

## Relations Between Family Support and Character Strengths in Adolescents

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### Abstract

This study aimed to verify whether family support has an impact on the development of character strengths in adolescents. For this purpose, we analyzed data from 304 elementary and high school students, with ages ranging from 13 and 20, of both sexes. The results indicated that the character strengths with greater predictive power over the three factors of the Perception of Family Support Inventory (*Inventário de Percepção do Suporte Familiar -IPSF*) were gratitude, vitality and creativity. In addition, it was observed that some strengths were more present in the regression analyses, in two of the three factors of the IPSF, namely: love, wisdom, love of learning, creativity and modesty. It is believed that if the family is capable to offer an environment that provides room for the development of character strengths in adolescents, these positive characteristics may be experienced more frequently and in other situations.

*Keywords:* positive psychology; positive characteristics; family

### Relações Entre Suporte Familiar e Forças de Caráter em Adolescentes

#### Resumo

Esse estudo objetivou verificar se o suporte familiar tem impacto no desenvolvimento de forças de caráter de adolescentes. Para isso, participaram da pesquisa 304 alunos do Ensino Fundamental e Médio, com idades variando entre 13 e 20 anos, ambos os sexos. Os resultados indicaram que as forças de caráter com maior poder de predição em relação aos três fatores do instrumento de avaliação do suporte familiar (*Inventário de Percepção do Suporte Familiar -IPSF*) foram a gratidão, a vitalidade e a criatividade. Além disso, foi observado que algumas forças estiveram mais presentes nas análises de regressão, em dois dos três fatores do IPSF, sendo elas, amor, sensatez, amor ao aprendizado, criatividade e modéstia. Acredita-se que se a família for capaz de oferecer um ambiente propício que ofereça espaço para o desenvolvimento das forças de caráter de adolescentes, essas características positivas poderão ser vivenciadas mais frequentemente e em outras situações.

*Palavras-chave:* psicologia positiva, características positivas, família

### Relaciones Entre Apoyo Familiar y Fuerzas de Carácter en Adolescentes

#### Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo verificar si el apoyo familiar tiene impacto en el desarrollo de las fuerzas de carácter de los adolescentes. Participaron de la investigación 304 alumnos de Enseñanza Primaria y Secundaria, con edades entre 13 y 20 años, de ambos sexos. Los resultados indicaron que las fuerzas de carácter con mayor poder de predicción en relación a los tres factores del instrumento de evaluación de apoyo familiar (*Inventario de Percepción del apoyo familiar - IPSF*) fueron; gratitud, vitalidad y creatividad. Además, se observó que algunas fuerzas estuvieron más presentes en los análisis de regresión, en dos de los tres factores del IPSF, siendo ellas, amor, sensatez, amor al aprendizaje, creatividad y modestia. Se supone que si la familia es capaz de proporcionar un entorno propicio que ofrezca un espacio para el desarrollo de las fuerzas de carácter de los adolescentes, estas características positivas pueden experimentarse con mayor frecuencia y en otras situaciones.

*Palabras clave:* psicología positiva; características positivas; familia

The family is understood as the primary network of social interaction and a provider of indispensable support for the maintenance of physical and psychological integrity, exercising the functions of protection, affection and social formation (Campos, 2004). As emphasized by Biasoli-Alves (2004), the family corresponds to the social group that exerts a marked influence on the life of the people, being seen

as a complex organization, inserted in a social context with which it maintains constant interaction. For Teodoro (2009) it is important pay attention to the new family configurations in the current society. According to Souza, Baptista and Baptista (2010), in fulfilling these functions and being perceived as affectionate, cohesive, with good communication, and with flexible rules, but with clear limits and boundaries, the family

is able to provide its members with basic conditions for individual development and may be understood as a support system.

The provision and receipt of family support directly influence the physical, psychological and social well-being of the individual, such that the lack of this resource may be one of the predisposing factors to mental illness. More specifically, the provision and receipt of support from family members are fundamental sources for the promotion of benefits in physical and psychological processes (Baptista, Rigotto, Cardoso, & Rueda, 2012; Souza & Baptista, 2008). In this regard, Baptista et al. (2012) found that perceptions of affection, adaptation and autonomy from the family context were correlated to the increase in the number of people perceived as supportive. The more affection the individual receives early in life, the greater will be his willingness to face and overcome stressful events, since affection is developed from infancy and can protect children from internal and external stressors (Weinman, Buzi, Smith & Mumford, 2003), substance abuse (Santander et al., 2008), and depression (Park & Peterson, 2008).

Andolfi, Ângelo, Nicolo-Corigliano and Menghi (1994) argue that it is through the family that the individual builds himself psychologically. He or she gradually passes through several stages, from a nondifferentiation state, in which he still perceives himself in a process of symbiosis, to a state of individualization, in which he becomes independent, that is, an individual ready to live in society and to take action in the face of joys and challenges. Over the last few decades, a number of studies have been conducted to examine the role of parents in the development and behavior of their children, especially in relation to personality traits. The influence of the family contributes to the construction and expression of positive traits. There is recent evidence among adolescents from the general population that the perception of a positive family functioning is associated to a stronger perception of their own character strengths (Raimundi, Molina, Schmidt, & Hernández-Mendo, 2016). It is in this context that the present study is inserted, that is, it is interested in the relation between the provision of family support and character strengths. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) argue that character strengths and morality issues among young people have received national attention from politicians, educators, parents, and the public in general.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define character strengths as the pre-existing capacity for a particular

form of behavior, thought or feeling that is authentic and enables the individual to live close to optimal functioning. Park and Peterson (2006) sustain that strengths are positive characteristics essential for the individual to have a satisfactory life, and to study them allows for, the understanding of how individuals may reach more than the absence of anguish and disorder. As a criticism to the frequent studies related to mental pathology, Peterson and Seligman (2004) created a classification of character strengths called *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths*, in which they organized 24 strengths, distributed in six virtues.

Vela, Sparrow, Ikonomopoulos, Gonzalez, and Rodriguez (2016) investigated the associations between family support and character strengths. There were correlations between the dimension relationships (degree of cohesion among family members, freedom to express feelings and absence of conflict) and the strengths gratitude ( $r=0.47$ ) and love ( $r=0.51$ ), as well as with the development dimension (degree of interest/participation in social, intellectual and cultural policies and the importance given to the ethical and religious values), and the strengths spirituality ( $r=0.44$ ), appreciation of beauty ( $r=0.35$ ), creativity ( $r=0.33$ ) and love of learning ( $r=0.33$ ). The author concluded that the correlations indicate that certain characteristics of the family are associated to the development and/or maintenance of some character strengths in adolescents. The author also verified that a satisfactory relation with parents was significantly and negatively correlated with depression, stress, disability, and with a negative attitude in relation to school and tutors; and positively correlated with self-esteem, optimism, and different measures of satisfaction with life.

Taking into account how the family context affects indicators of positive development, Raimundi et al. (2016) chose to study character strengths, in order to understand the relation between family characteristics and strengths. The results indicated moderate correlations between family functioning (in the variables cohesion, flexibility, communication and parental challenge) and the strengths perseverance, vitality, hope, kindness and citizenship ( $r$  between 0.22 and 0.36). In relation to cohesion and flexibility, according to the authors, a high emotional attachment means that the parents of adolescents can be a great source of support. Parents can function as important individuals with whom adolescents can talk about what is happening in their lives and from whom they can get help and advice in difficult times.

Snyder and Lopez (2009) sustain that the environment greatly influences the development of the child's personality, as well as the strengthening of emotions and character strengths, so that in a promising and safe environment, in which the exercise of the potentialities is stimulated, individuals have more resources to perfect their skills. However, in a family and/or social context in which negative aspects stand out, children and adolescents learn that there are few resources to solve their problems, and they tend to face life with little enthusiasm and low resources for problem coping. According to the authors, it is through the initial family bonds that the child establishes his/her healthy emotional connections, which will allow him/her security for experiencing himself.

There is a long way to go regarding the understanding of the relations between the family context and the character strengths, since there are not many studies about it yet. In addition, as Vela, et al. (2016) pointed out, it is important to investigate the quality of parent-child relationships in the development of abilities related to the responsible and autonomous behavior of the youth, since perceptions of warmth, affection and safety expressed in the relationship with parents, relate to self-confidence, identity building, and adjustment of interactions with others.

## Method

### *Participants*

The study comprised 304 adolescents, aged between 13 and 20 years ( $M=15.62$ ,  $SD=.062$ ), from both sexes, being 67.8% female, including students from the 8th and 9th levels of elementary school and from the 3 levels of high school. Regarding parental marital status, 53.6% of adolescents had married parents. It was a convenience sample, and students were enrolled in one out of the 5 public schools in the countryside of the state of São Paulo.

### *Instruments*

#### Character Strengths Scale - Escala de Forças de Caráter (EFC)

The *Escala de Forças de Caráter* - EFC (Noronha & Barbosa, 2016) was developed for the Brazilian context based on the *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths* from Peterson and Seligman (2004), which describes 24 strength characters organized in six virtues. The scale is composed of 71 items, which

include questions in a 4-point Likert-like scale, being 0 for "nothing to do with me", 1 for "a little to do with me", 2 for "more or less to do with me", 3 for "a lot to do with me" and 4 for "everything to do with me". An example of item is "Giving is more important than receiving".

For the psychometric studies, Noronha, Dellazana-Zanon and Zanon (2015) investigated the most appropriate internal structure by distinct methods of factor extraction, analyzing 426 university students from public and private universities, from two states in the Southeast region of Brazil, with age range from 18 to 57 years, 67.9% female. The results revealed that the single factor solution was the most adequate. The analyses were conducted with second-order factors, taking as reference the 24 strengths. Noronha and Batista (2017) searched evidence of validity for Character Strengths Scale (EFC) based on the relationship with other variables, checking correlations between Responsiveness Scale and Parental Requirement (EREP) and parenting styles.

#### Perception of Family Support Inventory – Inventário de percepção de suporte familiar (IPSF)

The *Perception of Family Support Inventory* (Baptista, 2009) aims to assess how people perceive family relationships in terms of affectivity, autonomy and adaptation among members, being destined to the age range from 11 to 60 years. The instrument has 42 items, each in a three-point Likert scale, with 1 being "always or almost always", 2 "sometimes" and 3 "almost never or never". It is noteworthy that the IPSF has 3 factors, namely, Affective-Consistent, Family Adaptation and Family Autonomy. An example of item is "I believe my family has more emotional problems than other families".

To verify the accuracy of the instrument, 1,064 high school and university students were analyzed, with ages ranging from 17 to 64 years, from private and public institutions in the state of São Paulo. From the principal component analysis, three dimensions were identified. The reliability studies indicated alpha coefficients higher than .70 in all factors, showing excellent accuracy results. In the test-retest, Spearman's correlation coefficients were higher than .80 and were found to be satisfactory.

### *Proceedings*

Initially the project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of a private institution,

and after its approval, contact was made with the educational institutions for data collection. Because it was a survey with adolescents under 18 years of age, all information and guidelines were passed, as well as the signing of the Informed Consent Form (ICF), which was handed to the students so that they could hand over to parents. The EFC and IPSF instruments, being applied collectively, during approximately 45 minutes, followed the administrations.

#### Data analysis

In order to meet the objectives of the present study, more specifically, to investigate the relationship between family support and character strengths, a linear regression with the enter method was performed. As dependent variables, the factors of the Perception of Family Support Inventory (IPSF) were considered separately, and the 24 character strengths were inserted as independent variables.

### Results

The results are organized by factors of the IPSF, so that Table 1 shows the prediction of the Affective-Consistent factor in relation to the strengths. Table 2 presents the prediction of factor 2 (Family Adaptation) and, finally, Table 3 shows information on the Family Autonomy factor.

From Table 1 it can be observed that in the Affective-Consistent factor the strength that presented the largest variance explained was gratitude, with a total of 12%. It is noted that considering the strengths gratitude, prudence, love, wisdom, love of learning, appreciation of beauty, spirituality, creativity and curiosity, the value of prediction reaches 30%.

In Table 2, linear regression values can be observed, and in the Family Adaptation factor of the IPSF, vitality explained only 3% of the variance. However, it is worth pointing out that the grouping of the strengths vitality, citizenship, justice, modesty, gratitude, self-regulation, hope, and wisdom indicated a variance of 23%.

Table 3 shows the regression values with adjusted coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ) with explanatory power from 10% of the variation. It can be observed that in the Family Autonomy factor of the IPSF, creativity presented the highest predictive value. Considering the group formed by the strengths creativity, humor, wisdom, critical thinking, love of learning, self-regulation, modesty, kindness, social intelligence and love, the variation explained was of 27%.

### Discussion

This research aimed at analyzing possible associations between the character strengths and the

Table 1.

*Coefficients of multiple linear regression of the Affective-Consistent factor of the IPSF to predict character strengths*

Model	Non standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p	Adjusted R2
	B	SE	Beta			
(Constant)	34,609	1,937		17,864	<0,001	0,12
Gratitude	1,184	0,193	0,352	6,124	<0,001	
(Constant)	23,929	2,828		8,461	<0,001	0,30
Gratitude	0,595	0,218	0,177	2,734	0,007	
Prudence	0,502	0,212	0,138	2,368	0,019	
Love	1,036	0,222	0,296	4,676	<0,001	
Wisdom	-0,737	0,210	-0,226	-3,512	0,001	
Love of Learning	1,153	0,262	0,286	4,405	<0,001	
Appreciation of beauty	-1,094	0,327	-0,231	-3,342	0,001	
Spirituality	0,672	0,236	0,197	2,850	0,005	
Creativity	0,560	0,230	0,157	2,436	0,016	
Curiosity	-0,541	0,259	-0,137	-2,094	0,037	

perception of family support, considering that strengths refer to the pre-existing capacity for a particular form of behavior, thought or feeling, which presents itself in an authentic way for the individual, as defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004), and were

currently evaluated by the *Character Strengths Scale* (Noronha & Barbosa, 2016). The first factor of the family support assessment instrument, the Affective-Consistent factor, is about verbal or non-verbal affectivity between family members and, in this sense,

Table 2.

*Coefficients of multiple linear regression of the Family Adaption factor of the IPSF to predict character strengths*

Model	Non standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p	Adjusted R2
	B	SE	Beta			
(Constant)	28,492	0,905		31,475	<0,001	0,03
Vitality	0,380	0,110	0,203	3,451	0,001	
(Constant)	30,114	1,439		20,933	<0,001	0,23
Vitality	0,416	0,132	0,222	3,153	0,002	
Citizenship	-0,630	0,131	-0,351	-4,826	<0,001	
Justice	0,712	0,151	0,307	4,707	<0,001	
Modesty	-0,635	0,146	-0,294	-4,337	<0,001	
Gratitude	0,606	0,144	0,324	4,201	<0,001	
Self-regulation	0,274	0,100	0,160	2,736	0,007	
Hope	-0,339	0,150	-0,167	-2,256	0,025	
Wisdom	-0,276	0,124	-0,143	-2,229	0,027	

Table 3.

*Coefficients of multiple linear regression of the Family Autonomy factor of the IPSF to predict character strengths*

Model	Non standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p	Adjusted R2
	B	SE	Beta			
(Constant)	15,538	0,517		30,061	<0,001	0,10
Creativity	0,390	0,068	0,323	5,714	<0,001	
(Constant)	11,612	0,971		11,953	<0,001	0,27
Creativity	0,287	0,073	0,237	3,952	<0,001	
Humor	0,353	0,071	0,335	4,991	<0,001	
Wisdom	-0,237	0,075	-0,218	-3,152	0,002	
Critical thought	0,324	0,078	0,252	4,172	<0,001	
Love of learning	0,268	0,077	0,205	3,488	0,001	
Self-regulation	-0,183	0,056	-0,187	-3,244	0,001	
Modesty	-0,242	0,077	-0,197	-3,124	0,002	
Kindness	0,226	0,082	0,185	2,755	0,006	
Social intelligence	-0,243	0,085	-0,205	-2,877	0,004	
Love	0,191	0,072	0,160	2,649	0,009	

it involves interest in each other, intimacy and acceptance, respect and empathy, besides clarity regarding intra-family rules, consistency of behaviors and verbalizations, and problem-solving skills (Baptista, 2009). The strengths predicted by factor 1 were gratitude, prudence, love, wisdom, love of learning, creativity, curiosity, appreciation of beauty and spirituality.

Gratitude involves the perception that good things happen and was the strength with the greatest predictive power. Love, prudence and wisdom are valued in interpersonal relationships, because they imply appreciation of contact with others; care with choices so as not to have future regrets and ability to provide advice (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The other strengths are focused on wisdom and knowledge, and therefore, on the interest and production of new knowledge, which seem to be necessary to understand family rules as well as to express feelings (Park & Peterson, 2008).

The results are in agreement with those found by Vela, et al. (2016). The dimension aimed at relationships, especially regarding communication and lack of conflict, was associated with the strengths gratitude, love, spirituality, appreciation of beauty, creativity, and love of learning, such as in the present study. In addition, Brdar and Kashdan (2010) and Littman-Ovadia and Lavy (2012) found a relationship between gratitude and curiosity and satisfaction with life.

The factor 2 of the Perception of Family Support Inventory (Family Adaptation) evaluates negative feelings and behaviors in relation to the family. The factor is marked by anger, isolation, misunderstanding, exclusion, shame, irritation, and aggressive relationships (quarrels and shouting), besides the perception that family members compete with each other, instead of trying more proactive interrelations. In the analyses performed, the values were inverted in order to facilitate interpretation.

Vitality was the strength with the greatest predictive power and it can be understood as zest and enthusiasm, so that whoever possesses it is an energetic person with physical and mental vigor (Ryan & Frederick, 1997), which is in line with the concept of the IPSF factor (Baptista, 2009). The sense of belonging and justice are represented by the strengths citizenship and impartiality, which mean respectively working well as a member of a group or team and offering all participants a fair opportunity. Self-regulation is also a very important strength in the sense of having discipline and control over one's emotions,

as well as wisdom, which refers to wise advice and a serene way of looking at the world. Modesty is justified, since healthy group coexistence is facilitated by feelings that all members can make contributions, so that one element should not be seen as more important than another (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The regression value was lower in this factor of the IPSF; however, the correlations found by Raimundi et al. (2016) were also lower. The authors' results indicate correlations between family functioning and the strengths perseverance, vitality, hope, kindness and citizenship ( $r$  between .22 and .36), so that this study partially corroborates the authors' research.

Finally, in the factor Family Autonomy, which demonstrates the perception of autonomy that the individual has from his family, which denotes relationships of trust, privacy and freedom among family members (Baptista, 2009), the strengths predicted were creativity, humor, wisdom, critical thinking, love of learning, self-regulation, modesty, kindness, social intelligence, and love. Thus, interpersonal strengths, such as love, kindness, and humor, as well as the strengths relating to cognitive abilities involving the acquisition and use of knowledge (creativity, critical thinking, love of learning, wisdom) contribute to the confidence of family members, besides promoting privacy and freedom (Park & Peterson, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The strength with the greatest predictive power was creativity, which concerns on thinking about new ways that imply the acquisition and use of knowledge. Thus, the data suggests that the greater the autonomy of the individual, the greater the amount of creativity he will present. In this sense, Olson (1986) states that if the family is able to offer a welcoming environment that stimulates autonomy, security and assertiveness in individuals, this experience can be extended to other situations.

### Final Considerations

This research sought to contribute for the understanding of the relationships between family support and character strengths. Two Brazilian instruments with evidence of validity were used. It was observed that some strengths were present in the regression analysis, in two of the three factors of the IPSF, namely: love, wisdom, love of learning, creativity and modesty. In general, they deal with characteristics that depict pro-social behaviors or portray knowledge about living conditions and human relationships (Littman-Ovadia &

Lavy, 2012; Park & Peterson, 2008), and for the reason they are appropriate when considering family support.

However, there were limitations, especially the use of the convenience sampling method. As a research agenda, we propose that the relationship between the constructs and other variables be studied, such as parental perception and parental styles, as examples. It is necessary to develop further studies on this subject in order to investigate other possibilities of relations and discussions, as well as the investigation of a greater demand, in other cities and regions of the country.

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Recebido em: 23/05/2018

Reformulado em: 02/10/2018

Aprovado em: 07/11/2018

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