

## Editorial

# Strengths of the Heart Helps Explain Optimal Mental Health among Youth

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## Editorial

My research, clinical practice and writings have focused for almost thirty years - both at Florida State University, and before that, at Duke University, on understanding the social and emotional world of gifted children and youth. In my work, both in the research lab and in the consulting office, I stumbled upon an important lesson: *Emotional Intelligence* (EI), a popular but elusive psychological concept- a concept that my students and I had spent considerable time investigating, was not the panacea we hoped for in protecting vulnerable high ability youth from the psychological and emotional disorders that all children and youth are susceptible to [1-4].

Our research found that *Emotional Intelligence* - measured in a variety of ways, with the best scales that were available, correlated only modestly with predictors, mediators, and moderators of important life outcomes. For example, *Emotional Intelligence* correlated only 0.248 with measures of Life Satisfaction, 0.299 with measures of School Engagement, and an insignificant 0.172 with measures of Perceived Parental Support. We obtained disappointingly similar, at best weak, and statistically-modest, relationships when correlating measures of *Emotional Intelligence* with measures of Self-Efficacy, Resilience, and Self-Esteem. These results were, of course, disappointing. But they led me to an epiphany-of-sorts. I began adjusting my thinking, and started relying more on lessons learned from our work as psychotherapists. We recognized that *Emotional Intelligence* was a useful concept in our clinical practice - for some, but not for all of our clients. This led to our broadening our search and, ultimately focusing on a triad of psychological concepts: social skills, emotional intelligence, and character strengths and virtues, which, when considered together, we found better predicted to important life outcomes, including success, psychological health, happiness, and subjective well-being. I came to call this triad of psychological concepts, “*strengths of the heart*”. We came to appreciate that it takes more than just *Emotional Intelligence* - the ability to ‘read’ your own and others’ emotions, for adolescents to be successful in life [5,6]. Our review of the empirical research literature also informed us that it isn’t that easy or simple to increase a person’s *Emotional Intelligence* [7,8]. This realization was initially disappointing, but nonetheless ultimately profoundly helpful in guiding our thinking about *strengths of the heart* as a more robust construct that could enhance the well-being and success of gifted

youth [6].

We came to recognize in our clinical work and in our research that gifted adolescents who are successful, who have close friends, and who perform at high levels in the classroom, lab, and real world, who see meaning in their lives, and who report high levels of subjective well-being, all have at least three things going for them [9]. These three things I call “*strengths of the heart*”. The triad of *strengths of the heart* consists of: well-developed social skills; sturdy and robust character strengths, such as empathy, compassion, optimism, a sense of humor, love-of-learning; and a clear ability to understand, read, and control their own, and others’ feelings- what we had been viewing as *Emotional Intelligence*.

All three of these important psychological constructs, the triad of well-developed social skills, sturdy and robust character strengths, and clear-cut evidence for emotional intelligence, make a huge difference in the lives of gifted adolescents [10]. This is a bit overstated, but we feel that we have found a very powerful prophylactic that increases the likelihood that gifted kids grow up to be successful and psychologically-healthy young adults.

My doctoral students and I began investigating, and then calling this triad of three constructs in conferences that I presented at, and in papers that we authored, by the almost mystical term, *strengths of the heart*. And as I shared this concept in talks that I gave, both in the USA and internationally, with mental health practitioners, educators, parents, and policy makers, the term caught on. People seemed to resonate to the idea that strengths of the heart made sense and were important to talk more about, investigate, and nurture.

Our research and pilot studies are still preliminary, but we are slowly accruing corroborating evidence that there may actually be a set of signature *strengths of the heart* that best predict to optimal life outcomes. For example, we have identified humility, empathy, kindness, compassion, gratitude, enthusiasm, and effective team work as consistently predictive of subjective well-being, school engagement, optimism, meaning in life, and concern for civic and community responsibility. At the same time, we are approaching the idea of identifying one unique set of signature *strengths of the heart* with a degree of caution and restraint; it is likely that we will find that there isn’t one algorithm or set of *strengths of the heart* that works best for all gifted youth. Or for any youth, for that matter. And, really, why should we think that one particular combination of character strengths, social skills and *Emotional Intelligence* would be most powerful for each-and-every youth. It is likely that personality, temperament, gender, family factors, and socio-cultural factors all contribute to which combination of *strengths of the heart* are most important at a given point in time in the life of a gifted youth.

One intriguing and provocative line of inquiry launched in our research lab is whether parents and teachers share the same view

about the relative importance of the different character strengths, and if these views among significant adults matches the adolescents' own views. For example, we have begun to explore whether parents might have the same or a different 'top 5' list of most important character strengths, when compared to their adolescent's teachers' 'top 5' list. And whether this makes a difference in which values and beliefs are communicated to the youth.

We hope that our research and clinical work can continue to contribute in a real and meaningful way to furthering the mental health care field's understanding of the social and emotional world of gifted adolescents. The questions that we are asking about *strengths of the heart*, although founded in developmental theory, are essentially applied psychoeducational and clinical questions. They are questions that have clear and concrete implications for translating our research into practice.

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