Who is a Good Person?

Overview of Contemporary Personality Theories and Psychological Conceptualizations of Virtues

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Who is a good person?
Overview of Contemporary Personality Theories and Psychological Conceptualizations of Virtues

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Illuminating Theology with Psychological Science

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Many Thanks

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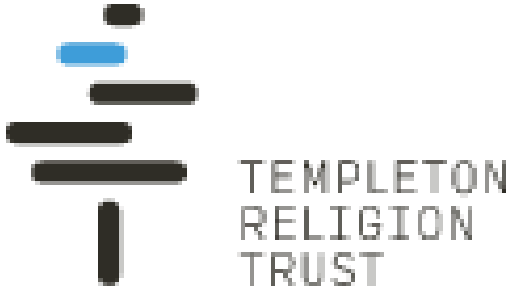

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What are virtues?

- As a psychologist…..

What are virtues?

- As a psychologist…..

What are virtues?
Ratchford, Pawl, & Schnitker (under review)

Virtues are

"(a) dispositional (b) deep-seated (c) habits (d) that contribute to flourishing and (e) that produce activities with the following three features: they are (f) done well, (g) not done poorly, and (h) in accordance with the right motivation and reason."

(Ratchford, Pawl, Jeffrey, & Schnitker, 2023, p. 5)

Common Characteristics (that may or may not fit the definition):

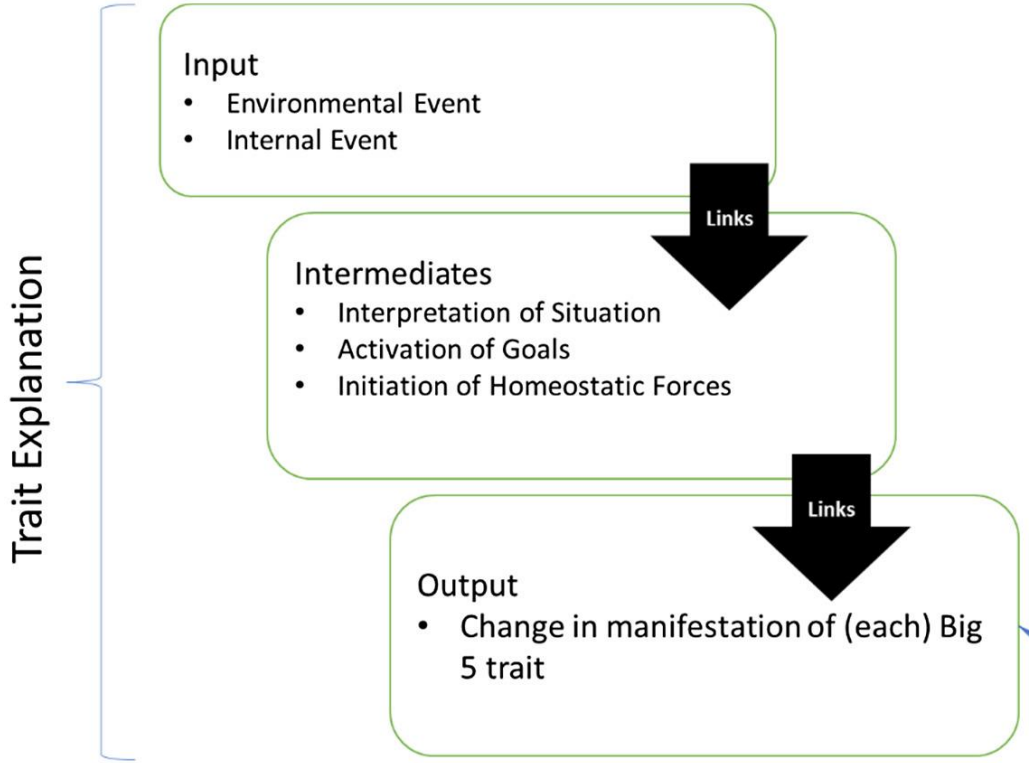
- Acquired by cultivation
- Activity is situated at the mean

What can we learn from psychological science?

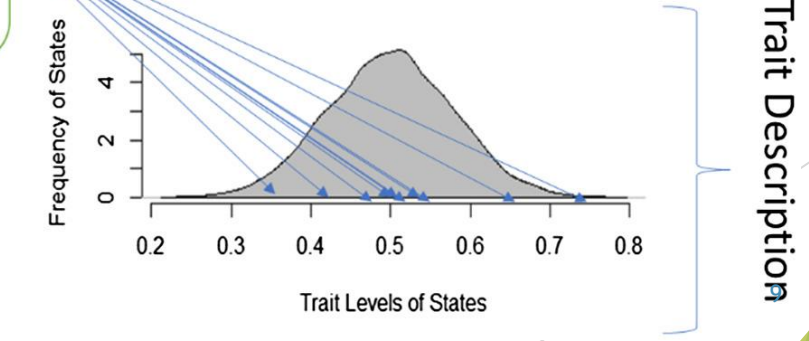
How do we conceptualize virtues within the personality system?

- Levels of personality:
  - Traits
  - Characteristic Adaptations/Motivations
  - Narrative Identity
- View 1: Virtues as traits within Whole Trait Theory conceptualization
  - Fleeson, Jayawickreme
- View 2: Virtues as characteristic adaptations connected to a transcendent narrative identity
  - Schnitker, Lapsley, Lerner

View 1: Whole Trait Theory

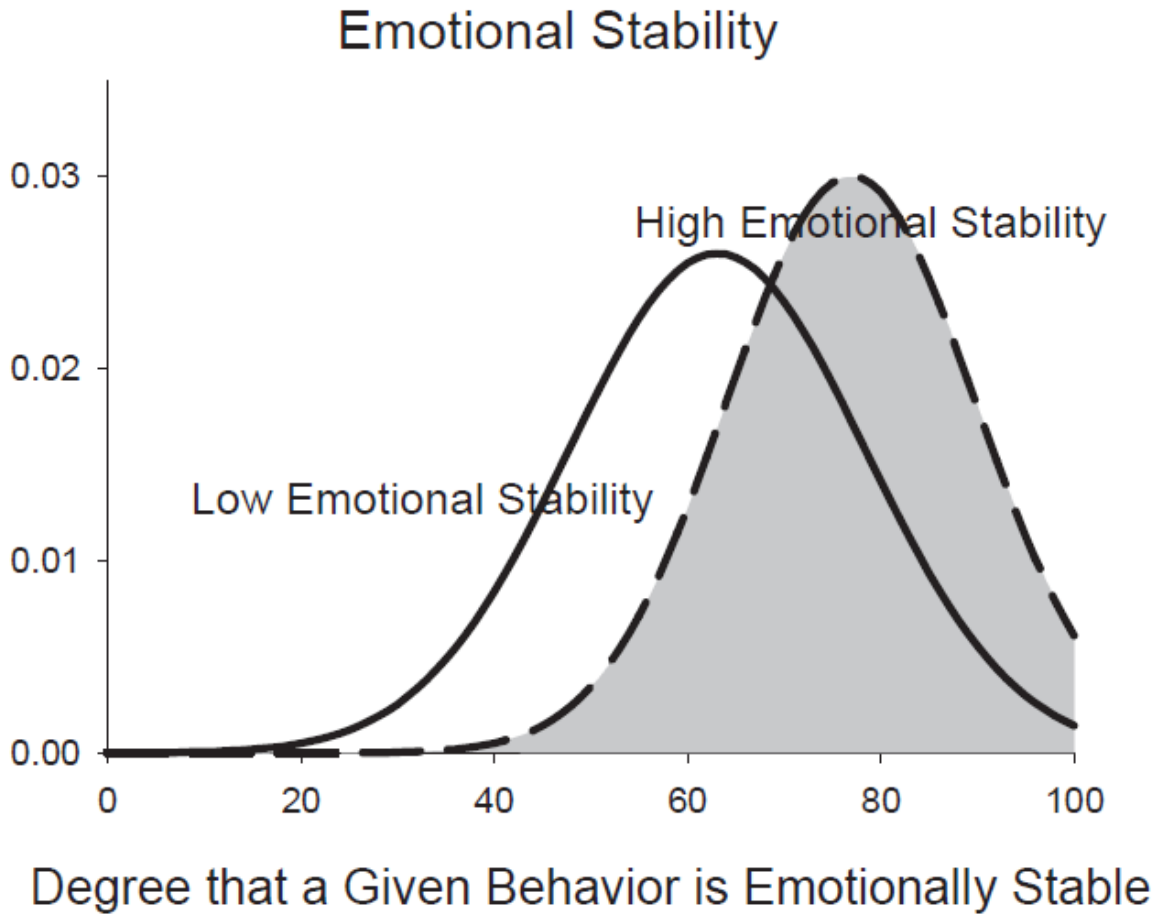


- Big Five Traits or *HEXACO*
  - Extraversion
  - Neuroticism/Emotional Stability
  - Agreeableness
  - Conscientiousness
  - Openness/Intellect
  - *Honesty/Humility*



Prentice, Jayawickreme, & Fleeson, 2019

Whole Traits



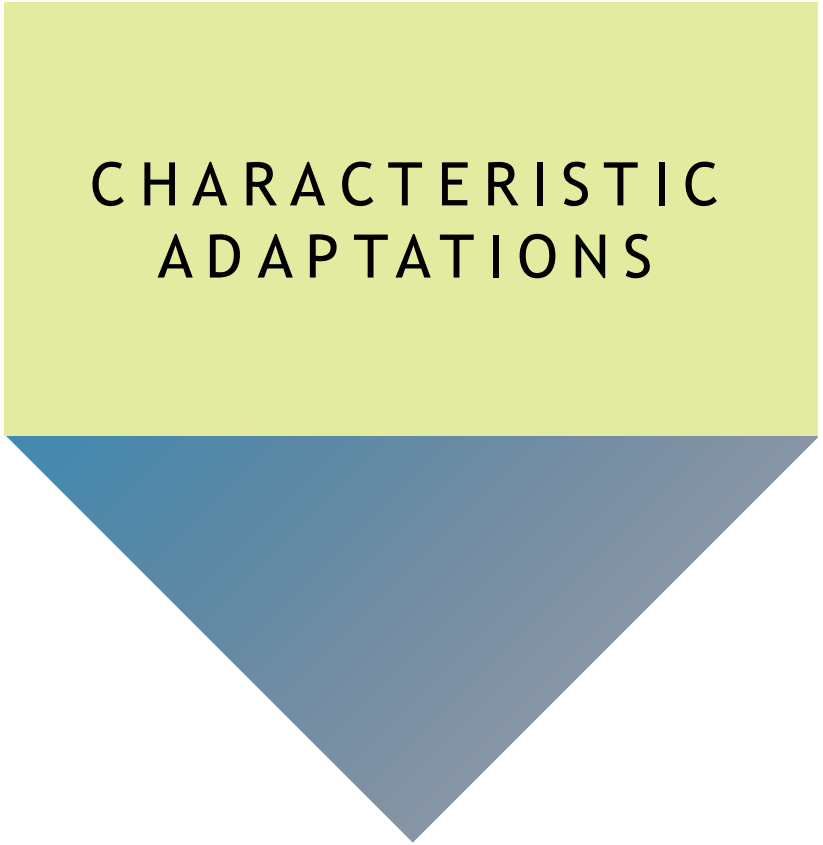
Fleeson, W., & Gallagher, P. (2009). The implications of big five standing for the distribution of trait manifestation in behavior: Fifteen experience-sampling studies and a meta-analysis. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 97(6), 1097–1114. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016786.

View 2:
Virtues as characteristic adaptations connected to a transcendent narrative identity

Schnitker, Lapsley, Lerner

Characteristic Adaptations

- Characteristic adaptations
  - Goals/motives
  - Schemas (e.g., internal working models)
  - Strategies (e.g., emotion regulation strategies)
- Psychological habits (e.g. curiosity, grit, bravery, self-control, emotion regulation)



(See McAdams & Pals, 2006; Schnitker et al., 2019)

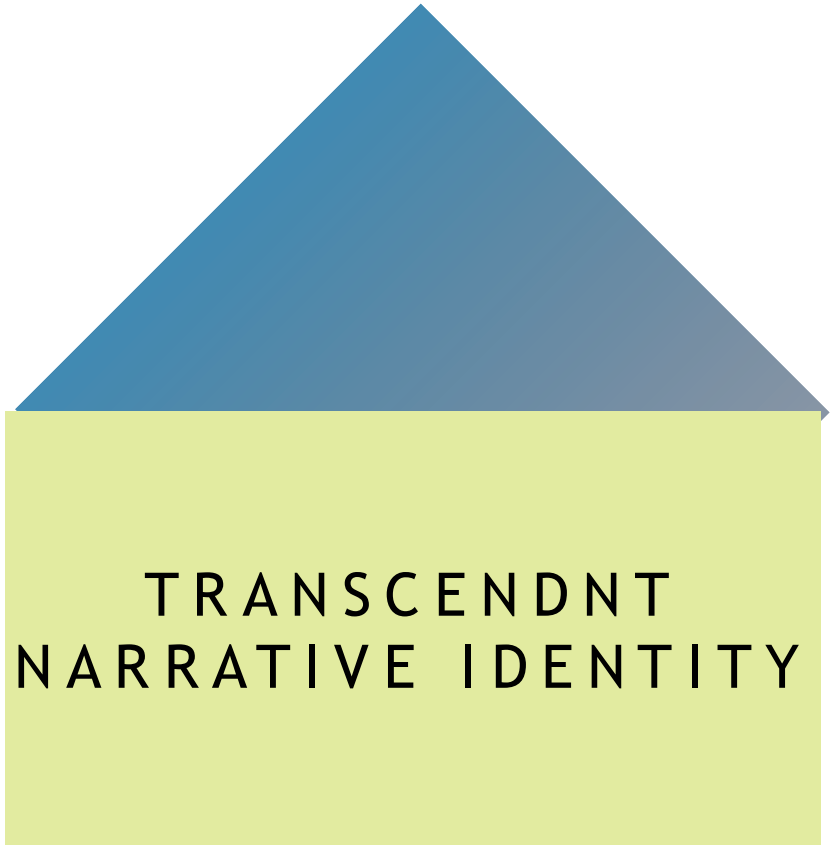
(Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir; Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2012)

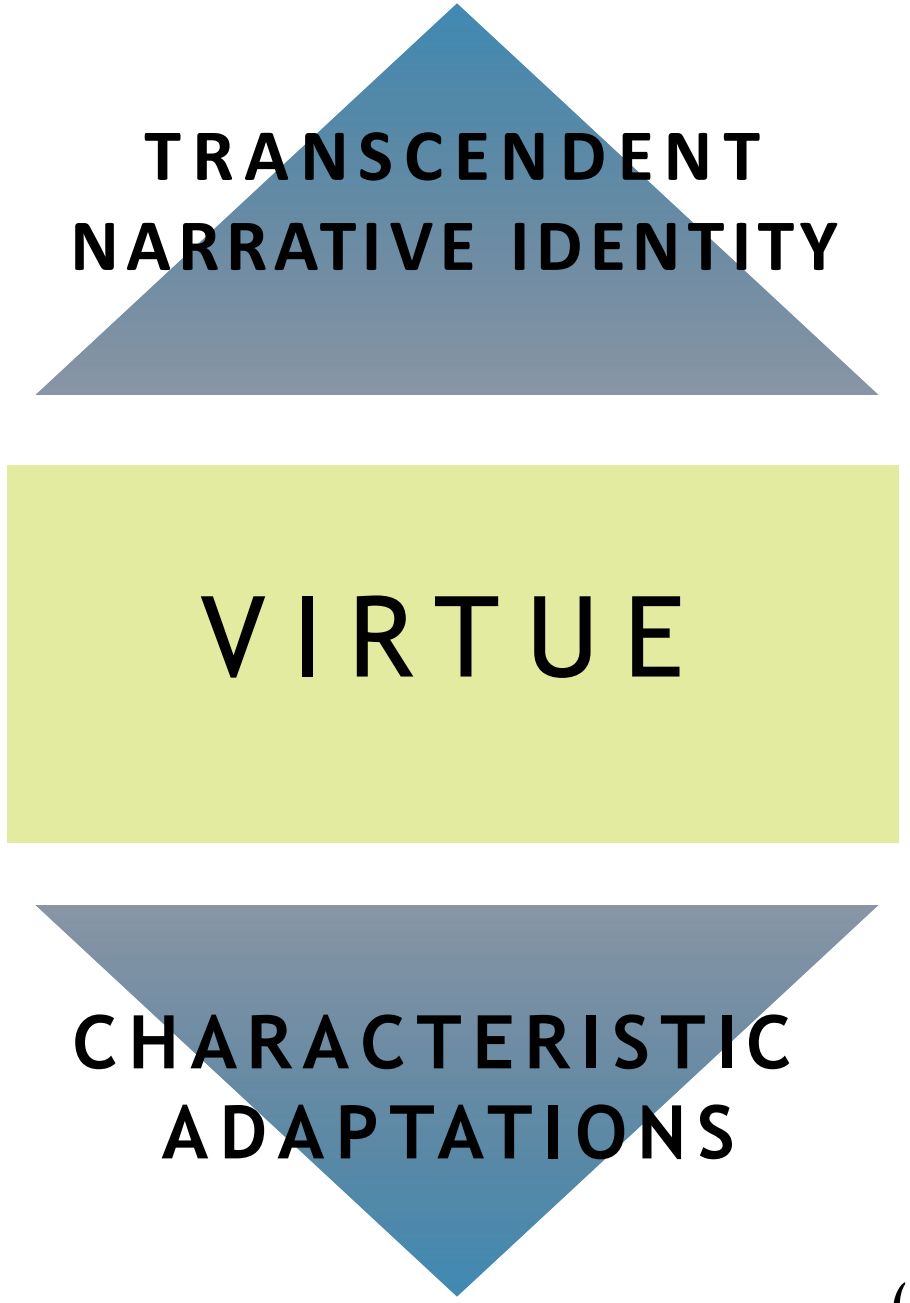
Narrative Identity

- Virtues can only be enacted and formed in the context of a community-based narrative (MacIntyre, 2007)
- Life story that provides a coherent framework for enacting virtue

Transcendent Narrative Identity

- Narratives that demonstrate deep commitment to transcendence, or beyond-the-self ideals.
- Provides meaning or moral compass for the characteristic adaptations
- A variety of cultural master narratives may fit this description.



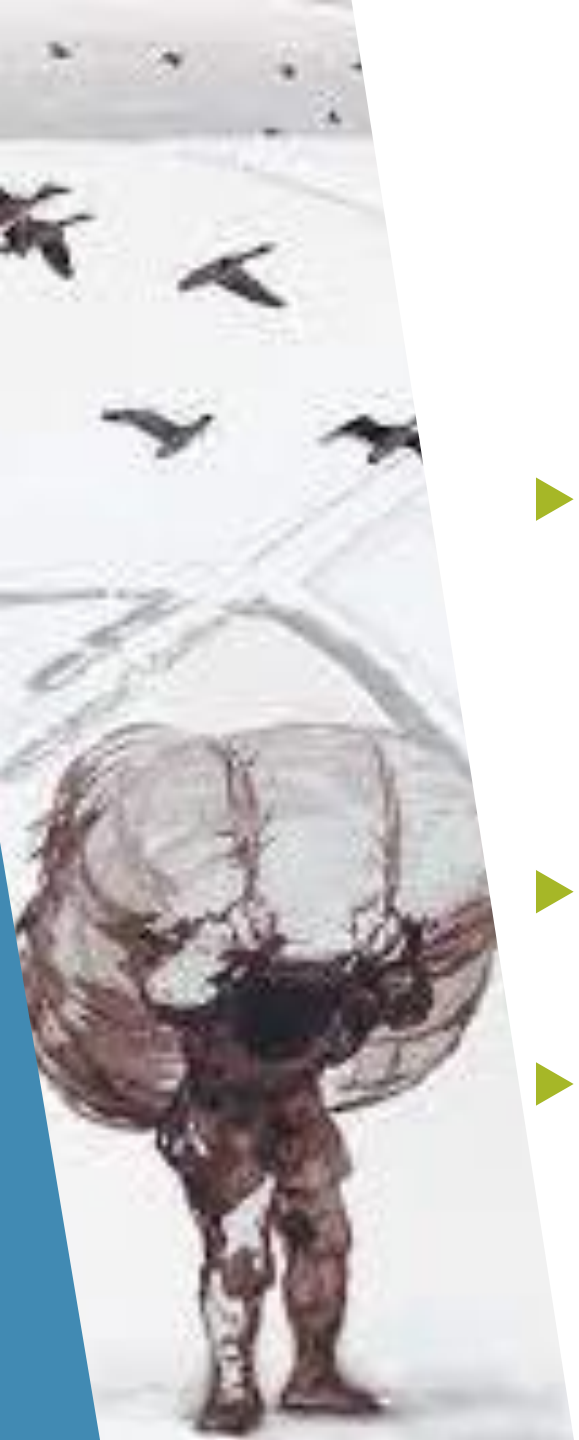


(See Schnitker et al., 2019)

Character Strength	→	Virtue
Emotion Regulation	→	Patience
Optimism	→	Hope
Happiness	→	Joy

- According to this model, to develop virtues…
  - Help people build characteristic adaptations that undergird virtues
  - Help people construct a coherent narrative identity within a community
- Accentuates the role of religion and spirituality in virtue formation

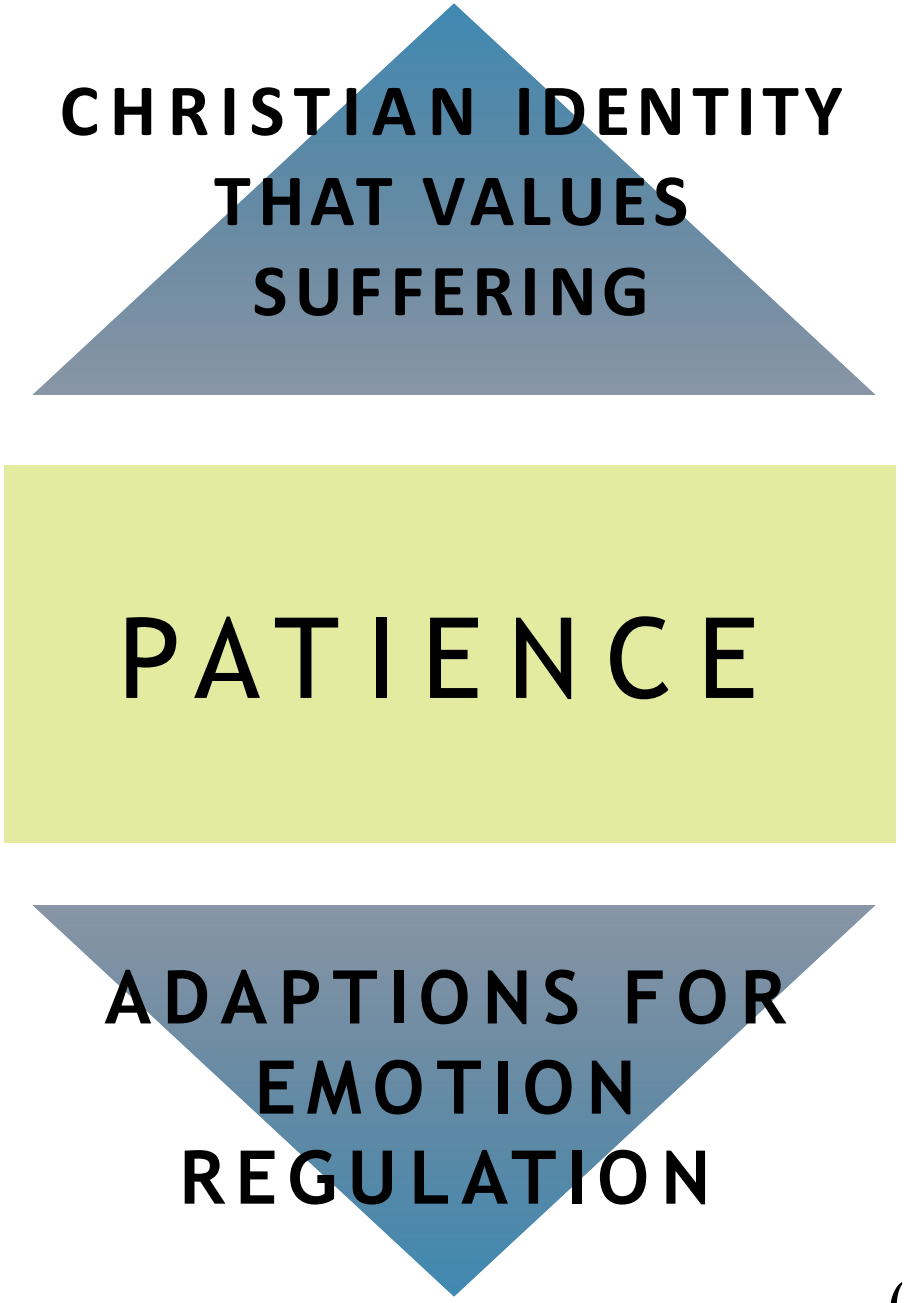
Patience



Patience

- The propensity of a person to be calm in the face of frustration, adversity, or suffering
  - Sources of frustration may be interpersonal, life hardships, or daily hassles
- From the Latin root *pati*, which means ‘to suffer’
- The virtue of patience requires motivation for goal pursuit that is moral—or at least self-transcendent

(*Schnitker, 2012; Schnitker, King, & Houltberg, 2019*)



(See Schnitker et al., 2019)

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY THAT VALUES SUFFERING

PATIENCE

ADAPTIONS FOR EMOTION REGULATION

(See Schnitker et al., 2019)

To cultivate patience…

1. Help people **build characteristic adaptations** that undergird patience through embodied practices.

2. Help people **construct a coherent narrative identity** that values suffering.

3. Provide **reflection opportunities** for people to **connect** their identity to their characteristic adaptations.

But I'm still a psychological scientist….
I need data!

How can empirical evidence support or falsify this model?

What do the data say?

- Is a transcendent, beyond-the-self purpose more effective in cultivating patience?
  - Experimental
  - Quasi-experimental longitudinal

Experimental Designs

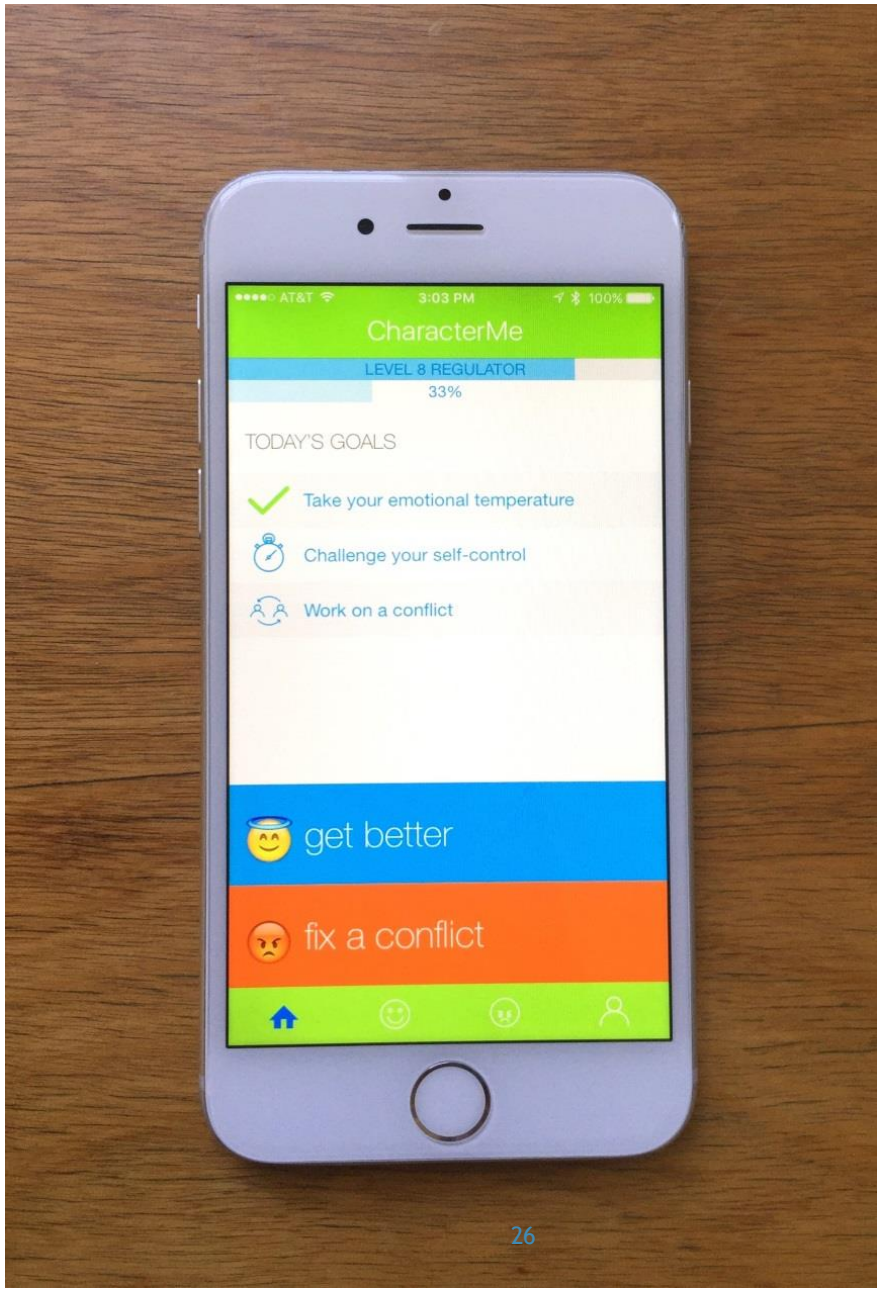
Study 1

Random Assignment

STUDY 1
Building Virtue Through Technology: CharacterMe App

- How might framing activities as moral, spiritual, or instrumental affect their efficacy?

(Schnitker, Shubert, Ratchford, Lumpkin, & Houltberg, 2021, *Frontiers in Psychology*)



Study Design

Orientation	Framing: Spiritual	Framing: Moral	Framing: Instrumental
Build Strengths	Grow spiritually, build connection	Become a good person	Enhance performance
Work on Weaknesses	Fix spiritual weaknesses	Don't be a bad person	Don't lose

Participants

618 high schooler students used the app for two weeks

- mean age = 16.07, SD = 0.99
- 56.8% female
- Ethnicity
  - 41.3% Asian/Asian Am.
  - 29.5% Latino/a
  - 12.9% White
  - 4.8% Black

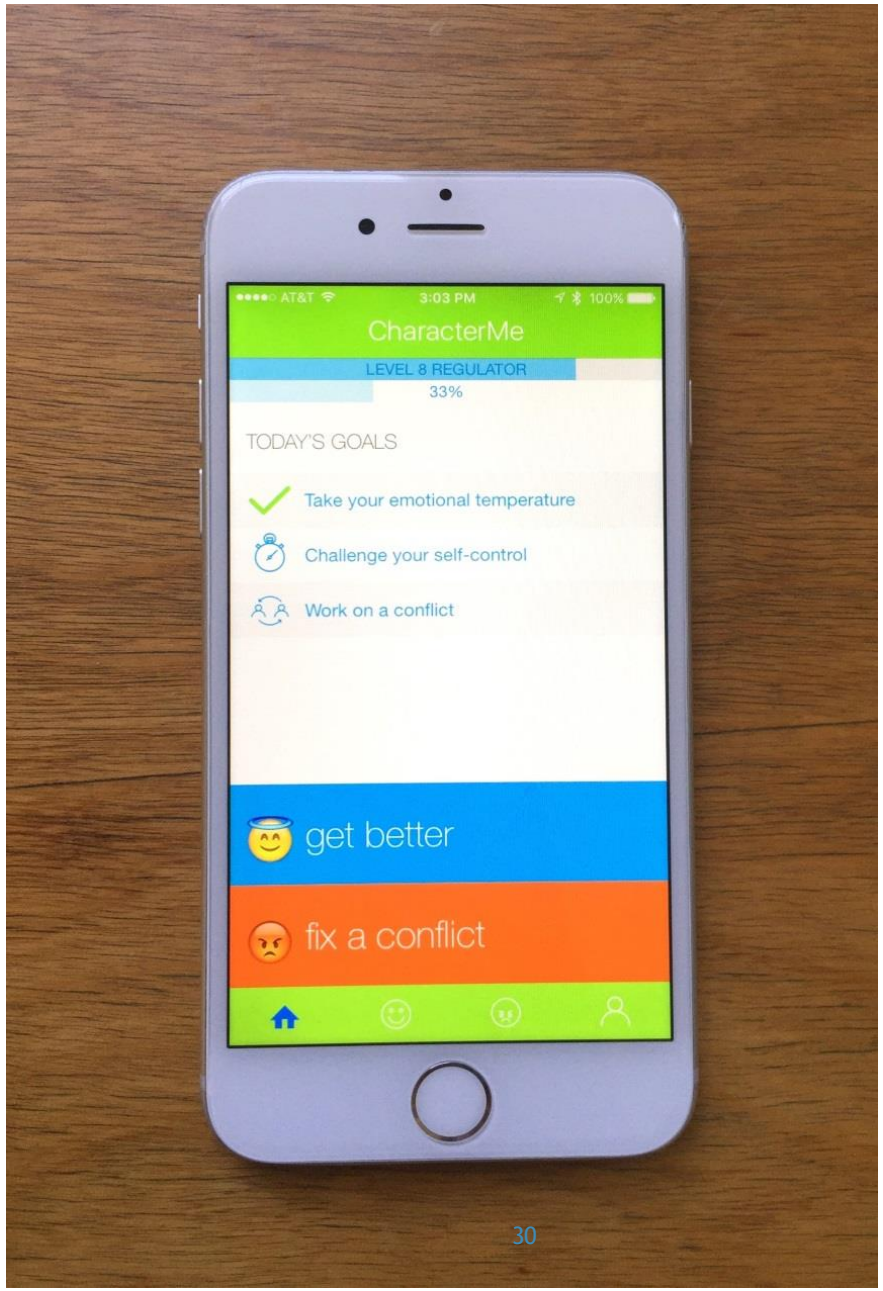
Results

- *Latent Growth Curve Models estimated to examine within-person change from pre-app to 6-months later over four measurement occasions*
- As a group, people did not change, but there was variability in their individual trajectories
- More days in the app = increases in life hardships patience
- Framings
  - Moral avoidance framing = increases in life hardships and interpersonal patience
  - Spiritual approach framing = increases in interpersonal patience
  - No significant effects for self-control or emotion regulation skills

Study 1: Building Virtue Through Technology: CharacterMe App

- Framing intervention activities as having a moral or spiritual purpose sometimes increases patience, but not self-control or emotion regulation

(Schnitker, Shubert, Ratchford, Lumpkin, & Houltberg, 2021, *Frontiers in Psychology*)



Naturalistic Quasi-Experimental Designs

Studies 2 and 3

Effects of real-world interventions across time

STUDY 2: Motivations for Marathon Training Team World Vision

"a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice"

(World Vision, 2015)

“It’s probably the hardest thing I’ve ever done, and in terms of suffering, it’s definitely suffering. I would never run a marathon or race for fun because it hurts too much. I think, in the midst of that suffering, you get a glimpse into what it’s like to walk miles and miles to get water that’s not even clean. I think that’s why I run, because I want to feel that - to know what it’s like. I want to be able to join with those people and then in the end to give them the opportunity to not have to feel that anymore.”

Team World Vision Results

- 396 adolescent and emerging adult runners completed questionnaires at four time points across six months
- Bivariate latent growth curve models used to examine how changes in motivations (spiritual, prosocial, fitness/health) affected change in virtues.
  - Change in both prosocial and spiritual motivations positively related to change in all virtues (patience, generosity, self-control).
    - Particularly large effect for spiritual motivation → patience.
  - Change in fitness motivation NOT correlated with change.

(Schnitker, Gilbertson, Houltberg, Hardy, & Fernandez, 2020, *Journal of Personality*)

STUDY 3
Does Ramadan Serve as a Naturalistic Intervention for Daily Character Development?

- Muslim American adolescents (13-18 years, $M = 16.5$, $SD = 1.5$; 62.5% female)
- Situational patience, compassion, gratitude, and connectedness to Allah assessed 3 times/day for 7 days via random surveys sent to their smartphones.
- Three waves: one week before, one week during, and one week after Ramadan

(Balkaya-Ince, Tahseen, Umarji, & Schnitker, 2023, J. of Positive Psychology)

Within-In Person Changes Among Adolescents

- Results indicated that adolescents grew more connected to Allah and exhibited greater inhibitory self-control, initiatory self-control, and patience in their daily lives from pre-Ramadan to Ramadan
- Elevated effects continued after Ramadan for initiatory self-control and patience.
- Compassion was lower after Ramadan than before or during.

	Before Ramadan	During Ramadan	After Ramadan
Connectedness with Allah	Lower	Higher	Lower
Inhibitory Self-Control	Lower	Higher	Lower
Initiatory Self-Control	Lower	Higher	Higher
Patience	Lowest	Highest	Medium
Compassion	Higher	Higher	Lower

(Balkaya-Ince, Tahseen, Umarji, & Schnitker, 2023, J. of Positive Psychology)

What do the data say?

- Is a transcendent, beyond-the-self purpose more effective in cultivating patience?
  - Experimental
  - Quasi-experimental longitudinal
    - Experience sampling methodology

Yes

  - Additional designs to test the question:
    - Correlational
    - Experiments in the laboratory
    - Longitudinal

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