Thinking about the virtues of character measurement
- Emma Taylor
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In 2014, our Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues annual conference was centred on the theme ‘Can virtue be measured?’.

We heard from keynote speakers and panellists, experts in their field from Europe, Asia, North America and Australasia, who gave philosophical perspectives on moral judgement and goodness, practice-based examples of character education in schools and character development through volunteering, and explanations of recent scientific work on neuro-imaging. As well as showing just how far interest in character has reached on an international and disciplinary level, the conference was also notable for the fact that many of our speakers agreed that, although it is complex and the way we do it often depends upon the context, ultimately, yes we can measure virtue, or at least aspects of it.

It’s a mark of how far the debate has progressed in even this short space of time that the questions we’re asking in 2016 are not whether or not we can measure virtue, or character, but rather how, and how best to do so.¹

It’s worth explaining upfront what exactly we at the Jubilee Centre mean by ‘virtue’ and ‘character’, while character may have entered the mainstream in government policy and education particularly over the past few years, we’re aware that virtue is still little-used outside academia.

¹ The Department for Education’s 2015-16 character grants scheme put £3.5 million into funding character building programmes in order to ‘provide evidence on effective practice and resources that will be shared with all schools across the country’ (see https://www.gov.uk/government/news/rugby-coaches-to-be-drafted-in-to-help-build-grit-in-pupils).
Informed by the work of Aristotle and the philosophy of virtue ethics, at the Jubilee Centre we see character as a set of personal qualities or dispositions that evoke specific emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct – the positive qualities or dispositions within character being ‘virtues’ for us, or what others might call ‘character strengths’ or ‘life skills’. We see there being four main virtue ‘types’, though the boundaries between these are fluid.

The diagram below explains this typology:

**VIRTUE TYPOLOGY**

The following types of character strengths are developed and practiced through opportunities to participate in real life experiences which make a positive difference. These are placed within the Jubilee Centre’s four, fluid virtue categories:

**MORAL**

Those which enable us to respond well to situations in any area of expertise.

Examples: courage; compassion; gratitude; friendliness and forming friendships; hope and optimism; pride; trust; patience; kindness; honesty; empathy.

**INTELLECTUAL**

Those required for the pursuit of knowledge, truth and understanding

Examples: reflection; cooperation; tolerance; respect; critical thinking; reason and judgement; curiosity; communication; resourcefulness; open-mindedness.

**PERFORMANCE**

Behavioural capabilities and psychological capacities that enable us to put many other virtues into practice

Examples: Resilience; perseverance and determination; self-discipline; leadership; teamwork; problem-solving; confidence; creativity.

**CIVIC**

Those necessary for engagement and responsible citizenship.

Examples: service; citizenship; community awareness; volunteering; social justice.

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2 Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. 2013. Framework for Character Education.
"In that spirit, at the Jubilee Centre, we’ve worked hard on contributing to a wider understanding of measuring character."

The Jubilee Centre applies this understanding and conception of character to a variety of projects on character in British society, with our thirty-strong team of academics undertaking research on subjects ranging from character in the British army and professions such as nursing, business and finance, to character education in schools and character development in young people in different contexts, including youth social action (activities young people do to help others and the environment, such as volunteering, campaigning and fundraising).

What each of these projects has at its heart is the notion that character is important, because it contributes both to human and societal flourishing, and promotes democratic citizenship because it’s all about how we interact with and treat others.

So, the question of how character and virtue are measured – and indeed, how character education interventions are measured – is profoundly important to our work. There is a huge range of qualitative and quantitative measures of character: from diaries, interviews and observations to other kinds of psychometric tests and surveys. There are those which focus on a whole environment, like a school or programme, and others which focus on the individual.

At the Jubilee Centre, we recognise that there are both challenges and limitations when it comes to measuring character. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do it; we ought to face up to the challenge of finding better ways to measure character but we also need to proceed with caution, honesty, and humility about what is possible to achieve and the extent to which we’re able to arrive at a gold-standard, catch-all, valid measure which can be applied in any situation, whether by researchers or by practitioners.

In that spirit, at the Jubilee Centre, we’ve worked hard on contributing to a wider understanding of measuring character.

To showcase one example of how we’ve attempted to assess virtue at the Jubilee Centre, and highlight the complications of doing so, let’s take a look at one of the most extensive studies of character education ever undertaken: our Character Education in UK Schools project led by Professor James Arthur, Professor Kristjan Kristjansson, and Dr David Walker.

Involving over 10,000 students and 255 teachers in schools across the UK, Jubilee Centre researchers on our Character Education in UK Schools project used a multi-method approach, as the most promising means for the measurement of virtue. This study brought together three different methods: the Values in Action survey (ViA), interviews with teachers about their students’ character strengths and the UK version of the Intermediate Concept Measure for Adolescents – Ad-ICM (UK).

The ViA survey is a psychometric test which asks individuals to report on their own ‘character strengths’. Created in the early noughties, Dr Martin Seligman and Dr Chris Petersen, key players in the field of positive psychology, developed a list of 24 strengths they think are most important. The Character Education in UK Schools project used the ViA to measure students’ character strengths, using the 96-item version. It has its limitations, as do all self-report measures.

There can be ceiling effects, for example, whereby all or most participants score themselves very highly, and therefore meaning there is little variation between their answers. Another problem can be social desirability bias, with participants answering according to what they think is the ‘right’ answer.

The ViA is, nonetheless, one of the most widely used measures in this area and the adult version has been tried and tested in various studies and by over 3.8 million people on the ViA website alone.

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3 www.viacharacter.org
The youth version of the ViA asks young people to decide the extent to which they think that a series of statements on the various character strengths are like them or not. The idea is that these statements tap into the 24 strengths and reveal what a person is really like.

Alongside this, in interviews with teachers, the Character Education in UK Schools researchers asked what they thought about the character of a particular year group at their school, and we triangulated the findings from this with the ViA results. Teachers were presented with the list of 24 strengths, asked to consider the children in their year group, and choose the three most pronounced strengths and the three least pronounced strengths among the students. They were then asked how often they observed particular strengths being displayed by the students over the previous few months.

Finally, the Schools of Character study used the Ad-ICM (UK): three ‘moral dilemmas’, presenting everyday situations for which students decide upon the best course of action for the protagonist and why.

The dilemmas emphasised situations where honesty, courage and self-discipline were required, ‘chosen because they measure virtues that seem uncontested across cultures and because they also match qualities measured by the ViA Youth Survey’ (Arthur et al. 2015). There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer to the dilemmas but students’ responses were scored according to previously made decisions by an expert panel, which judged potential responses as adequate, inadequate or neutral. All responses were calculated to demonstrate the extent to which participants matched expert panel judgements.

In this Character Education in UK Schools study, researchers found that the best way to get close to assessing virtue is through a combination of methods, partly because of the disparity between what people say and what they do. Triangulating students’ self-reports along with teachers’ impressions and the students’ responses to the moral dilemmas helped to build a wider picture of school environments, encompassing a range of schools and students. The use of previously validated measures also enabled comparisons with other, international studies in this area and has contributed to our understanding of character strengths in young people and their ethical reasoning, though it is still early days for this kind of research.

In terms of the moral dilemmas, the Character Education in UK Schools study looked at virtues on a whole-school level and found there to be no major differences in total scores between different types of school (regionally, faith- and non-faith based, large and small, state and independent) but did find that students who said that they took part in social action, music/choir, drama or art/photography were on average more likely to achieve higher Ad-ICM scores.

Indeed, there has, recently, been a lot of focus on the link between character and social action. In the three years, for instance, since the Jubilee Centre first pledged to the #iwill campaign (the cross-sector, cross-party campaign aiming to make involvement in youth social action the norm for 10-20 year olds across the UK by 2020), we’ve seen considerable investment in this area.

At the Jubilee Centre, we’ve looked in depth at how youth social action providers conceptualise character development through their programmes in our Building Character through Youth Social Action study, interviewing the CEOs of 23 providers, who, collectively, work with over a million young people, operating across the UK.

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You can read about this project and our findings on this blog that we wrote for the Centre for Youth Impact last year.

There’s also been the recent study by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), Evaluating Youth Social Action, which involved RCTs and a pre/post comparison of youth social action programmes. They used previously validated self-report measures and asked young people about the extent to which they agreed with statements related to six character strengths or ‘soft skills’.

BIT found that social action programmes had significant impacts on young participants’ empathy, cooperation, grit and resilience. This is especially interesting because much research on social action and character has been qualitative or has just focused on pre/post comparisons, mainly because of funding and resource limitations, so it’s one of the few studies which looks at character and social action on this scale.

So, what else is coming up in this area? Our own research is currently exploring what a habit of social action is for young people and whether civic virtues are also more likely to be part of the character of those who have made a habit of social action than those who haven’t. We can’t go into much more detail on how we’re doing this as the research is currently in the field, but we’ve created and piloted a new measure which will tell us if our hunch is right.

There are still gaps in the research, of course, and as interest continues to grow in this area we hope to see much more work on character development, particularly in relation to social action.

The DfE has set aside £2million as part of its Character Education Grant Programme for 2016-17 to fund character-building projects for 5-16 year olds, and successful organisations will need to show how they plan to evaluate their programmes.

At the Jubilee Centre, we’re working with the Centre for Youth Impact to produce a new evaluation handbook, which provides advice, guidance and tools for schools and organisations to self-evaluate their own character education provision.

Along with this, 2017 will also see the release of findings from all the Jubilee Centre studies that are currently in progress, including our habit of social action project.

We expect all of this research to help shift the dial on evidence-based policy and practice when it comes to character. If just two years ago we were asking whether virtue can be measured at all, it’s exciting to imagine the kind of questions we might be asking in the next couple of years.

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About the Centre for Youth Impact

The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations committed to working together to progress thinking and practice around evidence and impact measurement in work with young people.

We offer:

- A ‘route in’ to information, support and discussion in relation to evidence and impact
- Local and national events where you can collaborate with others, learn and build momentum
- Resources to support meaningful impact measurement
- An inclusive platform to promote debate and ideas

Learn more & take part:

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