	.47
	5 items	.75	.84	.43	.22	-.19	.52
Hope	Original	.84		.60	.45	-.43	.73
	5 items	.76	.96	.59	.47	-.43	.72
Humor	Original	.86		.63	.22	-.20	.40
	5 items	.85	.95	.64	.19	-.16	.33
Kindness	Original	.77		.55	.17	-.10	.40
	5 items	.71	.88	.41	.13	-.03	.33
Leadership	Original	.77		.37	.24	-.20	.42
	5 items	.69	.93	.35	.23	-.20	.36
Learning	Original	.84		.51	.15	-.19	.27
	5 items	.77	.92	.47	.08	-.14	.22
Love	Original	.80		.64	.39	-.38	.61
	5 items	.77	.92	.51	.41	-.38	.60
Modesty	Original	.83		.46	.07	-.01	.09
	5 items	.77	.94	.48	.03	-.00	.07
Openness	Original	.78		.30	.12	-.14	.33
	5 items	.72	.91	.20	.12	-.11	.28
Perseverance	Original	.88		.55	.32	-.33	.52
	5 items	.87	.93	.48	.24	-.32	.46
Perspective	Original	.82		.57	.30	-.31	.54
	5 items	.78	.91	.47	.20	-.20	.42
Prudence	Original	.78		.48	.11	-.09	.28
	5 items	.78	.92	.52	.12	-.08	.24
Self-Regulation	Original	.80		.55	.30	-.27	.40
	5 items	.77	.93	.43	.25	-.23	.31
Social Intelligence	Original	.83		.59	.32	-.32	.50
	5 items	.80	.94	.59	.27	-.27	.45
Spirituality	Original	.91		.74	.29	-.24	.48
	5 items	.91	.96	.77	.25	-.20	.38
Teamwork	Original	.75		.49	.24	-.11	.40

Scale	Version	Reliability	r with	Validity			
			Original	Activities	SWLS	CESD	Flour
	5 items	.68	.91	.45	.19	-.06	.35
Zest	Original	.86		.70	.53	-.51	.71
	5 items	.83	.95	.69	.57	-.52	.70
Mean	Original	.83		.55	.25	.22-	.43
	5 items	.79	.93	.50	.23	.20-	.39

was administrated independently (Sample 4), internal consistency coefficients of the 24 scales ranged from .64 (leadership) to .90 (spirituality), with a mean of .78 (See Table 3).

The short version had a mean correlation across scales of .93 with the original VIA-IS in the derivation sample used to develop the short form (Sample 1). Creativity, forgiveness, beauty, courage and curiosity are the five strengths most highly correlated on the VIA-120 with the respective strengths on the VIA-IS (See Table 2).

Associations of Strengths with behavioral acts, Depression, SWLS, Flourishing, and PANAS

The mean correlation of the VIA-120 scales with the behavioral criteria was .50, while the mean correlation of the original VIA-IS with the behavioral acts was .55 in the same sample (Sample 2). The five strengths most highly related to behavioral acts score were the same for the long and the short strength measures: spirituality, beauty, zest, forgiveness and humor.

The results of validity testing averaged across all VIA-120 scales were .20 for the depression measure. The average correlation of the original VIA-IS with the CES-D was .22 in this sample. The five strengths most highly related to depression score were the same for the long and the short strength measures (zest, hope, gratitude, curiosity and love).

The results of validity testing averaged across all VIA-120 scales were .23 for the SWLS. The average correlation of the original VIA-IS with the SWLS was .25 in this sample. Again, the five strengths most highly related to satisfaction with life score were consistent across measures (zest, hope, gratitude, curiosity and love).

The results of validity testing averaged across all VIA-120 scales were .39 for the flourishing measure (Sample 3). The average correlation of the original VIA-IS with Flourishing was .43 in this sample. The five strengths most highly related to Flourishing score were the same for the long and the short strength measures (zest, hope, gratitude, curiosity and love).

Zest, hope, gratitude, curiosity and love, measured either by VIA-120 or by VIA-IS, were found in this study (based on Sample 2 and Sample 3) as the strengths most highly related to flourishing, depression and satisfaction with life. This is consistent with findings reported by Park et al. (2004), who found the same five strengths were the best predictors of life satisfaction in their research.

Additional validity data, derived from the independent administration of the short version (Sample 5), have shown as expected, that the VIA-120 scores were positively correlated with positive affect and negatively correlated with negative affect and fewer strengths correlated with negative affect compared with positive affect. These findings are similar to those of Littman-Ovadia and Lavy (2012). Thus, the hypothesis presented by Peterson and Seligman (2004) that strengths positively relate to positive outcomes more than they negatively relate to negative outcomes were supported by the short version as well as by the VIA-IS.

The Factor Structure of the VIA-120

A factor analysis of Sample 4, in which participants completed only the VIA-120, was compared

Table 3
Reliability and Validity Statistics of the Independently Administered Short Form

Scale	Version	Reliability	Validity	
			PA	NA
Beauty	Original		.31	-.02
	5 items	.83	.18	.04
Courage	Original		.36	-.06
	5 items	.80	.20	-.11
Creativity	Original		.41	-.05
	5 items	.88	.24	.01
Curiosity	Original		.52	-.30
	5 items	.78	.42	-.06
Fairness	Original		.30	-.08
	5 items	.74	.20	-.07
Forgiveness	Original		.17	-.10
	5 items	.78	.17	-.13
Gratitude	Original		.40	-.22
	5 items	.87	.36	-.17
Honesty	Original		.35	-.12
	5 items	.72	.21	-.12
Hope	Original		.49	-.34
	5 items	.77	.48	-.29
Humor	Original		.38	-.15
	5 items	.84	.16	-.02
Kindness	Original		.32	-.15
	5 items	.72	.20	.03
Leadership	Original		.33	-.13
	5 items	.64	.29	-.16
Learning	Original		.52	-.14
	5 items	.71	.22	-.05
Love	Original		.34	-.26
	5 items	.79	.28	-.18
Modesty	Original		.18	-.05
	5 items	.79	-.02	-.11
Judgment	Original		.44	-.11
	5 items	.74	.12	-.05
Perseverance	Original		.41	-.09
	5 items	.87	.25	-.18
Perspective	Original		.47	-.19
	5 items	.74	.21	-.02
Prudence	Original		.26	-.07
	5 items	.80	.09	-.09
Self-Regulation	Original		.42	-.25
	5 items	.77	.26	-.16
Social Intelligence	Original		.35	-.15
	5 items	.75	.29	-.04
Spirituality	Original		.13	-.08
	5 items	.90	.16	-.17

Scale	Version	Reliability	Validity	
			PA	NA
Teamwork	Original		.35	-.22
	5 items	.70	.25	-.11
Zest	Original		.57	-.27
	5 items	.80	.58	-.23
Mean	Original		.37	-.14
	5 items	.78	.24	-.10

Table 4
Factor Analysis Structure Matrix Results.

	McGrath (2014) Factors					Current Sample Factors				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Beauty	0.38	0.29	0.50	0.09	0.40	0.43	0.37	0.13	0.37	0.63
Bravery	0.24	0.59	0.24	0.35	0.30	0.28	0.73	0.44	0.46	0.39
Creativity	0.23	0.60	0.29	0.23	0.50	0.14	0.64	0.27	0.27	0.58
Curiosity	0.33	0.73	0.59	0.31	0.38	0.32	0.63	0.32	0.56	0.72
Fairness	0.81	0.38	0.38	0.40	0.35	0.82	0.47	0.44	0.36	0.39
Forgiveness	0.54	0.23	0.44	0.27	0.21	0.62	0.33	0.29	0.41	0.32
Gratitude	0.52	0.51	0.85	0.37	0.28	0.66	0.52	0.32	0.74	0.43
Honesty	0.57	0.41	0.32	0.60	0.36	0.58	0.57	0.65	0.39	0.25
Hope	0.42	0.66	0.71	0.52	0.22	0.41	0.66	0.51	0.77	0.31
Humility	0.53	-0.02	0.21	0.41	0.27	0.58	0.06	0.42	0.15	0.06
Humor	0.39	0.61	0.34	0.12	0.17	0.40	0.65	0.13	0.5	0.21
Judgment	0.39	0.29	0.17	0.53	0.76	0.38	0.52	0.68	0.15	0.58
Kindness	0.71	0.51	0.50	0.21	0.22	0.75	0.57	0.28	0.54	0.27
Leadership	0.72	0.55	0.36	0.45	0.33	0.73	0.65	0.44	0.48	0.32
Learning	0.19	0.26	0.27	0.14	0.52	0.19	0.32	0.26	0.22	0.78
Love	0.44	0.49	0.54	0.28	0.15	0.54	0.56	0.2	0.63	0.24
Perseverance	0.37	0.44	0.30	0.74	0.22	0.33	0.52	0.72	0.49	0.17
Perspective	0.37	0.47	0.27	0.43	0.64	0.43	0.74	0.6	0.43	0.50
Prudence	0.49	0.07	0.24	0.67	0.51	0.53	0.21	0.72	0.19	0.26
Self-Regulation	0.30	0.24	0.34	0.58	0.22	0.34	0.41	0.67	0.42	0.21
Social Intelligence	0.52	0.65	0.43	0.28	0.28	0.43	0.78	0.37	0.49	0.32
Spirituality	0.30	0.27	0.56	0.28	0.17	0.44	0.35	0.3	0.59	0.26
Teamwork	0.72	0.39	0.41	0.44	0.17	0.74	0.49	0.39	0.51	0.10
Zest	0.36	0.79	0.69	0.41	0.15	0.39	0.71	0.42	0.8	0.41

to results from a sample of 458,998 U.S. residents who completed the VIA-IS for whom factor analysis results were reported in a previous study (McGrath, 2014). As in the previous study, parallel analysis (Glorfeld, 1995) suggested retaining five factors. Table 4 compares the structure matrix from the principal axis factor analysis with promax rotation (power=4) for the current sample to those reported in Table 3 of McGrath (2014). The factor structures are roughly equivalent, though the third and fourth factors changed places in the new sample. Two-way mixed effect single-measure intraclass correlation coefficients were all above .80 except for the last factor, which was still an acceptable .62.

Correlations with Age and Gender

The short version showed similar correlations with age as the original VIA-IS (Sample1), when administered independently (Sample 4). All correlations with age ranged between 0 and .16 (beauty) for the original version, and .20 (learning) for the short version. Forgiveness, gratitude, spirituality were among the five highest correlated with age in both versions.

The short version showed similar patterns of gender differences as the original VIA-IS (Sample 1), when administered independently (Sample 4). In both cases women generated significantly higher scores on appreciation of beauty, gratitude, kindness, love and love of learning. Men were significantly higher on creativity, self-regulation and bravery in both versions (across Samples 1 and 4). The range of correlations with gender was 0 to .19 for the VIA-IS (Sample 1), and 0 to .13 for the short version (Sample 4).

CONCLUSIONS

The initial psychometric data presented here are promising, but obviously more validity work is needed. It will be important to determine the associations of the new short version scales with non-self-report measurements of the same concepts, for example ratings from peers, and also to use the scales to predict non-self-report behaviors. It will also be desirable to establish the stability of the scales over time. Additionally, results from Internet samples may not be generalizable (Parks et al., 2012). This could have also somehow affected the results in the present study as well.

These findings suggest that the brief version is substantially equivalent to the original long version in internal consistency reliability and validity. The fact that the factor analysis was consistent with expectation and that correlations with the original scores were so high suggest coverage was sufficient too. Therefore, in consideration of the fact that most studies involve multiple measures, researchers may use it as a more efficient approach to measurement of the 24 strengths. The VIA-120 is now offered in the VIA website as the standard VIA Survey, replacing the long form.

The development of a shorter form of the VIA-IS is of significance both for practice and research. The psychometric properties of the short form were analyzed using both the same samples which were used for its development and other samples of people who complete only the short version. This is in line with the established recommendations for the development of short forms (Smith et al., 2000). Thus, the present data avoid an overestimation of the convergence between the short and long form.

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