

The lived experiences of adolescent's identification of character strengths and the impact upon identity. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

Introduction

In the development of Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification, Peterson and Seligman (2004), sought to create a framework of understanding that would provide a common language in relation to character strengths and consensual classifications of positive human attributes. Since the conceptualisation and emergence of character strengths theory, research has shown that character strengths use in adolescence has numerous benefits. Research has shown: character strengths such as zest, perseverance and love of learning are positively related to school performance (Weber, Wagner & Ruch, 2016); engagement in character strengths interventions impacts and increases the well-being of individuals as compared to a control group (Oppenheimer, Fialkov, Ecker & Portnoy, 2014); following character strengths interventions school classes have shown an increase in group cohesion and classroom engagement (Quinlan, Swain, Cameron & Vella-Brodrick, 2014); and the more prominent 'other-related' strengths predict lower depressive symptoms in adolescents (Gillham et al., 2011).

Character strengths can be considered central to the personality make up and sense of self of the individual in that they are related to behaviours, feelings, attitudes and values and are stable across various domains of an individual. This is supported by Ferragut, Blanca and Ortiz-Tallo (2014), who found that over a three-year period the character strengths of adolescent individuals between 12 to 14 years of age showed little change. Using character strengths to consider the personality of the individual is unique because it focuses upon the positive elements of the individual that have the capacity to benefit the individual and others (Niemic, 2013). In relation to this, Seider, Novick and Gomez (2013) found that by focusing on 'moral character', individuals significantly increased in integrity and personal responsibility.

Since its conceptualisation, character strengths theory has become a legitimate area of research with a host of studies having been undertaken in relation to the impact and effect they have upon wellbeing and emotional functioning. Although

the relationship between character strengths, personality and identity has been conceptualised theoretically (e.g. Niemic, 2014) there have been few studies that explore how individuals make sense of the identification of character strengths and in what ways this experience is related to how the individual understands themselves. Adolescence is a developmental period that is marked by considerable cognitive, physical, and personal change (Sanders, 2013). It is a time that is defined as being central to the individual developing an understanding and self-awareness of their identity and sense of self. Research has shown that an 'insecure' identity is a significant risk factor in the development of mental health issues (Watanabe, Akamine & Ito, 2016). Conversely, an individual with a 'secure' identity and sense of self is more likely to have higher levels of resilience and less likely to develop depression (Veselska et al, 2009). Because of this, it is important to develop an understanding as to how individuals can be supported to navigate this stage to enable them to develop a secure identity.

Although there is a vast amount of quantitative research that supports the efficacy of character strengths use, research is limited in how individuals make sense of the experiences of identifying and using them. Given that how an individual experiences the identification of character strengths as well as how they make sense of their identity are intrinsically phenomenological, to explore this it is necessary to adopt a qualitative approach that considers the meaning and experiences of the participants.

This study used a qualitative approach to gain an understanding as to how a group of adolescents experienced character strengths identification that was facilitated through a Positive Psychology intervention. As a result of this, the study held in mind the following research question:

What is the lived experience of adolescents who have undergone an intervention where their character strengths are identified?

Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed

to analyse the interview transcripts. IPA was chosen as a methodology due to its focus on developing an understanding of the 'lived experiences' of a particular phenomenon and how individuals make sense of these experiences (Smith, et al., 2009).

Participants

Participants were five females who attended a secondary school in Lincoln, had participated in a Mindfulness Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) programme and were between 16-18 years of age. Although the sample was diverse in the ethnic origin of the individuals, all were born and brought up in the United Kingdom.

Five participants who met the following inclusion criteria were selected:

- Between 16-18 years old
- Had attended the first four weeks of the MBSP programme
- To keep the sample homogenous, it was decided to only include female participants as according to Smith et al. (2009), homogeneity is a key element of IPA studies.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from the Sixth Form of a secondary school in Lincoln following their participation in an 8-week MBSP programme. Of the 18 participants that attended the programme 8 attended the first four weeks of the programme and due to the eligibility criteria 5 were eligible to participate. Following the programme, participants were contacted regarding participation in the study.

Mindfulness Based Strengths Practice (MBSP)

MBSP is an 8-week programme that uses the Values in Action (VIA) framework of 24-character strengths and encourages individuals to develop an understanding of character strengths through a variety of mindfulness activities and exercises (Niemic, 2014). As a part of the programme participants were asked to complete the VIA Youth-198 Survey (Park & Peterson, 2006). The programme utilises standardised character strengths activities that are outlined in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) 'Handbook of Character Strengths and Virtues'.

Interview Schedule

A semi-structured interview approach was adopted as a way of collecting data. The interview schedule was utilised as a loose guide with each question being developed around the research question and designed to be 'open' to enable the participants to explore and consider their experiences. The interviews were scheduled two-weeks after the conclusion of the MBSP programme and took place within the school.

The process of analysis

This study used IPA to develop an in depth understanding of the participants' experiences of the identification of character strengths. The analysis was guided by Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) analytic process and included the following five steps:

Step 1: Transcription and familiarisation

The first part of the analytic process was to become familiar with the interview recordings and transcripts. This was done by repeatedly listening to and re-reading the material.

Step 2: Immersion in the data

This phase of analysis involved developing an in-depth relationship with the data through repeatedly listening to and reading the interview recordings and transcripts.

Step 3: Initial noting and commentary

The third part of the process involved a free textual analysis that meant a line by line analysis of each transcript. This involved making notes in the left-hand margin of the transcript in relation to words, phrases, comments and thoughts, paraphrasing and summarising of comments.

Following this process, the right-hand margin was used to note emergent themes that arose from the text and the initial analysis. The aim of this was to develop the initial notes and analysis into more psychological constructs and understanding that 'captured' and 'explained' the data.

Step 4: Putting themes together

At this point the emergent themes were listed in chronological order and then arranged into related groups. The themes were grouped together using abstraction (similarity of themes), polarisation (considering one theme as being more influential than another) and numeration (the number of times a theme occurred). Following this, each theme was named based upon the type and nature of the group. These steps were repeated for each transcript.

Step 5: Cross case analysis

When each transcript had been analysed all the themes were cross analysed. This was achieved by looking for patterns and connections across the themes and grouping them together into 'clusters'. Each cluster was then cross analysed with superordinate themes being developed based on similarities of the themes, the themes that seemed most influential and the reoccurrence of themes. Following this, each superordinate theme was given an appropriate name.

Results

The analysis resulted in the emergence of four master themes, with 11 subordinate themes. Each will be explained using relevant quotes from the data.

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