# Meeting Summary: Via Taxonomy of Strengths and Virtues

**Glasbern Resort, Fogelsville, PA**

# October 16-17, 2000

## Day One

The meeting was chaired by George Vaillant. George’s work on the taxonomy began prior to the Mayerson Foundation support and the creation of the VIA project. George asserted that what makes this effort exciting is that for scientific progress to occur, you need people who are in it for the science itself as well as for the application. The meeting started with a strong charge from Neal Mayerson, Marty Seligman, and Dale Blyth to integrate positive psychology and youth development.

**Neal Mayerson.** Neal explained the interests of the Mayerson Foundation and recounted the history of VIA. Began with his interest in improving society’s ability to build strengths in youth, followed by a cold-call to Marty, a rather rambling conversation, and then an emerging focus on building a bridge between the emerging positive psychology field and its application in youth development. His vision was to find the best research in psychology, develop new youth programs based on this research, and disseminate them broadly. He brought together scientists and youth practice reviewers in Philadelphia for a mini-conference, and found that while no one was interested in his agenda (his words), they had formed a clear idea: instead of introducing new evidence-based programs, link two compatible fields – positive psychology and youth development. Neal took this new direction back to his board and found support.

VIA has two major strands of action. First is an authoritative taxonomy of strengths or virtues, with assessments for youth. The second involves the adoption of this work within the field of youth development. Stand one is about definition, strand two is adoption and application. He sees at least one new professional scientific journal for each “taxon” or strength, a proliferation of evidence-based programs, and a system for spreading such programs.

**Marty Seligman.** Marty discussed the present and recent past of positive psychology, which he sees as based on four pillars: positive subjective experience; positive traits; positive institutions; a taxonomy. He noted that it was not until the Philadelphia meeting Neal described “that I realized the key would be the bridge with youth development.” Positive Psychology Network has raised $20 million (could be $33 by next week, he said). He and Neal hope to raise an additional 8 figures for each of the strengths—a significant sum has already been raised to study civic engagement. George, the original head of the taxonomy work, will stay on “rabbi”, while Chris P. is taking the project on full time for three years. Marty defined the purpose of the taxonomy this way. “Our clients are the youth of the world. This taxonomy exists for this purpose.”

**Dale Blyth.** Dale began with a brief selective history of youth development, stressing that as a field it emerged from programs, not science, and that while not new, it was never sufficiently grounded. Next, he discussed the science/youth development interface, noting that program folks are committed to developing the strengths, not necessarily measuring them. We are, however, moving from saying “we see it, so we don’t need to measure it” to saying “if we can’t measure it, we can’t change it,” and noted that funding accountability trends have re-ignited the field’s interest in assessment. Next, he discussed Search’s assets as an example of how a list has made a difference in the field, demonstrating the power of statistical relationships between concrete things that youth need and outcomes to convince the police chiefs and skeptics that doing these things is not just nice, but critical for the outcomes they care about. He also mentioned the Hawkins and Catalano CTC model, pointing out it is more of a *diagnose* and *prescribe* approach, while the Search model tends to *describe* and *mobilize*. He ended by stressing that the field of youth development (which he described as on a wave which may or may not have crested) has not used measurement effectively and is in need of a scientifically reliable base. He also sounded a caution: if the Search Institute and people like Karen P. are correct, the key is accumulation. A taxonomy may isolate and obscure the possibility that the importance may not be any specific dimension of an asset, but the overall pile-up effect.

**Chris Peterson.** After noting his excitement about the meeting, Chris gave an overview of the draft of the taxonomy. He noted that he liked the term “strands,” because they can be woven together. The immediate focus will be on youth, but strengths are important throughout the life span. He noted that while it looks as if all strengths lead to all desirable outcomes, some programs may work better for some strengths than others. If this is not practical and useful to those who work with youth, then he feels it needs to be questioned. The talk led to a wide-ranging discussion. Participants weighed the relative value of selecting a list of strengths/virtues that would be either 1) ubiquitous – in all cultures of the world; 2) USA in 2000/2001 – in all cultures within present-day America; 3) deck of cards –in at least one culture, with the assumption that different cultures will pick various cards as appropriate for their context or 4) scientific – selecting virtues that fit some scientific criteria, e.g. biology or evolution. The method used to date has been a combination of historical review and reflection.

**Peter Stevens.** Discussed the use (and misuse) of taxonomies in general, coming from the perspective of botany. He helped the group think about the inherent challenge of creating divisions within continuity. Big challenge—users of classifications may use them differently than scientists intended, may have their own terms, goals. Classifications are non-overlapping. Are the groups in it discrete? Is the hierocracy logical? Bottom line is that many of the character states talked about (in botany) are simple assertions about the universe. Do we make categorical distinctions in our minds about qualitative differences? Not changing your ideas means they are stable over time. Stability becomes a virtue and a vice because many users might want changes.

**Katherine Dahlsgaard.** Presented literature review of historical taxonomies or lists of virtues. She found four virtues, which she dubbed the “prom queens,” were “ubiquitous” across cultures (Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, Confucius, Bushido): courage, justice, temperance, wisdom. She termed those that appeared on historical lists but no longer seem relevant, such as “cleanliness,” and “courtesy/politeness” as the “social outcasts.” Finally, she noted the “new kids,” virtues which did not appear on historical lists but seem worthy of inclusion, such as “humor.”

**James Pawelski.** James reflected on the taxonomy from a philosophical perspective, encouraging participants to think beyond positive social sciences and towards positive liberal arts. This was led as a conversation, in which the point was made that it felt like the taxonomy was a list of adult virtues which we are grafting onto children. It was also considered whether the taxonomy being proposed is relational or simply a listing of categories. It was pointed out that the DSM was not relational—in fact atheoretical—but the notion of being atheoretical was challenged by the notion that our choices are clearly context-laden, even if we won’t use the word theoretical.

**Gabrielle (Gaye) Carlson**. Gaye, who was on the committee which created DSMIV, discussed the lessons we could learn from DSM. She began with an enlightening history of the DSM, noting that it was developed to serve as a road map for research – never intended for it to become the underpinnings for the entire mental health system. She suggested that the biggest sin of DSM was “with childhood onset disorders, we have kept the developmental model, but with adult onset disorders we have adopted the illness model wholesale.” She also cautioned that the DSM made a symptom list that eliminates other possibilities from study, and created a paint by numbers caricature which we then accept as the real painting. She made a number of recommendations for this project, including: utilize prospective studies and retrospective studies rather than imposing adult virtues downward; develop operationalized criteria but with description; realize the danger of virtues being eliminated because you can’t operationalize them, define them, or distinguish them.

**Robert Kendell.** Gave further history of the DSM IV, and the needs which led to it. He then noted several implications. Disorders and virtues are very different. The DSM was created based on specific needs of language and reliability. Don’t be too impressed with it. Is it wise at this stage to have any taxonomy of strengths? All taxonomies have assumptions about relationships and continuities. Instead, you may want to leave it as a list of prime targets for future research.

**Peter Nathan and Robert Kendell**. After dinner, Peter and Robert led a roundtable discussion on *What is positive mental health, and how do you assess it? Reliability, validity, utility.* Again a wide ranging discussion. Phil Stone discussed the ways Gallup created and validated their measures. Robert asserted that “positive mental health is a meaningless concept and should be abandoned,” since there is no such thing as “negative health.” He agreed with the ideas we were advancing, but felt that health was the wrong terminology. Heather asked: “If we are talking about actions and behaviors, we are at a level young people can engage in. Youth development implies young people as agents. They are people now, whose wisdom we need to access now. If there is an opportunity to create scenarios to ask young people about these traits, we may be at a place which connects the adult concepts with the youth concepts.”

In terms of validation, Phil posed the question: “What kind of outcomes are we going to compare? What outcomes are relevant to youth development programs? Are the outcomes content specific?” George suggested “it is not the task of the 14 year old to be generative, it is their task to prepare themselves to be generative at 40.” Heather and Thad countered that youth participation and engagement is critical and undervalued.

Next the question of utility for the youth development field was raised. How can this be used? Dale proposed three ways to think about utility: 1) Is the taxonomy useful for engaging youth in their own development? When you have it, are youth are more likely to be contributing to their own well-being? 2) Relational utility. Are youth who have these strengths more likely to have positive relationships with key people? 3) To what extent are youth who have these things more likely to contribute to the community in a meaningful way? Peter raised the question “Are we talking about two assessment systems, one for youth, one for adults?” Chris responded “We realize that it is an adult system now, but we want to make it relevant to youth. We will likely start with the adult one, because I am most aware of the adult measures.” Marty also asked if it would be worth measuring things like drug abuse and teen pregnancy. Dale said yes, that we need to assess the relationships between things for the taxonomy to have value. It was also asked if there was utility in assessing youth workers vis a vis the virtues. Heather agreed that there was, and suggested doing a cross-matching between the youth worker competencies lists and the virtues lists.

## Day Two

**George Vaillant and Derek Issacowith.** George presented data from his own work with the living men from the Grant study. Looked at factors that lead to longer lives, using self-report questionnaire methodologies. Derek Isaacowitz reported on data from the Valliant study which found the most significant virtues which relate to long lives were: love of learning; capacity to love and be loved; humane leadership. Marty then suggested that it does not seem daunting to find a list of virtues for youth. The challenge is the 0-5 age group. What strengths do they have that lead to the development of strengths later?

**Phil Stone.** Phil reported on his work with the Gallup StrengthsFinder tool (34 items to measure workplace strengths), and noted that they were creating a version focused on youth. They are also working on measuring the development of community around school and what communities must do to support strengths. Phil noted they want to develop and partner with people interested in this sort of thing.

**Thaddeus Ferber.** Thad’s comments summarized the youth development group’s thinking on the bridge building process. Could meet if we are intentional. But we are using different construction materials, and starting from different places. The starting place for youth development is looking for ways to track positive progress among youth, hold ourselves accountable for the things we can achieve, and improve practice through evidence.

Remarkable similarities between the journeys of positive psychology and youth development—we say “problem-free is not fully-prepared,” you say “psychology is half-baked.” Same point – we must focus on what’s above the zero point. We started over a decade ago thinking about how to define the positive continuum – here is some language we use [Carnegie Council Turning Points, then IYF’s 5C’s]. The construction materials we used are different. We started by talking to reflective youth, parents, and youth workers. You started with a review of “Aristotle and friends.” Both are important, but they are different. We started with a process which gave us face validity, and then quickly went back to see if there was research to support it – indeed, our early literature reviews could be characterized as “footnoting common sense.”

The positive things discussed in the youth field are not just strengths or virtues, but a hodge-podge which runs across the different areas of taxonomy— enabling conditions/status conditions, virtues/attitudes & beliefs, fulfillments/outcomes. There is work, then, to do in all of these categories. Conversations yesterday discussed three groups: adults and youth, yes, but also last night people raised questions about adults with frequent, intentional interactions with youth – parents, teachers, and youth workers. This chart is a way to open the floor up for conversation, to locate comments within a larger framework. What would have to happen in each of these cells to make the taxonomy useful to the youth development field? Strand II representatives quickly went through the strengths/virtues list, and circled the ones that felt relevant to youth. We quickly circled all but three, but we wrote in different words for the strengths in the margins. So it is possible that the list itself is fine for youth, but specific language needs to be adapted.

The discussion that followed focused on the issue of bridging fields. Marty noted, “I’m beginning to see the bridge and what tasks might be…first categories, taxonomy, systematics. Need to find a way to meld the 21 (strengths) with the 34 (Gallup Strengthfinder Categories) with the 5 (youth development outcomes). I don’t think that’s insurmountable. First you want to be inclusive, then part of the intellectual job is to say where are we most likely to be exclusive. Then, (I didn’t think so a year ago), *together* we have to create the measures. Generating items, focus groups with kids, tough psychometrics, validating them.” Dale noted it’s still not clear whether the purpose is primarily scientific or more utilization-oriented. Plus and minus game both routes would be useful for some things, not for others. Also, he cautioned the group about collapsing vs. inclusiveness. Depends on what we’re trying to do, but with something like courage, talking about it in more concrete ways is more helpful.Neal asked what is it we need, and Dale responded—“what youth development needs is virtues or strengths that we can work toward building, knowing that when they’re built, they’ll have implications for life.” Mark Rosenberg brought up the issue of development and the need to describe strengths in stage-specific terms. Also, we need to think just as hard about what it means to grow up under difficult conditions. Third, when we talk about well-being, we frequently mean well-becoming (leads to happiness at 70) as opposed to the importance of subjective well-being for children.

**Barbara Fredrickson**. Barbara presented research on positive emotions. While negative emotions lead to specific actions, positive emotional states emotions create urges to act, but they are not as prescriptive—negative emotions narrow; positive emotions broaden. She made some recommendations for places the taxonomy could rephrase and decouple: capacity for love, capacity for hope, capacity for awe, capacity for gratitude. She recommended augmenting the strengths to include capacity for contentment (serenity). She also urged the group to consider a higher order strength: the capacity to self-generate positive emotions.

**Lucy Davidson.** We need to ask ourselves, why have positive emotions on the list? If so, how are they explicated? Does enough experience of a positive emotion over time make it stable? Love of life, zest. If you have repeated short-term experiences of it, do you have durable change? If so, give people more of these experiences. Or, zest show up as the result of some other conditions? How does our recognition of the fact they’re good and useful link to their presence on the list?

**Ed Diener.**  Ed reported on his work on positive affect. He argued that subjective well-being is both a strength and an outcome. His review of the research suggests that long-term high levels of positive affect likely leads to: Sociability, creativity, health, success, altruism, self regulatory ability, work productivity , and longevity. Whether or not it leads to improved or impaired human judgment/problem solving depends on the problem and the situation. His research which uses multiple measures (self reports, act frequency, biological measures, situational challenges) to assess subjective well-being in adults.

**Heather Johnson Nicholson.** Heather gave a “mini-report” from the youth development group. Over the course of a coffee break and lunch, the group had huddled to map out how the Cs might combine with the 21 strengths or virtues. They found that the virtues could bundle quite neatly into the C categories:

Competence-------------- competence/cognitive virtues

Confidence---------------emotional virtues

Connection---------------relational virtues

Character-----------------personal virtues

Contribution-------------civic virtues

During the discussion that followed, Marty suggested a modification, using the 5 C’s to group the outcomes of strengths rather than the strengths themselves. He also played with the notion of pulling “character” out from the list of five, as the term that encompasses as 21 strengths and becomes the under girding .

**Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi.** Closing discussion. He put three main points on the table.

* First, it may be useful to look at the virtues through a lens of “evolutionary hermeneutics.” The survival of notions like hope and optimism is because they are selected as ideas which are worth passing down to the next generation.
* Second, we should not shy away from considering the deep structure (relationships between virtues). His suggestion was to do this more deductively than inductively, by looking for a general space into which we can organize the elements. He further advocated for leaving the specific content undefined for a while, to focus instead on defining the larger categories.
* Third, he suggested if we want strengths to be nurtured in young people, we must find ways for them to enjoy doing things which build them. Positive affect or “flow” experience can become the delivery system for the strengths or virtues. As we try to understand the strengths, we should also explore how to make them more enjoyable in their development. Marty speculated—while in the past, the delivery system was regulation of negative affect (punishment), in the future, for above zero, the delivery system is the introduction of positive affect.

Heather pointed out that the youth development context is the perfect analogue of this. We can do what kids enjoy, what turns them on. Thad added that youth programs which are voluntary are forced to find ways to reach kids through positive affect. Reg discussed his research on optimal learning environments. Nicole added that we know that the structure of youth organizations is critical –there is something between the learning environments and the strengths. What types of activities in the setting lead to which strengths? We need to be careful in what we are talking about in terms of activity. The most powerful correlation between activity and outcome may be the amount of time the child got to spend with an adult.

#### CLOSING DINNER REMARKS

**Marty Seligman.** Yesterday I thought we had moved from the first tee back to the showers. Now, by the end of the meeting, we have moved forward. Heather brought things together for me. Because of the youth development folks it has gone forward. I think the notion of the C’s is a wonderful front end for telling the public and congress what we are after. The C’s are the fulfillments (outcomes). It does not feel forced at all to say that that is what we are after. The virtues can be put together as the C character, which is modified by enabling and disabling conditions.

For the next couple of months, I see creating an email listserv group charged with finalizing the integration of the Cs, the 21 virtues, and the Gallup work, leading to a broader document. Then I see two steps. A measurement step, and an acceptance step. Measurement: talk to Gallup and David’s people to construct through focus groups etc. measures around the 21 strengths. Simultaneously, this has to be accepted across the range of America’s youth, through a lot of consultation. Reg agreed to start thinking about putting the plan in a form we can take to communities and ask what we have missed and what we should lose. This will be the spring.

Finally, I see a theory. Learning theorists made a mistake. The theory I see emerging is that negative emotion is a signal that tells you that you are in a zero-sum game. It activates a set of narrowing responses. Positive emotions are a signal that you are in a non-zero sum game – a building system. Also, our botanist convinced me that we have a categorization, not a taxonomy.