

Exploring Associations of Character Profiles and Out-of-School Time Activities among Children
and Adolescents

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Abstract

Conceptualizing character from a relational developmental systems metatheory, this study utilizes a person-oriented approach to examine profiles of character strengths in children and adolescents. Using Q sort methodology, 90 youth ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.0$, 51% female) sorted 12 character strengths based on how much each strength represented them. Using Q factor analyses, three character profiles emerged: *Future-Minded Leaders* viewed themselves as leaders who were purposeful and future-minded; these youth engaged in sports, volunteering, and academic clubs. *Joyful Givers* reported high joy, generosity, and forgiveness, and often engaged in sports and civic activities. *Creative Leaders* shared strengths of leadership and creativity, and commonly engaged in sports and leadership groups. Thrift, awe, and humility were rarely identified as top strengths. Results provide a descriptive snapshot of what character looks like in childhood and adolescence and illustrate a useful methodology for measuring character strengths across diverse ages. Results also provide insights into the ways out-of-school time activities are associated with character profiles.

Key words: leadership, organized activities, civic engagement, Q methodology, virtues, adolescence, positive psychology

Exploring Associations of Character Profiles and Out-of-School Time Activities among Children and Adolescents

Character has been recognized as a pillar of positive development, and it is imperative for research to progress towards understanding and enhancing character development in youth (Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Theoretical work has suggested that character is a dynamic, multidimensional construct (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006), yet across empirical studies, character strengths rarely factor into coherent structures across studies thus leaving individual strengths to often be studied in isolation. We set out to advance research on character development by using innovative Q methodology to identify profiles of character strengths. The central goal of this work was to illuminate the heterogeneity that exists in young people's character strengths. Drawing from the positive youth development (PYD) perspective, out-of-school time (OST) activities are key assets for youth development (Larson, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004) and are likely to co-occur with the development of profiles of character strengths. The combination of Q sort and qualitative interview data provides a unique opportunity to understand distinct profiles of character in youth and insights into how OST activities may be differentially related to character profiles.

Developmental Theoretical Perspective

Extant definitions of what character might look like for youth are quite broad, calling attention to the need for a clear definition and theory of character as well as corresponding methodologies (Geldhof et al., 2014). There is shared agreement across theoreticians, researchers, and practitioners that character is a composition of strengths representing positive individual differences (e.g., Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2008; Josephson, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Coaching character within a relational developmental systems (RDS)

perspective is a fruitful avenue for conceptualizing character and better understanding processes of character development (Lerner & Callina, 2014). The study of character from a RDS perspective involves investigating individual strengths (i.e., content) and understanding the way associations between strengths form an integrated pattern of strengths (i.e., structure). Identifying patterns of strengths is an important step in character research, as it has been posited that coherent structures of character allow individuals to positively contribute to the world in a reliable and consistent manner (Lerner & Callina, 2014). Coherent structures of character are likely to have mutually influential associations with contexts: As contexts such as OST activities likely cultivate strengths, individuals become better equipped to apply those strengths in ways that support their surrounding contexts (Narvaez, 2008).

PYD theory is rooted in RDS theoretical principles and emphasizes that mutually beneficial relations between the individual and the context lead to youth thriving (Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b). Within the PYD framework, the Five Cs model posits that character, as one of the Cs, is linked to optimal development and contribution (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2004). Thus, PYD theory sets the stage for examining the link between youth character strengths and OST activities, since these activities typically occur in resource-rich contexts and offer youth opportunities to contribute to their communities. Our study addresses recent calls for theory-driven research on character development (Lerner & Callina, 2014) by taking a person-oriented approach to identify profiles of character among youth and explore how these profiles are manifested in youths' engagement in OST activities.

Character Frameworks

Across disciplines, applied work on character has focused on enumerating the specific individual characteristics that constitute character. Across these lists, there is significant

variability in both the number and nomenclature of strengths indicative of character; yet, there is also some agreement (Josephson, 2014; Klee, 2008; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seider, 2012). For example, generosity, responsibility, and perseverance are identified in nearly all character frameworks, while other strengths such as gratitude and leadership are identified in only a few approaches (see Josephson, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Seider, 2012; John Templeton Foundation, 2016; Wang et al., 2005). It is implausible if not impossible to include an exhaustive list of character strengths within any single study. The current study set out to illustrate how an array of strengths indicative of multiple frameworks may form distinct profiles that would relate to youth's engagement in OST activities.

Attempts to model the structure of character have also revealed inconsistencies across studies, suggesting that theoretical models may not fully account for heterogeneity in character. Seider (2012) has suggested that character is composed of moral, performance, and civic domains, whereas other work considers character to form six domains: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). However, attempts to statistically model character strengths utilizing these different theoretical approaches have consistently found different sets of character dimensions (see McGrath, 2014), which do not align with the theoretical models of either Seider (2012) or Peterson and Seligman (2004). In adults, the resulting factor analyses have ranged between three and five dimensions, including civic-mindedness, restraint, intellect, moral, other-directed, and transcendence dimensions. Similar dimensions have emerged in samples of adolescents, but the strengths within these dimensions often differ from those found in adult samples (e.g., Gillham et al., 2011; Toner et al., 2012). Moreover, there has been considerable variability in the make-up and structure of

the resulting solutions across studies (McGrath, 2014). Thus, studies of youth and adults suggest that character is multidimensional, yet no theoretical approach coincides with the specific dimensions that underlie character strengths. Discrepancies between theoretical notions and empirical results do not necessarily invalidate the conception of character strengths; instead these discrepancies reveal the complexities of character as a construct.

Alternative methodological approaches to factor analysis may better account for complexities in character strengths and better assess the structure of character (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; McGrath, 2014). Person-oriented approaches have been suggested as a pivotal direction for character research (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011), as these analytic approaches can provide an understanding of how character functions as a whole within individuals. The inconsistencies in the structure of character across multiple studies suggest that character strengths could coalesce in unique ways for different people. Thus, methodological approaches that allow for between-person variability in relations between character strengths and capture character holistically within individuals may provide further insight into both the content and structure of character among children and adolescents.

Person-Oriented Approach to Studying Character

For character research, identifying patterns of strengths may facilitate an understanding of how strengths work synergistically to enhance other developmental processes such as well-being and learning. Person-oriented approaches can help us understand the multidimensional nature of youth character by identifying distinct profiles of character strengths as opposed to examining isolated variables or character dimensions alone (Bergman, Magnusson, & El Khour, 2003). Such an approach aligns with recent theoretical work on character development, which views character as a dynamic integration of strengths, not as simply a sum of many isolated

strengths (Fleeson, 2001; Lerner & Callina, 2014; Sokol, Hammond, & Berkowitz, 2010). Thus, a person-oriented approach to character is a logical next step for character research.

Q methodology is a person-oriented methodology that provides a unique approach to exploring within-person patterns. In contrast to factor analytic techniques, which identify homogenous groups of variables and have so far been the primary statistical technique for understanding relatedness among character strengths (McGrath, 2014), Q methodology identifies profiles of homogenous groups of individuals. Unlike factor analysis, which requires large samples to identify underlying dimensions, traditional Q methodology is effective for smaller samples (Brown, 1993; Ellingsen, Størksen, & Stephens, 2010). Like other person-oriented approaches, Q methodology is used to identify commonalities and differences in individuals (Shinebourne, 2009). The methodology has been used successfully within personality research to map out groups of individuals who resemble one another in terms of their whole personality (Block, 2008). Using Q methodology, researchers have demonstrated that unique constellations of personality traits have specific implications for a range of outcomes, including indicators of positive development as well as psychopathology (e.g., Robins, John, Caspi, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996).

In the case of character research, Q methodology is unique in documenting strengths that an individual feels to be most representative of him- or herself, which is accomplished by ranking least and most representative qualities. Q methodology offers a number of advantages for character research among children and adolescents. Like other person-centered approaches, Q methodology does not aggregate across youth, instead it can more adequately capture the holistic nature of character and the heterogeneity in character across youth. By using a forced-choice procedure, participants must prioritize certain strengths over others, thus minimizing social

desirability bias (Stephenson, 1980). The forced-choice procedure requires individuals to rate the relative importance of strengths for themselves, creating a systematic ranking of strengths relative to other strengths. Q analysis, an analytic technique specific to Q methodology, correlates persons rather than variables, revealing profiles of youth who share similarities in their individual rankings of character strengths (Brown, 1993).

Character and OST Activities

There are likely dynamic associations between character and contexts. OST activities are one context for distinct developmental experiences that provide youth with opportunities for developing and utilizing the 5 Cs of PYD, including character strengths (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). Character and activity involvement are considered to be part of a co-occurring developmental process (Hilliard et al., 2014; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009), such that activity involvement should foster character strengths and character can deepen engagement in activities (Lerner, Wang, Champine, Warren, & Erickson, 2014). Furthermore, a key hypothesis of the PYD perspective is that when young people's strengths are aligned with resources in schools and communities, the development of a 6th C, positive contributions to one's contexts, is likely to occur (Lewin-Bizan, Bowers, & Lerner, 2010). Research suggests empirical links between OST activities and character (e.g., Linver, Roth, Brooks-Gunn, 2009), however, previous studies have used broad conceptualizations of character, which limits the ability of this research to explore sets of strengths that may be related to OST activities. Given the variability in the opportunities and supports provided to youth within OST activities, different activities may be associated with different strengths.

Previous research has found that participating in sports provides young people with opportunities to utilize and further develop important 21st century skills like emotion regulation,

goal pursuits, and problem solving (Duda & Ntounumis, 2005; Larson et al., 2006). As such, sports may also offer a context for youth to exercise character strengths, including responsibility and leadership (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Macleod, 2004; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). Academic clubs and organizations typically entail the skills necessary for academic achievement (Eccles & Barber, 1999), which may relate to character profiles high in responsibility and future-mindedness. Participation in creative or performing arts may be related character profiles marked by strengths such as creativity and awe (Barnett & Weber, 2008).

Civic activities such as volunteering or student council provide opportunities for youth to utilize and hone a number of different skills (Larson et al., 2006). Involvement in civic activities has previously been associated with strengths of purpose, hope, and wisdom (Markstrom, Li, Blackshire, & Wilfong, 2005). Civic activities also provide youth with connections to adult networks and encourage positive relationship experiences, which may allow youth to use and further develop interpersonal character strengths. We expect that civic activities would relate to character profiles marked by strengths such as future-mindedness, generosity, humility, leadership, purpose, and responsibility. Overall, OST activities likely provide a rich context for youth to develop and use their character strengths. Given the heterogeneity in experiences across activities, there are likely differential relations between activity types and character strengths.

Current Study

Drawing on the RDS metatheory that articulates a dynamic, integrated perspective of character among youth (Lerner & Callina, 2014), our study examines the ways in which strengths coalesce into specific character profiles. Using a geographically, socioeconomically, and ethnically diverse sample of 4th – 12th graders, twelve strengths were assessed using Q sort methodology. The 12 strengths were selected based on other hypotheses about linking character

and civic engagement (see Metzger, Syvertsen, Oosterhoff, Babskie, & Wray-Lake, 2015). Six strengths were hypothesized to be directly related to civic engagement (i.e., future-minded, generous, humble, leader, purposeful, and responsibility) and six strengths were not hypothesized to directly relate to civic behaviors (i.e., amazed, creative, forgiving, grateful, joyful, and thrifty). These 12 character strengths are also broadly relevant to children and adolescents' lives and featured across multiple frameworks of character (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Our study had three aims. First, we examined top character rankings to describe the self-reported character of children and adolescents in our sample. Next, we conducted Q analysis to identify profiles of character strengths. Finally, we documented links between character profiles and OST activity participation.

Method

Data for this study came from 90 Q sort tasks and interviews with children and adolescents. Participants completed 6 Q sort tasks and a 20-30 minute semi-structured interview, with the overall goal of exploring the association between character and civic engagement. The Q sorting task was broken into three sections. In the first section, youth were asked to provide a definition for each of the 12 character strengths. Each character strength was framed as an adjective. If participants were unable to define a strength or offered an incorrect definition, the interviewer provided a scripted definition (see Appendix A for complete list of researcher provided definitions). Definitions of character strengths were visible to youth throughout the sorting procedures to prevent any confusion about the character terms. In the second section, youth completed five sorts ascribing the 12 character strengths to different types of civic engagement, such as “think of a person who volunteers to help people in their community.”

Based on these prompts, participants used a grid to rank the character strengths according to perceived importance in a process known as Q sorting. The grid depicts a continuum containing anchored endpoints “exactly like” and “least like.” Following the first set of Q sort tasks, participants were interviewed about school and community activities and helping behaviors. The final Q sort task, the focus of this study, had youth sort the 12 character strengths as they applied to themselves.

Participants

Children and adolescents in 4th through 12th grades between the ages of 9 to 19 ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.0$, $SD = 2.68$) were recruited from three regions in the United States: rural West Virginia, suburban southern California, and urban Minnesota (51% female). Thirty interviews were conducted at each site. One-on-one interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes were conducted during school hours in schools for elementary ($n = 24$), middle ($n = 30$), and high school students ($n = 36$).

Self-reported race for these youth was White (49.4%), Hispanic or Latino, (20.2%), Black or African American (19.1%), Other (10.1%), Asian (7.9%), American Indian (2.2%), and Alaskan Native (1.1%). Academic grades were self-reported: 49.4% of students indicated receiving “Mostly As,” 39.3% “Mostly Bs,” 9% “Mostly Cs”, and 2.2% of youth left the question blank. Nearly one-third of participants (32.6%) indicated their mother had graduated from college, 13.5% reported their mother had a high school diploma, 6.7% indicated their mother did not finish high school, 14.6% did not know their mothers’ education, and 33% of responses were missing due to researcher error.

Measures

We used the self Q sort to assess the character strengths of youth. Following the

qualitative interview of the larger study, participants were given the following prompt, “Now we are going to do one final card sort. I’d like you to sort the cards into the same piles like we did before. However, I’d like you to sort them based on what you think about *yourself*.” Participants were instructed to place two cards on the grid into the category “+2 = exactly like me” if the strengths were exactly like them, two cards in the “+1 = mostly like me” category, four cards into the “0 = sort of like me” category, two cards into the “-1 = less like me,” and two cards in the “-2 = least like me” category.

Semi-Structured Interview

The interviews were conducted by trained research staff, audio-recorded, and transcribed. One-on-one interviews were conducted in quiet spaces provided by the school. When possible, youth were paired with an interviewer of the same gender to facilitate rapport building. Semi-structured interview protocols were used. Questions pertaining to their involvement in OST activities included the following prompt: “We’re interested in hearing more about the kinds of in-school and out-of-school activities you’re involved in. Do you participate in any school or community activities?” Interviewers were encouraged to probe to obtain a full understanding of youth’s experiences in OST activities. Potential follow-up questions included, “Can you tell me a bit about each of them [activities?], “What is your favorite activity?” and “What do you enjoy most about being part of this activity?”

Participants’ responses to these follow-up questions were transcribed and analyzed using a coding scheme based OST and civic activities research (e.g. Eccles & Barber, 1999; Lerner, 2005). Responses were coded for mention (1) or not (0) of the following activity types: student government, environmental, religious groups/activities, helping, volunteering, donating, leadership groups, organized sports, creative arts, academic clubs, and community events. Youth

who reported other activities besides those listed above were coded for unstructured leisure activities (see Table 3). Two qualitative coders who were not privy to the character profiles until the coding process was complete, coded responses to the open-ended questions. Inter-rater reliability was above .88 for all categories. After the coding was completed, researchers used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine themes in OST activities across the three groups of character profiles. We added counts of activity involvement for each character profile to show patterns and we include select quotes from youth for illustrative purposes.

Results

Using the Q sort grid, scores for each character strength ranged from -2 (*not at all like me*) to +2 (*exactly like me*). Overall, the two highest reported strengths across youth were responsibility ($M= 0.86$, $SD= 1.02$) and generosity ($M= 0.52$, $SD= 1.09$), approaching *mostly like me* on the scale (see Table 1). The two lowest reported strengths were amazed ($M= -1.12$, $SD= 0.95$) and thrifty ($M= -0.94$, $SD= 1.25$), approaching *less like me*.

Q Factor Analysis

The Q sort data were analyzed by conducting principal components factor analysis using PQMethod (Schmolck, 2002), a software program designed specifically for Q analysis. Q dedicated software packages, such as PQMethod, are recommended and commonly used in Q factor analysis (Watts & Stenner, 2005). Q factor analysis identifies common profiles of character strengths, which are interpreted in the same manner as profiles resulting from other person-oriented methods like latent class analysis (Brown, 1993). The decision regarding the number of factor profiles to retain was based on two selection criteria: (a) minimizing the correlations between factors, and (b) minimizing factors that had less than five individuals

defining each factor (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Using these selection criteria, a three-factor solution was chosen and rotated through Varimax rotation. The three extracted and rotated factors accounted for 51% of the variance. The resulting factors represent groups of children and adolescents who identified similar patterns of character strengths.

The factor loadings for each youth represent the extent to which an individual's Q sort is associated with the character strengths of the factor. Youth were assigned to factors based on their highest factor loading. Fifty-six of the 90 sorts were defined as factor exemplars, meaning that these youth define the factor because they exemplify the pattern of strengths shared across the factor. Within each factor, character strengths were assigned a z-score, which is the normalized average score of respondents in each factor (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). As is customary in Q methodology, z-scores above .50 are considered practically significant, meaning that strengths with a score above .50 best define the factor (Brown, 1993). Likewise, z-scores below -.50 represent character strengths that are least likely to define individuals in a factor. Scores in between .50 and -.50 were mid range scores that participants considered somewhat characteristic of the factor. Table 2 presents the top loading character strengths – i.e., strengths that were most like participants – for each factor.

Factor 1: *Future-minded Leaders*. Factor 1 ($n = 42$) was defined by a strong, positive view of the self as future-minded ($z = 1.48$) and as a leader ($z = 1.23$). Future-minded and purposeful ($z = 0.59$) were uniquely high for youth in this factor. As indicated by the other high positive z-scores, participants fit into the future-minded leader factor also saw themselves as responsible ($z = 0.87$). Youth in this factor were least likely to view themselves as amazed or thrifty. Strengths of creativity and joy were uniquely low for youth in the future-minded leader factor.

Participation in organized sports was highest for all three character profiles. Youth in the *Future-Minded Leaders* profile were most likely to engage in organized sports (70% of youth in this profile $n= 28$) and were uniquely high on engagement in volunteering (43% of youth, $n= 17$) and academic clubs (30% of youth, $n= 12$; see Table 3). Youth in this profile were unlikely to engage in environmental activities or to make donations. Many youth described being involved in multiple activities that allow them to use their strengths. Youth in the *Future-Minded Leadership* profile were often involved in leadership roles, such as being a room representative or mentoring younger youth. They engaged in activities that would both serve themselves (e.g., bolster their resumes and college applications) and others in need to assistance (e.g., younger children or homeless). For instance, one boy said:

I do martial arts because, like, since I was a little kid I used to watch Jackie Chan movies. And then it's like, "I wanna do that, so I got in." It wasn't about making flips or amazing other people, I did it for the responsibility and the behavior that you had because once you get higher in rank, they put you in charge of other kids.

A 6th grade girl said:

Well, in school I am involved in tennis, I'm [a] room representative...helping other students in the classrooms. And out of school I'm involved in other sports, tennis, and Girls Scouts...And I help the community, the plants everywhere, and the elderly center...For room representative you represent your room showing responsibility in how you care about it...that you show responsibility.

In describing her activities in Girl Scouts, this 6th grader went on to explain:

We plant plants for others, we help the elderly center, we sometimes try to build things for others... We will try to feed the homeless, and we do lots of other things. I've been in Girl Scouts for so long. I would say Girl Scouts is my favorite activity because I love helping people.

When discussing their participation in academically-focused out-of-school time activities, *Future-Minded Leaders* often mentioned their involvement in honor clubs reserved for high

achieving students and college preparation programs. For example, one 11th grade female described participating in two college prep programs, saying:

[One program] has helped me so much and it has widened my experiences and what colleges are going to be able to offer me. [The other program] helps you find out what you need for your colleges, your SAT scores, everything to help you with your preparation for [college]. It's so community involved...and that's what I want to do. I want to be community-involved... you know contribute to my city, to my town.

An 11th grade male described the joy he gets from volunteering at a local baseball park, saying "Well, I grew up down the street from there and I've always played baseball so it's always fun to just watch kids grow up and see how they play and how they develop."

Factor 2: *Joyful Givers*. Factor 2 ($n = 19$) was largely defined by a view of the self as joyful ($z = 0.90$) and comprised of the other-directed strengths of generosity ($z = 1.52$) and forgiveness ($z = 0.78$), as well as creativity ($z = 0.73$). Compared to other factors, youth in this factor were uniquely high in a view of the self as joyful and forgiving. Youth who fit into this factor were rated themselves lowest on thrift as well as leadership, which was uniquely low compared to other factors.

Youth in the *Joyful Givers* profile were most likely to engage in organized sports (68% of youth in this profile, $n = 13$), student government activities (32%, $n = 6$), and volunteering (26% of youth, $n = 5$; see Table 3), but were unlikely to engage in leadership groups. Youth in the *Joyful Giver* profile spoke of a number of ways in which they were involved in helping others and their community, many of which spanned across activity types. In describing their experiences, these youth often spoke of the fun and excitement in the activities, either because the activity itself was enjoyable, they were spending time with others, or they felt good from helping others. A 5th grade female described being a member of student council, her active church involvement, and volunteering with a food drive describing them as "just fun" because

she gets to “spend time with [her] friends.”

Another 10th grader described being involved in an environmental club, the soccer team, and volunteering in the community. For him, volunteering in the soup kitchen was a powerful experience:

[When I’m at the soup kitchen], I’m helping people. The first time I did it, I was scared ‘cause - you know - I didn’t know what would happen. And, then, the whole day I was serving them breakfast and all their drinks. I almost cried because...well, first of all, it's sad that I have to see that, but at the same time I’m helping them. You know, because they probably don’t have any breakfast. So, I felt really good about that. It just feels good inside to know you’re helping.

Factor 3: *Creative Leaders*. Factor 3 ($n = 29$) was characterized by high levels of responsibility and leadership. Creativity was uniquely high for youth in this factor. In contrast to the *Future-Minded Leaders*, youth in the *Creative Leaders* factor did not see themselves as purposeful or future-minded, and ranked themselves lowest in thrift, humility, and awe.

Youth fit into the *Creative Leaders* profile were most likely to engage in organized sports (66% of youth in this profile, $n = 19$), volunteering (28% of youth, $n = 8$), and leadership groups (24.1% of youth in this profile, $n = 7$). Youth in this profile had the highest participation in activities involving the creative arts (21% of youth in this profile, $n = 6$; see Table 3). Compared to the other two character profiles, *Creative Leaders* showed the lowest engagement in religious activities. Thus, youth in this profile expressed their creativity through a variety of mediums—including helping other and self-expression.

A 6th grade girl described how she harnesses her creative talents to help others: “Usually in the summer I paint rocks and really cool designs on them and then I sell them and donate them to a charity.” She went on to describe her friends joining her effort and becoming involved in other creative activities:

I’m also doing this thing called *Flowers of Hope*. I try to sell them [flowers] around the

school...I'm going to donate half the money to Haiti - so that they can help clean it up cause it's still pretty big of a mess down there - and then half to Hurricane Sandy.

Another 6th grader girl described being involved in creative activities both in and outside of school:

I'm in scrapbooking club...then out of school I do dance ... well with dance I like it because I've always liked to dance in my life and it just lets me express myself and I get to let out all my energy. And scrapbooking, I'm really, really, really creative...I really like to create things and make pages and stuff like that.

Discussion

This study's aim was to describe individual differences in children and adolescents' character rankings by identifying character profiles and links between and youth's engagement in OST activities. Data revealed three distinct character profiles: *Future-Minded Leaders*, *Creative Leaders*, and *Joyful Givers*, showing that character strengths go together differently for different groups of youth. Analyzing youth's qualitative descriptions of their OST activities further suggested that certain character profiles are linked with certain types of activity involvement. These findings advance researchers' and practitioners' understanding of the mutually influential relationship between contexts and character development.

Our mostly descriptive study illustrates a potential application of RDS metatheory to the study of character development: Specifically, we argue that character content is best understood holistically by taking multiple strengths into account, and thus character development may be best studied by considering character as a person-specific set of positive strengths. Our findings also support the positive youth development perspective that all youth have strengths and illustrate that strengths manifest differently among young people. Methods that aggregate across youth may not fully capture the holistic nature of character and the heterogeneity in character across youth. Thus, our study illustrates the utility of examining character strengths as a set of

interdependent qualities that form a person's whole character instead of simply considering each strength individually. This study reinforces the need to incorporate person-oriented methodological approaches to fully capture idiographic differences in positive development among youth (Molenaar, 2009). Results from our cross-sectional study provide an important descriptive snap shot of what character looks like in childhood and adolescence that offers a building block for future research.

The utility of employing a person-oriented approach to study youth character strengths is perhaps best illustrated by examining the strength of leadership. Namely, the average ranking for leadership was close to neutral for the overall sample but the person-oriented approach revealed two profiles of young people who self-identified as leaders while the third subgroup ranked leadership among their lowest strengths. These findings illuminate individual differences in patterns of strengths that cannot easily be captured by variable-oriented methods that aggregate over persons. Furthermore, identification of the *Joyful Giver* profile highlights the importance of examining idiographic differences in youth's character strengths. These *Joyful Givers* ranked themselves as high on strengths of generosity, joyfulness, and forgiveness. The low average ranking of forgiveness across the sample obscures the fact that forgiveness is a top strength for a subgroup of youth in this sample. In fact, youth in the *Joyful Giver* group tended to endorse character strengths that were exceptionally other-focused. Thus, our use of a person-oriented approach allowed us to uncover the nuances behind the sample averages and identify homogeneous subgroups of youth who shared character strengths and who differed substantially in their character strengths from other youth in the sample.

Drawing from a RDS framework, character development entails dynamic exchanges between individuals and contexts (Lerner & Callina, 2014). Thus, identifying specific contexts

that contribute to interindividual differences in character is important for building a contextually-grounded theory of character development. OST activities have been broadly linked to both character and civic development in past research (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Youniss, McClellan, & Yates, 1997), and our results build on this work by suggesting specific links between certain kinds of OST activities and certain sets of character strengths. Importantly, our cross-sectional study did not test for causal links between character strengths and OST activities, but RDS theory posits a dynamic interplay. OST activities likely offer an important context for character development, either by providing youth with an avenue to exercise their strengths or by promoting new strength development. Likewise, youth with specific character profiles may seek out activities that align with their character strengths and related interests. Future research should further investigate the viability of these bidirectional pathways, given that optimal development likely results when character strengths and constructive activity involvement are mutually reinforcing (Lerner & Callina, 2014; Mahoney et al., 2009).

Youth in the *Joyful Giver* profile often participated in organized sports but also had high engagement in activities that were other focused, including community service activities. It may be that these youth are drawn towards community service activities because they provide an outlet for giving to others, allowing them to exercise the strength of generosity. Previous research has suggested that service activities connect youth with adults and provide positive relationship experiences that build social skills (Larson et al., 2006). Perhaps engaging in these activities cultivates interpersonal character strengths. Given the salient civic engagement theme in the responses of *Joyful Givers*, future research would benefit from in-depth and ideally longitudinal studies examining the reciprocal relationship between civic activities and character.

Unlike the *Joyful Givers*, youth in both leadership profiles discussed their involvement in leadership groups. Previous work has suggested that participating in OST activities helps youth to understand themselves by observing their own behavior during the activity (Valentine, Cooper, Bettencourt, & DuBois, 2002). Perhaps as youth are engaged in leadership groups, they begin to take on roles and responsibilities reflecting leadership qualities and as a result are more likely to self-identify as leaders (Salusky et al., 2014). The two leadership profiles looked quite different on other strengths and these differences were reflected in youths' involvement in other activity types. Youth in the *Future-Minded Leader* profile displayed the highest rankings of purpose and nearly half of these youth discussed involvement in volunteer activities. Our results coincide with previous work showing that youth with higher strengths of purpose display greater prosocial behavior and moral commitment (Damon & Gregory, 2006). Moreover, the *Future-Minded Leaders* also reported the highest involvement in academic clubs. Given the goals of academic clubs in encouraging long term academic development and achievement (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002), youth may become involved in academic clubs in order to improve their chances of attending college, reflecting their orientation towards future-minded thinking. *Creative Leaders* had the highest involvement in creative arts activities, a logical link that likely illustrates a process of young people self-selecting into activities where their strengths can be further cultivated.

Our qualitative findings coincide with previous work indicating that youth are often engaged in a number of distinct activity types (e.g., Feldman & Matjasko, 2007). For some youth, different activities allowed them to draw on specific strengths, such as the young man engaged in academic clubs or the two youth who were involved in creative art programs such as drama. Other youth displayed more integration of strengths across activities, or in other words,

their involvement in activities allowed them to utilize a combination of strengths, as with the young girl who displayed leadership, creativity, and generosity when encouraging her friends to join her in painting rocks to raise money for charities. Future research should examine the links between character strengths and activities in more depth to more precisely understand which activities are linked to specific strengths only and which activities foster multiple strengths simultaneously. Finding ways for youth to practice multiple strengths in the context of a particular activity would likely be the most enriching and impactful from a character education perspective. Given that youth may self-select into activities based on existing strengths, character education initiatives may benefit by first identifying youths' strengths and then helping them explore opportunities to engage those strengths within the context of activities.

Q methodology is a versatile method that can be applied to any number of strengths or theoretical frameworks in order to further the empirical research on the development of character. Currently, the vast majority of studies of character strengths in youth have relied on questionnaire data. While any likert-style questionnaire can use a person-oriented approach, Q methodology provides an important complement to these measures. The Q sort task may be an efficient way for parents or teachers to report on youth character, allowing researchers to triangulate the measurement of character in a novel, integrated manner. In character research, one problem that arises with using questionnaire data to addressing developmental differences is social desirability; participants of any age may be inclined to over-report on strengths in order to maintain a positive self-image (Osin, 2009), which can make it difficult to reveal any actual developmental differences in strengths. The Q sort forces participants to prioritize strengths in relation to all other strengths, thus eliminating over-reporting and social desirability issues. Q methodology also offers a conceptual contribution to the character literature; however, it is the

practical feature that may end up being the most compelling reason for its inclusion in youth character research: The actual task of Q sorting a list of character strengths was engaging to participants of all ages, and the ease and quickness of the task may be more efficient and less encumbering than completing page after page of questionnaire items. If the Q sort were adapted to fit existing character frameworks, future research would benefit from exploring the number of different strengths that could be used within the Q sort without the task becoming cognitively burdensome for youth. Q methodology provides an efficient method for applied workers to assess youth strengths.

The merits of this study should be considered in light of some limitations. First, while every attempt was made to ensure all participants understood all of the character terminology, it is possible that misunderstanding particular character strengths may have led youth to rank certain strengths lower. Our study included only a small subset of character strengths; it is implausible if not impossible to include an exhaustive list of character strengths within any single study. Future studies examining wider or different sets of character strengths will likely yield different character profiles. The profiles identified are not intended to be a definitive set of character profiles, but rather to illustrate one potential avenue for assessing character in youth. The small sample size of the study limited our ability to look at quantitative differences such as age and gender. In other studies, we have demonstrated age differences in Q sorting tasks with youth (see Metzger, Syvertsen, Oosterhoff, Babskie, & Wray-Lake, 2015). Further understanding age and other sociodemographic differences in character would be a fruitful avenue for research. Further, there may have been ordering effects from the Q sort tasks. Beginning the study with links between civic engagement and character strengths may have led to certain strengths being more salient for youth. In addition, the focus on civic engagement may have led students to talk

more about civic activities than other activities, and having the discussion of activities precede the character Q sort may have influenced youth to align their character rankings to the activities they just described. These alternative explanations for our findings cannot be definitely ruled out, and thus our findings linking character and OST activities require replication in future work.

Recognizing individual differences in the strengths of children and adolescents may be important for promoting thriving (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011; Lerner, 2004). Viewing character strengths as person-specific can deepen our understanding of what character looks like in youth, which could help educators and youth development professionals better understand the strengths of the youth they connect with on a daily basis and tailor programs to meet the needs of youth. Continuing research in this area could bring further theoretical and empirical clarity to the nature of character development and the contexts that promote it.

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Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for character strengths*

Character Strengths	M (SD)	% sorted as "least like"	% sorted as "less like"	% sorted as "sort of like"	% sorted as "mostly like"	% sorted as "exactly like"
Amazed	-1.12 (0.95)	45.6%	25.6%	25.6%	2.2%	1.1%
Creative	0.10 (1.37)	14.4%	21.1%	27.8%	13.3%	23.3%
Forgiving	0.10 (1.04)	6.7%	16.7%	48.9%	15.6%	12.2%
Future-Minded	0.29 (1.31)	11.1%	16.7%	28.9%	18.9%	24.4%
Generous	0.52 (1.09)	4.4%	10.0%	37.8%	24.4%	23.3%
Grateful	0.27 (1.05)	4.4%	16.7%	41.1%	23.3%	14.4%
Humble	-0.36 (1.21)	25.6%	12.2%	42.2%	12.2%	7.8%
Joyful	0.03 (1.11)	7.8%	22.2%	42.2%	14.4%	13.3%
Leader	0.38 (1.42)	15.6%	10.0%	26.7%	16.7%	31.1%
Purposeful	-0.12 (1.19)	13.3%	24.4%	35.6%	14.4%	12.2%
Responsible	0.86 (1.02)	3.3%	4.4%	26.7%	34.4%	31.1%
Thrifty	-0.94 (1.25)	47.8%	20.0%	16.7%	10.0%	5.6%

Note. Character strengths are on a 5-point scale from -2 to +2.

Table 2. *Person-centered factor analysis*

Future-Minded Leaders		Joyful Givers		Creative Leaders	
<i>Strengths most like participants</i>					
Future-minded	1.48	Generous	1.52	Responsible	1.35
Leader	1.23	Joyful	0.90	Leader	1.29
Responsible	0.87	Forgiving	0.78	Creative	1.28
Purposeful	0.59	Creative	0.73	Generous	0.58
<i>Strengths somewhat like participants</i>					
Generous	0.51				
Grateful	0.21	Humble	0.38	Joyful	0.19
Humble	-0.07	Grateful	0.25	Forgiving	0.17
Forgiving	-0.17	Future-minded	0.20	Grateful	0.17
		Responsible	-0.01		
<i>Strengths least like participants</i>					
Joyful	-0.65	Amazed	-0.50	Purposeful	-0.53
Creative	-1.06	Purposeful	-1.10	Future-minded	-0.88
Amazed	-1.40	Leader	-1.50	Thrifty	-1.12
Thrifty	-1.54	Thrifty	-1.67	Humble	-1.22
				Amazed	-1.28

Note. Character strengths in bold typeface represent top strengths that are unique to each factor. Numbers refer to the z-scores of each strength assigned to the factor.

Table 3. *Types of activity participation by character profile*

Activity Type	Future-Minded Leaders	Joyful Givers	Creative Leaders
Student Government	12.5%	31.6%	13.8%
Environmental	0.0%	10.5%	13.8%
Religious	17.5%	21.1%	10.3%
Volunteer	42.5%	26.3%	27.6%
Donation	0.0%	10.5%	10.3%
Academic	30.0%	15.8%	20.7%
Leadership	17.5%	0.0%	24.1%
Sports	70.0%	68.4%	65.5%
Creative Arts	17.5%	5.3%	20.7%
Community Events	2.5%	0.0%	3.5%
Unstructured Leisure Only	5.0%	0.0%	3.5%
Average Number of Activities	2.3	2.1	2.3

Note. Numbers indicate the percentage of youth in each factor that engage in each activity type.

Appendix A. *Character strengths and researcher provided definitions*

Character Strength	Operational Definition
Amazed	Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, or good work
Creative	Thinking of unique and productive ways to do things
Forgiving	Letting go of bad feelings towards those who have done wrong; Giving people a second chance
Future-Minded	Thinking about the future and the impact of your decisions
Generous	Doing favors for others; Giving to others
Grateful	Being aware and thankful for good things; Expressing thanks
Humble	<i>Not</i> bragging or showing off; <i>Not</i> needing to be rewarded when you do something good
Joyful	Feeling of great pleasure and happiness
Leader	Encouraging other people to get things done while also maintaining good relationships; Organizing group activities
Purposeful	Having a reason for being alive; Having a major life goal you are determined to reach
Responsible	Doing what you're supposed to do; <i>Not</i> blaming others for your actions
Thrifty	Using money and other resources carefully; <i>Not</i> wasting

Note. The definitions provided above were largely derived from Peterson and Seligman (2006).