

The place of disability in positive psychology research contexts

Bachene Hamza ¹, Hamouda Hamouda Ali Hadjer ², and Hamza Behir ³

¹ University of Algiers 2, (Algeria). Email: hamza.bachen@univ-alger2.dz

² University of Medea (Algeria), Psychological and social research laboratory, Email: hamouda.alihadjer@univ-medea.dz

³ University of Algiers 2, (Algeria). Email: hamza.behir@univ-alger2.dz

Abstract---This article seeks to highlight the position of positive psychology, which provides an empirical conceptual foundation for the study of what makes life worth living. This perspective has contributed to the emergence of new waves of research examining the diverse experiences of individuals across different groups, including individuals with disabilities. Accordingly, this line of research offers an alternative perspective to traditional theories of disability by emphasizing how the principles of positive psychology can be applied to various categories of disability, thereby enhancing collective awareness of the lived experiences of these individuals. The analytical descriptive approach was employed to examine the position of disability within the framework of the psychology of character strengths, in alignment with contemporary trends in positive psychology that aim to strengthen pathways of psychological empowerment and to build aspects of personal immunization. This approach is grounded in the findings of international studies that seek to identify indicators of flourishing and advancement across multiple categories of disability.

Keywords---Positive Psychology, Disability, Character Strengths.

1. Introduction

Many researchers, including Niemiec and Tomasulo (2023), have emphasized that every person on this planet may experience some form of disability, with no true exceptions. While some individuals are born with a specific disability, such as cerebral palsy, for others disability may develop gradually over time, for instance in the form of mental illness. In other cases, disability may arise suddenly as a result of an accident, such as hemiplegia, or emerge from an unexpected medical condition, such as a heart

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attack, or occur as a secondary consequence of chronic illnesses like diabetes. For certain individuals, disability is associated with aging, during which symptoms of Alzheimer's disease may manifest. In addition, some individuals have experienced disabling effects linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as psychological and emotional suffering resulting from the loss of a family member or friend. Viewed from this broader perspective, disability appears as a universal human condition, suggesting that no one is immune to it, since it constitutes an integral part of the human lived experience (p. 3).

According to the World Health Organization (2020), more than one billion people worldwide live with some form of disability or chronic health condition, representing approximately 15% of the global population. The increasing number of persons with disabilities is associated with the rising prevalence of chronic diseases and population aging. In this context, persons with disabilities may face various psychological and social challenges, summarized by Bezyak et al. (2020) as functional limitations, restricted vocational performance, comorbid health conditions, social stigma, and limited community participation (as cited in Umucu, & al, 2022, p. 1).

Acknowledging the magnitude of these statistics encourages deeper reflection on the lived reality of disability and its short- and long-term consequences, particularly given that disability represents a shared human condition to which anyone may be exposed. These findings align with the perspectives of numerous researchers and practitioners, including Carter (2016), who emphasized that disability is a natural and inherent part of the human experience. Accordingly, disability cannot be entirely separated from human life nor avoided, a recognition that may foster greater understanding, empathy, and compassion toward individuals living with disabilities (as cited in Niemiec & Tomasulo, 2023, p. 3).

Therefore, it is important to study how to better support individuals with disabilities and chronic health conditions in order to facilitate optimal psychological and social adjustment through the use of more effective approaches supported by research in psychiatry and positive psychology (Umucu, & al, 2022, p. 1). These approaches are grounded in contexts of strengths and human capacities. Until recently, discussing or conceptualizing disability within strength-based psychological orientations reflected broader shifts that have occurred in the field of disability. Similar to developments in psychology, the field of disability has experienced transitions away from deficit-based models that focused primarily on identifying performance limitations, as noted by Wehmeyer et al. (2008). In contrast, other studies have emphasized strength-based approaches that recognize individuals with disabilities as possessing personal competencies that also require understanding and utilization to guide planning and support, as discussed by Buntinx and Schalock (2010).

For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) explicitly states that services provided to youth aged 16 and older to support the transition from school to adulthood must take into account the "child's strengths and preferences." This mandate is driven by a substantial body of research documenting the strengths present among youth with disabilities, which can shape the transition process and be used to develop individualized education programs and transition goals based on strength-based assessment tools (as cited in Niemiec, & al, 2017, p. 17). Additional efforts led by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) have also contributed to this shift by adopting a socio-ecological approach to disability. This perspective described the functioning of individuals with disabilities not solely in terms of problems, weaknesses, or deficits, but emphasized the importance of performance related to strengths across various domains (as cited in Niemiec, & Tomasulo, 2023, pp. 3–4).

Accordingly, studies emerged that moved away from the traditional disease and pathology model, emphasizing the importance of building positive traits rather than focusing exclusively on repairing weaknesses. These studies are grounded in the assumptions and empirical findings of positive psychology, which seeks to understand what makes life worth living and contributes to empowering individuals to achieve flourishing. In recent decades, increased attention has been given to

understanding disability and chronic health conditions, including mental illness, in relation to human functioning, as well as identifying human strengths and potentials. Beatrice Wright promoted a positive framework of disability, in line with the foundations established by positive psychology, which focuses on the abilities and strengths of individuals with disabilities. Several studies, such as those by Tansey et al. (2018) and Lee et al. (2020), have demonstrated the impact of positive psychological traits—such as character strengths including hope and resilience—on functioning and quality of life within a strength-based model of disability and rehabilitation (as cited in Umucu, & al, 2022, p. 2).

Thus, the emergence of positive psychology as an approach concerned with studying what makes life worth living has generated a new wave of research in which the principles and insights of positive psychology have been applied to understanding the diverse experiences of individuals across multiple disability groups.

Accordingly, this article examines constructs of positive psychology within the context of the psychology of human strengths, which may broaden and enrich collective understanding of persons with disabilities. It also explores how these distinctive individuals can define and achieve the Good Life.

2. Research Problem

Most research on persons with disabilities, their families, and their communities has predominantly focused on the difficulties and challenges they encounter. Within the field of education, a substantial body of research has, for a long time, concentrated on the development of teaching curricula intended to improve educational outcomes for this population, as noted by Marschark et al. (2016). In contrast, studies in the field of social development have often focused on children with disabilities by documenting the prevalence of various behavioral problems, as reported by Barker et al. (2009). Meanwhile, Glickman (2013), in research involving adults with disabilities, emphasized the challenges they face and the need to provide services for individuals experiencing difficulties related to mental and psychological health (as cited in Szarkowski & Brice, 2018, p. 111).

Additionally, several studies have examined the prevalence of mental health problems among persons with disabilities, revealing rates that are significantly higher than those observed in other segments of society. This trend reflects the fact that much of the psychological literature related to the disability community has tended to emphasize negative aspects, particularly mental health difficulties, inadequate educational provision, and experiences of discrimination.

Therefore, this selective review of research and studies related to positive psychology and disability aims to enrich understanding of the lived realities of the various groups encompassed by disability, which may help identify effective mechanisms for interacting with and supporting persons with disabilities. It is time to adopt a different approach that aspires to employ the positive psychology model, which may contribute to identifying ways of engaging with persons with disabilities and those belonging to this community. This approach also seeks to expand the scope of research questions that encourage learning how individuals within this distinctive community can define and achieve the Good Life, a core pillar of positive psychology.

Given that a strong focus on human potential, personal growth, happiness, and achievement is largely absent from research conducted on persons with disabilities, applying the types of questions posed by researchers in positive psychology to this population may offer a perspective from a different angle. Such an approach may help shift the prevailing deficit-oriented view, heavily burdened by notions of disability and limitation. While it is true that persons with disabilities face unique challenges and stressors—an issue that has been the focus of many studies—little is known about their positive experiences. This gap is what the present study seeks to address.

3. Study Objectives

- To highlight the position that disability occupies within research domains in positive psychology.
- To address the extent of diversity in positive psychological experiences encountered by individuals with disabilities in the midst of their exposure to life difficulties.
- To identify personal character strengths that contribute to establishing indicators of adjustment and strengthening coping mechanisms in dealing with the various pressures and challenges experienced by persons with disabilities.
- To emphasize the importance of psychological pathways that contribute to enhancing psychological empowerment and achieving personal resilience among persons with disabilities, based on identifying, activating, developing, and amplifying character strengths, as they constitute the backbone of positive psychology.

4. Significance of the Study

This research paper aims to highlight the importance of positive psychology in consolidating efforts to understand the essence of a satisfying life by identifying the factors that contribute to enriching a meaningful and good life. This objective is achieved by focusing on individuals' experiences in contexts of both adversity and well-being, including the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. The study also seeks to enhance collective awareness of the significance of the position of persons with disabilities within the social fabric, as an effort to promote societal flourishing across all groups, in alignment with an emphasis on the foundations of capability, psychological empowerment, and human potential.

5. Conceptual Framework of the Study

5.1. Positive Psychology: Foundations of Human Strengths and Empowerment

Positive psychology has historical roots linked to the concept of the good life (Bachene & Ben Aïchouba, 2023, p. 620), which constitutes one of the central themes of inquiry in several other branches of psychology, from which it has drawn influence, such as the humanistic school. This contemporary movement has been subject to extensive criticism, particularly regarding its focus on positive psychological variables. Such critiques prompted a re-examination of the field, leading to revisions informed by scholarly debates, critiques, and theoretical contributions. These developments revitalized positive psychology and expanded the range of issues it addresses to include both positive and negative variables, as well as the dialectical relationship between them. From this perspective, negative aspects are considered among the factors that give meaning to life, as negative emotions are no less important than positive emotions; together, they reflect the human being in his or her totality. This perspective falls within what has become known as the second wave of positive psychology. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that research within this contemporary movement has remained within the boundaries of positive psychology as originally established by Seligman. Accordingly, it continues to focus on the prevention of physical illnesses and psychological disorders, the alleviation of their severity, and the study of human excellence and optimal functioning, with the aim of achieving well-being and flourishing among individuals and groups (Bachene, 2023, p. 25).

Duckworth et al. (2005) defined positive psychology as “the scientific study of positive experiences, positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development.” It stands in contrast to traditional psychological perspectives that focus primarily on alleviating suffering, as positive psychology emphasizes individuals' experiences related to well-being, life satisfaction, and the capacity to flourish (as cited in Szarkowski & Brice, 2016, p. 250).

Over the past decades, psychologists have increasingly directed their attention toward the study of positive psychological phenomena such as resilience, gratitude, and moral–emotional dimensions such as forgiveness and compassion. This shift supports the departure from traditional assumptions related

to understanding and treating psychological problems. These assumptions have begun to change as a result of developments in positive psychology research. Consequently, research within this field, as noted by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), has come to rely on building strengths and promoting well-being to the same extent that it focuses on treating weaknesses and remediating deficits. This orientation has been reaffirmed by studies conducted within the second wave of positive psychology (as cited in Bachene, 2022, p. 10).

Character strengths are considered foundational pillars of positive psychology. They are positive personality traits that reflect an individual’s identity and generate beneficial outcomes for both the self and others. Studies by Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) and Seligman (2011) have demonstrated the role of character strengths in understanding individuals and enhancing positive outcomes, including well-being, achievement, and leadership. Furthermore, Peterson and Seligman developed the Values in Action (VIA) classification, which identifies and describes character strengths and provides guidance for researchers and practitioners engaged in strength development. The VIA classification—also referred to as virtues in action—was developed to provide consensual labels or a “common descriptive language” for understanding and organizing personality components. The development of the VIA classification of character strengths took three years and involved 55 researchers who worked to identify positive personality characteristics, organize them within a conceptual framework, and develop valid tools for their assessment. As a result, the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) was created for adults, along with the VIA Youth scale designed for children, adolescents, and youth aged 10 to 17 years (as cited in Niemiec, & al, 2017, pp. 13–14).

The VIA classification includes 24-character strengths organized under six core virtues, as illustrated in the following figure:



Figure 1: Components of the VIA Classification of Virtues and the Character Strengths They Encompass
 Source: (Bachene, Berrazouane & Ben Aïchouba, 2022, p. 24).

Accordingly, adopting a strength-based approach to understanding the experiences of individuals with disabilities—as well as parents raising children with disabilities—as an alternative to traditional approaches may enhance collective understanding of this experience. This applies not only to stressors and challenges, but also to issues such as family quality of life, adaptive capacity, optimism, and subjective well-being.

Currently, there is a growing body of research addressing the outcomes of activating and developing the 24-character strengths, indicating their effective role in positive psychological functioning and well-being. Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of character strengths in enhancing psychological resources and capacities across various populations, including persons with disabilities.

5.2. Disability from a Strengths-Based Psychology Perspective

The number of disability cases is continuously increasing. When examining care and rehabilitation programs, it becomes evident that our societies lack adequate services tailored to the needs of this population, particularly given the diversity of groups encompassed by disability. According to Machado et al. (2013), disability is defined as “an alteration or change in several physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological functions that affect individuals’ daily lives and are associated with, or may translate into, dependence on others to perform simple and basic movements, due to difficulties in integrating into social and/or professional life.” Similarly, Vandenbos (2015) emphasized that disability is a “permanent mental or physical impairment that negatively affects an individual’s abilities and functioning in one or more basic life activities, such as self-care, mobility, communication, social interaction, sexual expression, or work.” Accordingly, disability represents an impairment affecting individuals in specific domains, leading to difficulties in adaptive behavior, social interaction, and social as well as professional integration (as cited in Ben Azzouzi, 2019, p. 160).

Wehmeyer (2014) noted that there is currently a growing awareness among researchers, clinicians, practitioners, and policymakers of the need to understand the implications of disability in ways that go beyond the limitations imposed by the condition itself (as cited in Szarkowski & Brice, 2016, p. 250).

In this context, only a limited number of studies have examined the presence of specific traits and experiences associated with strength-based approaches among youth and adults with disabilities from a positive psychology perspective. For instance, Shogren (2013) reviewed the application of positive psychology constructs to assess the extent to which disability is represented in the research literature. The findings revealed a limited focus on disability issues within positive psychology; among 162 articles published between 2006 and 2011, only six articles (approximately 4%) addressed disability. Moreover, most of these six articles focused on chronic illnesses associated with disability, such as asthma and cancer (as cited in Niemiec, & al., 2017, p. 17).

However, over the past decade, positive psychology has offered a more comprehensive and distinct perspective that continues to evolve and undergo reassessment at both theoretical and applied levels. As a result, this approach has increasingly permeated the field of multiple disabilities. Shogren, Wehmeyer, and Lopez (2006) indicated that positive psychology has paid considerable attention to several aspects relevant to persons with disabilities, particularly through examining the positive impact of physical and environmental factors. Additionally, self-concept among persons with disabilities has received significant attention, as it represents a foundational pillar in support processes. This self-concept requires recognition, exploration of strengths, and efforts toward building and developing these strengths, as emphasized by Niemiec, Shogren, and Wehmeyer (2017). Such processes may enable individuals with disabilities to experience happiness and well-being across various life domains, reflected in increased life satisfaction and acceptance of disability. Accordingly, Farmer (2011) stressed the necessity of identifying and developing character strengths to enable persons with disabilities to define themselves, compensate for deficits, and enhance their levels of happiness (as cited in Ben Azzouzi, 2019, p. 163).

In this regard, several studies have examined character strengths among individuals with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities, as well as disabilities emerging at different developmental stages, such as intellectual disabilities including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These disabilities often appear relatively early in life and persist over time. Character strengths among individuals with such conditions may differ from those of individuals with more severe impairments, such as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Umucu et al. (2022), in a study involving 11,699 individuals with disabilities, found that the signature strengths characterizing this sample included love of learning, honesty, appreciation of beauty and excellence, kindness and generosity, and fairness. These findings contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the domains in which individuals with multiple disabilities may flourish across different contexts. They also provide clinicians and practitioners with clearer insights into potential intervention strategies, as the study demonstrated differences in character strengths across disability groups, including intellectual and developmental disabilities, multiple sclerosis, and chronic brain injuries (p. 1).

For example, Niemiec et al. (2017) discussed how character strengths can be developed among individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, leading to positive outcomes in support systems and quality of life (p. 13). Similarly, Shogren et al. (2018) evaluated the VIA-Youth Inventory to examine differences in character strength endorsement between youth with intellectual disabilities and typically developing youth. Their findings highlighted the need to explore methods for increasing awareness and experiences related to character strengths among youth with intellectual disabilities, in order to identify effective strategies for integrating strength-based assessment into support systems for adolescents with intellectual disabilities (Shogren, & al., 2018, p. 27).

Smedema (2020) found that several character strengths were associated with quality of life among individuals with Multiple Sclerosis. The signature strengths identified in this sample included honesty, kindness and generosity, and fairness, while zest, hope, and gratitude were the strengths most strongly associated with quality-of-life outcomes (Smedema, 2020, p. 1259).

In a study by Hanks et al. (2014) involving individuals with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), character strengths and virtues were found to be moderately associated with subjective well-being. Perspective, bravery, and self-regulation emerged as the strongest predictors of well-being, whereas hope, zest, perseverance, and humor were the strongest predictors of life satisfaction (Hanks, & al., 2014, p. 2100).

Umucu et al. (2021), in a study of 269 individuals with disabilities and chronic health conditions, highlighted the importance of character strengths in mitigating stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that individuals with chronic disabilities tend to report lower levels of well-being compared to healthy individuals, the study found that several character strengths significantly moderated the relationship between COVID-19-related stress and well-being. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening character strengths among individuals with disabilities and chronic health conditions to enhance their well-being (Umucu, & al., 2021, p. 67).

Other researchers, including Kirchner, Ruch, and Dziobek (2016), examined character strengths among adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The distinctive strengths of this group included openness, creativity, and love of learning. Notably, hope, zest, kindness and generosity, humor, social intelligence, and teamwork—all considered emotional or interpersonal strengths—showed the strongest positive associations with life satisfaction among individuals with ASD. This suggests that greater endorsement and use of emotional and interpersonal strengths may enhance life satisfaction and contribute to the development of social and emotional competencies in this population (pp. 8–10).

In another study, Kannangara et al. (2018) investigated the most prevalent character strengths among individuals with Dyslexia and identified curiosity, fairness, kindness and generosity, perspective, honesty, and leadership as their most distinctive strengths (p. 86).

Other research has focused on identifying and describing strengths within the deaf community. For example, Moore and Mertens (2015) examined how life experiences among deaf individuals contribute to the development of resilience in deaf youth. Rostami et al. (2014) found that training in positive thinking skills had a positive effect on improving happiness levels among deaf adolescents. Maxwell-McCaw and Zea (2011) highlighted the positive impact of participation in deaf cultural activities on the development of community identity. Additionally, Zand and Pierce (2011) edited a comprehensive guide on methods for fostering resilience among deaf children (as cited in Szarkowski & Brice, 2018, p. 111).

Based on the above, it can be concluded that a broader understanding of the character strengths reported by persons with disabilities—along with their shared features and differences—provides deeper insight into their psychological experiences, sources of well-being, quality of life, and life satisfaction. This understanding has contributed to enriching intervention programs grounded in the principles and techniques of positive psychology.

Previous research findings have also confirmed strong positive associations between character strengths and health outcomes. Researchers such as Weziak-Bialowolska, Bialowolski, VanderWeele, and McNeely (2021) emphasized that using character strengths is not only beneficial for self-perceived physical health in difficult situations, but also enhances meaning in life, social connectedness, and optimal mental health. Given the association between character strengths and positive health outcomes, Seligman et al. (2005) argued that this enables practitioners to adopt interventions that incorporate the use of signature strengths in innovative ways. By identifying and reframing individuals' strength profiles and applying them when working with persons with disabilities, such approaches may lead to improvements in psychological and social functioning, as well as overall quality of life (as cited in Umucu & al., 2022, p. 9).

Nevertheless, despite these strong examples of research within the disability community across its various categories that emphasize the importance of positive resources, there remains a need for further efforts to expand the research context on disability. In particular, it is necessary to explore how health, successful adjustment, and well-being are defined, and how these psychological constructs are perceived from the perspective of persons with disabilities themselves.

5.3. Pathways of Psychological Empowerment and Dimensions of Personal Fortification among Individuals with Multiple Disabilities

It is interesting to observe the existence of shared personal character strengths among individuals with multiple disabilities. These strengths consist of five core strengths which, taken together, form a distinctive strength profile, namely: love of learning, honesty, appreciation of beauty and excellence, kindness and generosity, and fairness. This has been confirmed by the findings of the study conducted by Umucu et al. (2022), which indicate that individuals with disabilities possess unique positive psychological characteristics formed by a distinctive constellation of character strengths that differentiate them from healthy members of society. This is due to the fact that disability may result in certain benefits that contribute to growth, maturity, and flourishing, which represents one of the most significant positive gains that this group may achieve compared to others.

This is based on the consideration that individuals with disabilities who possess the strength of love of learning engage deeply in knowledge acquisition and typically experience positive emotions when developing skills and acquiring knowledge. They seek to seize opportunities to build knowledge that qualifies them to reach a level of expertise that is valued by others (Al-A'sar et al., 2005, p. 181). Previous studies have linked the strength of love of learning to life satisfaction, positive affect, and post-traumatic growth.

A study by Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) conducted on a sample of adults showed that appreciation of beauty, love of learning, humility, and creativity were strongly associated with life satisfaction (as cited in Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009, p. 55). Similarly, the study by Ovadia and Lavy (2012) found that love of learning, hope, curiosity, love, judgment, and appreciation were among the five strengths most strongly associated with positive affect (as cited in Hong & Yan, 2018, p. 2).

Regarding the second distinctive strength characterizing individuals with disabilities, it is authenticity, also referred to as honesty. This strength reflects truthfulness and self-consistency, manifested through being honest with oneself regarding what one conveys to others in terms of intentions and commitments, where inner values align with outward behavior in both speech and action (Al-Awfi, 2015, p. 109). Honesty leads individuals to assume responsibility, accompanied by an internal sense of moral obligation, or what may be referred to as integrity. It is a strength of exceptionally high moral value, particularly in close relationships, as “we may forgive our friends and loved ones for treating us poorly, but distorting facts or deceiving us takes us to a different level of transgression. Authenticity or honesty is therefore one of the most important qualities that should be present in friends and spouses, as it is among the factors that build trust between people.” Accordingly, academic curricula and training programs taught in medical schools, faculties of law, clinical psychology programs, and business administration should aim to cultivate this trait, given the need to prepare honest professionals (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 205–209).

Based on previous research findings, the strength of authenticity may contribute to improving students’ academic performance and may also play a preventive role by acting as a barrier against various psychological disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression.

Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of this strength and its relationship with positive psychological variables. For instance, the study by Saldaña et al. (2014) conducted on a sample of students in the United Kingdom indicated that authenticity was among the strengths most strongly related to academic performance (p. 30). Meanwhile, Gustems and Calderon (2014) reported that certain strengths, such as fairness and authenticity, are closely associated with well-being, while other strengths such as authenticity, social intelligence, and hope function as protective strengths against obsessive-compulsive disorder. Park and Peterson (2008) also found that authenticity and humility were negatively associated with depression. Furthermore, fairness and authenticity were found to predict high levels of psychological well-being (as cited in Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2014, pp. 265–279).

The third strength characterizing individuals with disabilities is appreciation of beauty and excellence. This strength is based on noticing and valuing beauty, along with striving for excellence in performance through the use of various skills across all areas of life (Bachene, 2022, p. 37). Individuals who express high appreciation of beauty and excellence notice and value beauty and/or outstanding performance in all life domains, from nature and art to mathematics, science, and everyday experiences. Individuals high in this strength typically respond to three types of beauty:

1. Physical beauty, which may involve auditory, tactile, or abstract experiences and generates goodness and virtue in the person who experiences it.
2. Skill or talent (excellence), which often serves as a motivating force compelling individuals to pursue their personal goals and may lead to admiration and recognition.
3. Virtue or moral goodness (moral beauty), referring to virtuous goodness that inspires individuals to become better, more loving, and more giving, thereby creating feelings of flourishing and elevation (VIA Institute on Character, n.d.).

Research consistently shows that “emotional” character strengths—such as love and gratitude—are more strongly associated with well-being than “intellectual” strengths, which are primarily related to the individual, such as creativity, critical thinking, and appreciation of beauty and excellence. This has been

confirmed by the studies of Park and Peterson (2008) and Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) (as cited in Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 4). The study by Park et al. (2004) also indicated that appreciation of beauty, love of learning, humility, creativity, judgment, and appreciation were among the strengths associated with life satisfaction (as cited in Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2014, pp. 268–274).

The fourth strength characteristic of individuals with disabilities is kindness and generosity. This strength includes generosity, care, compassion, and altruism in interpersonal interactions (Niemiec, 2017, VIA Classification of Character, para. 3). It reflects the provision of services and caregiving tasks for others and represents one of the fundamental psychological and social values identified by Erikson (1963). Caring for others shifts attention beyond the self and contributes to others' well-being, while simultaneously fostering a sense of personal satisfaction (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 296). Engaging in acts of service and assistance for others, characterized by kindness and generosity, constitutes one of the most essential pillars of human interaction (Al-Awfi, 2015, p. 110).

The study by Park and Peterson (2009) demonstrated that higher levels of kindness and generosity, hope, social intelligence, self-regulation, and perspective reliably function as buffers against the negative effects of stress and trauma. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) and Peterson et al. (2008), the different dimensions of post-traumatic growth correspond to specific character strengths: kindness and love enhance relationships with others; curiosity, creativity, and love of learning foster openness to new possibilities; while appreciation of beauty, gratitude, and zest help individuals develop a deeper appreciation for life (as cited in Niemiec, 2013, p. 18).

A study examining religiosity and character strengths among Muslim youth in the United States—classified as more committed to Islamic teachings than their peers—found that religiosity was strongly associated with several character strengths, including kindness and generosity, fairness, leadership, self-regulation, prudence, gratitude, hope and optimism, spirituality, and forgiveness. These strengths served as protective factors in reducing maladaptive behavior and decreasing the likelihood of engagement in high-risk activities (Ahmed, 2009, p. 104). Some of these strengths may also be positively associated with psychological resilience.

The fifth strength within the distinctive strength profile of individuals with disabilities is fairness. This strength aims to “uphold principles of justice, prevent emotions from influencing decisions, and actively pursue equality” (Niemiec, 2017, VIA Classification of Character, para. 4). Equality is achieved by providing everyone with a fair opportunity while adhering to the principle that the same rules apply to all.

One study demonstrated that individuals who scored high in fairness exhibited lower levels of aggression and phobic anxiety. This aligns with previous findings indicating that fairness acts as a protective buffer against the negative effects of stress and psychological trauma (Park & Peterson, 2009). This supports the relationship identified in earlier studies, such as Berkowitz and Gibbs (1983), concerning the development of moral reasoning (fairness), particularly in understanding multiple perspectives in conflicts and enhancing the ability to improve interpersonal relationships (as cited in Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2014, p. 279). These findings are consistent with the conceptualization of this strength, whose bearers seek to adopt a compassionate approach toward others within a framework of ethical and moral principles, producing positive effects in social interactions.

Similarly, Gustems and Calderon (2014) reported that the relationship between character strengths and psychological well-being can have a significant impact on academic performance. Fairness, authenticity, love, humor, curiosity, and self-regulation were found to predict high levels of psychological well-being (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2014, p. 265).

Accordingly, it becomes evident that love of learning, authenticity or honesty, appreciation of beauty and excellence, kindness and generosity, and fairness play an active role in improving indicators of positive psychological variables such as life satisfaction, positive affect, post-traumatic growth, well-being, and positive academic performance. Some of these strengths may also serve preventive functions by acting as barriers against various psychological disorders, including obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, psychological trauma, phobias, and aggression. These conclusions reflect the findings of previous studies conducted across different regions of the world and indicate that character strengths fundamentally enhance pathways of psychological empowerment and reinforce aspects of personal fortification among individuals from diverse populations during times of both adversity and prosperity.

6. Commentary

Over past decades, stigma experienced by individuals with disabilities has dominated research and scholarly discourse. Virtually no category of disability was exempt from judgment or from the attribution of negative traits, as disability was frequently examined according to standards developed for able-bodied individuals, reflecting a lack of sensitivity to diverse lived experiences. Consequently, attributes of deficiency and inadequacy were imposed on many groups of individuals with disabilities, heightening their exposure to stress and contributing to the dominance of deficit-oriented research. For an extended period, researchers and practitioners largely overlooked the development of capacities and achievement, concentrating instead on treating and correcting dysfunctional performance, while negative variables continued to occupy a central place in scholarly investigation.

However, positive psychology emerged to restore balance to these findings by focusing on the examination of positive traits and character strengths, alongside attention to psychological and social protective factors for chronic conditions. This approach aims to assist health professionals in understanding the character strengths individuals use, which may be beneficial in developing specialized interventions for individuals with multiple disabilities.

Accordingly, this study, through its review of previous research findings, emphasized the importance of examining character strengths among individuals with disabilities and chronic health conditions worldwide. The growing body of research on positive psychological interventions—based on increasing awareness and use of character strengths—has provided strong evidence for achieving therapeutic goals, enhancing quality of life, and improving well-being among individuals with disabilities, as an alternative to deficit-focused approaches. Character strengths provide a language through which individuals can focus on positive psychological variables that may benefit both themselves and their communities.

The present study addressed the identification of distinctive character strengths within a multidimensional disability context, encompassing individuals with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities, as well as disabilities arising at different developmental stages, such as intellectual disabilities (IDG) and permanent disabilities related to traumatic brain injury (TBI). While the character strengths of individuals with these disabilities may differ from those of individuals with more severe disabilities, previous research has established the presence of shared character strengths among individuals with disabilities, including love of learning, honesty, appreciation of beauty and excellence, kindness and generosity, and fairness. These findings provide a broader understanding of character strengths among a heterogeneous population of individuals with disabilities and may offer researchers and practitioners deeper insight into the effectiveness of positive psychological interventions for this unique group within society.

7. Conclusion

This research paper sought to identify positive psychological traits associated with disability, including specific character strengths that have been linked to several psychological variables, such as positive affect, life satisfaction, post-traumatic growth, and well-being. This orientation contrasts with the majority of studies conducted on this population, which have traditionally concentrated on illness, deficit, and functional impairment. Several researchers have argued that the mere identification and reporting of symptomatic health indicators is insufficient, and that stress and tension should not be viewed as the only possible experiences of individuals with disabilities. Rather, they emphasize the need to broaden research fields by addressing issues related to optimal health as an alternative framework, one that necessarily incorporates the domains of positive psychology, given that this contemporary movement is grounded in principles capable of transforming both research approaches and intervention methods for individuals with disabilities.

The present study highlights the necessity of establishing a degree of balance with regard to the content of research examining the experiences of individuals with disabilities. To date, and continuing to the present, the field of research has largely centered on the systematic examination of the challenges and stressors faced by individuals with disabilities across different categories. At the same time, ongoing efforts seek to identify the unique benefits that individuals with disabilities may acquire in comparison to able-bodied individuals, while taking into account the guidelines emphasized by disability researchers concerning the fallacy of comparing individuals with disabilities to non-disabled individuals—particularly in relation to understanding the experiences and beliefs of persons with disabilities. Such comparisons have, on many occasions, led to misinterpretations of these experiences, resulting in the attribution of blame to individuals with disabilities for an alleged failure to develop effective coping abilities, thereby contributing to increased pressure on this population. This underscores the responsibility of psychologists to emphasize the need to develop assessment tools specifically designed for individuals with disabilities, to involve their families as mediators in this process, and to work toward the development of positive psychological interventions tailored to this segment of society.

It is also important to note that this theoretical study did not include Arabic-language studies due to their scarcity, particularly those addressing character strengths among individuals with disabilities across different categories. This limitation persists despite the fact that previous research findings have underscored the importance of employing strengths-based psychological approaches, given their contribution to enriching understanding of the experiences of individuals with disabilities. Such approaches can enhance collective awareness of the experiences carried by these distinctive individuals—not only as a consequence of exposure to various stressors and challenges, but also through the assets and competencies they possess, which have contributed to improving quality of life and adaptive capacity. The indicators of these processes may be positively reflected in the enhancement of well-being, thereby enabling greater levels of growth and flourishing for this group within society.

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