POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AT THE MOVIES 2

By RYAN M. NIEMIEC · DANNY WEDDING

Using Films to Build
Character Strengths and Well-Being
2nd Edition

HOGREFE

About the Authors

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Positive Psychology at the Movies

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2nd Edition

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For Rachelle
*For my loving and lovely wife, whose character strengths complement and
enhance my own, and fill me with profound gratitude and love to be so fortunate to have
found a woman of such remarkable character.*
RMN

For Karen
*I hope we watch
the next thousand films together.*
DW

Praise for the Book

"This book is both accessible and rigorous. Reading it will not only help you better understand the field of positive psychology, it could actually make you happier."

Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD, bestselling author of Happier *and* Being Happy*; formerly teacher of the largest course at Harvard University –"Positive Psychology"*

"This almost impossibly impressive compendium has everything anyone would ever want to know about goodness, truth, and beauty in film, whether classic or contemporary, mainstream or indie, domestic or international. The second edition completely outdoes the first."

Dean Keith Simonton, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis, CA; Author of Great Flicks *and coeditor of* The Social Science of Cinema

"*Positive Psychology at the Movies* is true to the spirit of positive psychology. Psychologists have often focused on the negative effects of watching movies so it is refreshing to have the potential benefits of film celebrated so enthusiastically and inspirationally. Niemiec and Wedding do a splendid job of exploring hundreds of movies, both famous and obscure, that reflect those essential virtues, like courage, wisdom, and forgiveness, that characterize what Aristotle calls 'the good life.' This book can help readers see more of the possibilities in film and in life."

Stephen "Skip" Dine Young, PhD, Professor of Psychology at Hanover College, Hanover, IN; Author of Psychology at the Movies

"Niemiec and Wedding are masterful in using positive psychology, one of the most influential movements of the 21st century, to guide our awareness and appreciation of films. The compelling VIA Classification, which highlights the salience of wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence, enables the reader to more fully comprehend and learn from the movies and the strengths of the characters. Upon reading this outstanding book, scholars will be motivated to hone our understanding of the evidence-base for positive psychology and its practical applications, educators and clinicians will have a more powerful and meaningful guide for teaching students and clients about the value of this psychological perspective, and film watchers will be stimulated to engage in a process of personal growth so that they can flourish."

Nadine J. Kaslow, PhD, ABPP, President of the American Psychological Association (2014); Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, GA

"This beautiful book is essential reading for anyone interested in films, human virtues, or positive psychology. Niemiec and Wedding's new and expanded edition works on multiple levels. It is a research-based, engaging introduction to positive psychology for students and professionals; a marvelous guide to using film as a tool for demonstrating and discussing key issues in virtues and character strengths; and a treasure-trove of new and wondrous movies to revisit and discover. The authors continue to be the leading voices for analyzing movies via a psychological research lens."

James C. Kaufman, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Learning Research Institute, California State University, San Bernardino, CA; President, American Psychological Association's Division 10 (Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts)

"Making movies is an art. Selecting and appraising movies that tell us what makes life worth living is a craft skillfully mastered by Ryan Niemiec and Danny Wedding in *Positive Psychology at the Movies*. In mastering this task, Niemiec and Wedding have integrated the oldest human attribute – storytelling – with the most popular contemporary pastime – movies. Their integration allows readers to spot the silver linings amid dark clouds, letting readers organically relate it to emotions, actions, habits, and attitudes that keep our spirits invigorated to be good to ourselves and others."

Tayyab Rashid, PhD, CPsych, Psychologist and Researcher, University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada

In Memoriam
Christopher Peterson (1950–2012)

The world of positive psychology was shocked and saddened by the unexpected passing of one of positive psychology's founders, Christopher Peterson.

Not only do people resonate with Chris's adage that summarized positive psychology – "Other people matter" – but we've found people universally knew and believed deeply that "Chris Peterson mattered." We listen closely to how people talk about other people, and the truth is, there is not a single person in positive psychology we can think of who had more positive, grateful, and respectful comments made "behind his back" than Chris. This is true of scientists, scholars, practitioners, educators, students, and the general public. Chris affected them all, strongly. Perhaps a measure of how well we have influenced others is: What do people say about "who you are" behind your back?

Chris Peterson was the leading figure in the world in character strengths research, following his leadership with Martin Seligman of a team of 55 scientists who created the groundbreaking VIA Classification, ushering in a new science of character and well-being. After that, positive psychology was forever changed. Chris was an accomplished researcher (one of the 100 most cited psychologists in the world), award-winning professor (he won the prestigious Golden Apple award for outstanding teaching at the University of Michigan), and successful author (*Character Strengths and Virtues*, 2004; *A Primer in Positive Psychology*, 2006; and *Pursuing the Good Life*, 2013).

Chris, for one last, belated time, we want to say, for all that you have done for psychology, positive psychology, and the world: Thank you. You have a solid and meaningful place in history. Positive psychology will remember you fondly. Forever.

Foreword to this Second Edition

It is impossible to follow in the footsteps of a giant of positive psychology, Christopher Peterson, who wrote the foreword to the first edition of *Positive Psychology at the Movies*, but who sadly passed away in 2012. He coauthored the VIA Classification model of psychological strengths and virtues that is the driving conception behind this book.

I will not attempt to replicate Chris's unique insights and erudition in positive psychology, but will simply express my unconditional positive regard for this new edition that I have enjoyed immensely.

This is the most important book about the movies of our times. Once read, you will never see movies the same way again. Few books about film are written by psychologists, and none with the insights and inspiration of Drs. Niemiec and Wedding. These docs know movies! Their popcorn bills must be enormous, but as they are positive psychologists, I assume their healthy exercise commitments are enormous too.

The outstandingly unique feature of this book is that it is organized and conceptualized from a major psychological perspective – positive psychology, which provides a coherent conceptual lens for film analysis. Positive psychology is a highly popular contemporary perspective or movement that lends itself beautifully to filmic discussion, given its focus on such movie mantras as justice, courage, love, forgiveness, humor, leadership, and judgment, to mention but a few. There are few movies that cannot be considered from an enlightening positive psychology perspective. As a life-long lover of film, this volume has changed my viewing of the most creative visual art form of the past 100 years. I now look more closely at character as revealed, or not, in the movies I see. I now have many more avenues for understanding films than I did, and a much richer vocabulary with which to discuss them.

Niemiec and Wedding intend this volume to be pedagogical, to teach us about character strengths and virtues and for us to learn to enhance these features in ourselves based on the film experience. Films as teachers, films as self-help, films as perspective challenging, films as catalysts in the struggles for self-understanding – they're all here!

The greatest struggle of our times is our confrontation with horror. The horror of violence, terror, torture, slaughter of the innocent, poverty, hopelessness, despair, and more. Our success in combating that horror has been mostly minimal, and movies have well-portrayed these failures. Positive psychology in the hands of Niemiec and Wedding offers hope in this confrontation, through positive psychology movies that can strengthen us in our attempts to make the world a better place and ourselves, of course, better people. We need such movies, and the blueprint this book offers.

This volume is a remarkable manifesto on the meaning of movies and their contributions to a positive life. It raises sharply our psycholiteracy about film and at the same time advances a most positive agenda that all can embrace.

Frank Farley, PhD
L. H. Carnell Professor,
Temple University, Philadelphia
Former president, American Psychological Association; and the Society for Media Psychology and Technology;
Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts; and
Society for Humanistic Psychology
June 2013

Foreword to the First Edition

My foray into positive psychology began in early 2000, when I answered a phone call from Martin Seligman. "What do you want to do with the rest of your life?" he asked. Momentarily surprised, I thought that – finally – I was going to hear a marriage proposal! But that did not seem plausible, so I asked about him about his family. All was well, he said, so I waited for the rest of the conversation. Seligman asked if I would be willing to relocate from the University of Michigan to the University of Pennsylvania and spend a few years working with him on a new initiative in positive psychology: describing, classifying, and measuring important strengths of character. I thought for a few seconds and then replied "Let's make it happen."

Impulsive decisions can be terrible ones, but this particular one was the best decision of my professional life. Working in the field of positive psychology indeed appears to be how I will spend the rest of my days. What I am doing is pleasurable, engaging, *and* meaningful – the hat trick of happiness.

Our project was supported by the Mayerson Foundation in Cincinnati, which created a non-profit organization named the Values in Action (VIA) Institute (now called VIA Institute on Character). As the years have gone by, "VIA" has crept into common use with positive psychology circles. It refers of course to the Institute that continues to support and disseminate the work. It refers to the Institute's website (www.viastrengths.org). It refers to the classification that Seligman and I created of 24 widely valued positive traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). VIA also refers to various assessment devices created by Nansook Park and me to measure the strengths in the classification: self-report surveys, interviews, informant reports, and content analysis schemes (Park & Peterson, 2006). To date, almost 1,000,000 people worldwide have completed our online VIA self-report surveys, usually in English but also in Spanish, Chinese, and German.

Although an explicitly labeled positive psychology is but a decade old, it has matured enough to attract criticisms, among them the charge that positive psychology is nothing new. To be sure, the interests and goals of positive psychology long predated its christening, and a number of topics with sustained research lineages are now mainstays of this new field, e.g., giftedness, life satisfaction, and optimism. So is there really anything new here? I think so. "Positive psychology" is both novel and valuable as an umbrella term, an overarching perspective that allows previously separate lines of work within psychology to be seen as interrelated. "Positive psychology" is also novel and valuable as a psychological lens on topics that are central to the good life, about which psychology often has had too little to say.

Positive Psychology at the Movies by Ryan Niemiec and Danny Wedding is a wonderful example of how positive psychology affords ways to make sense of movies that show what is best about people. Millions of us watch and rewatch movies, share and discuss them with our friends and family members, and feel inspired by their characters and their stories.

I am flattered that Niemiec and Wedding found our VIA Classification useful enough to structure their book, and I will be sure in the future to cite *Positive Psychology at the Movies* as compelling validity evidence for the classification and more generally for the perspective of positive psychology.

This is a good and smart book, but I trust that its authors will forgive me if I say that you should *not* read it in one or even a few sittings. That would be like reading a cookbook from cover to cover while never venturing into your kitchen. Rather, read a bit, and then stop and see some of the movies they discuss, familiar and unfamiliar. Use their insights to enrich your understanding and enjoyment, not only of the movies but of yourself.

Christopher Peterson
University of Michigan
February 2008

Preface

This book is about character strengths – yours, ours, and those of the most important people in your life, as well as the people you pass in the street every day. It's about spotting these strengths in yourself and in others. It's about learning to use these strengths in a more balanced way to elicit greater well-being, deeper engagement with life, and better relationships. Movies are one way – and a good way – to get there.

While we were writing this book, we were reminded of something that Nobel Laureate and physicist Sir William Bragg stated: "The important thing in science is not so much to obtain new facts as to discover new ways of thinking about them." This book represents a new way of approaching movies and a new way of approaching and accessing those qualities that are best in us – those qualities that make us human.

There are hundreds of thousands of accessible movies that speak to what is strong in human beings. We hope that the discussion and cinematic examples in this book will provide the reader with new ways of thinking about strengths and what constitutes a fulfilling life; we also hope it will help our readers identify ways to change their lives for the better.

Following an Introduction that gives the reader a background to positive psychology, character strengths, and the world of cinema, we discuss the portrayal of specific character strengths in movies. Each of these chapters describes strengths according to the VIA Classification developed by Christopher Peterson, Martin Seligman, and 55 scientists in a seminal text classifying six virtues and 24 strengths, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Classification in its most updated form (courtesy of the VIA Institute on Character) is shared below:

1. **Wisdom and Knowledge** (cognitive strengths): creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective
2. **Courage** (emotional strengths): bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest
3. **Humanity** (interpersonal strengths): love, kindness, social intelligence
4. **Justice** (civic strengths): teamwork, fairness, leadership
5. **Temperance** (protective strengths): forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation

6. **Transcendence** (spiritual strengths of meaning): appreciation of beauty & excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

This VIA Classification offers a common language for discussing what is best in human beings. It provides a framework for us to discuss these positive personality characteristics that are universal to the human experience. We discuss movies that portray characters who develop and maintain these character strengths and who use these strengths to overcome obstacles and adversity. Our approach and this core structure are maintained throughout the book; in each of the core chapters, we try to balance film discussion, related psychological research, and practical applications.

Positive psychology is a bridge merging scientific research with practical self-help; said another way, this is science-based practice. Scientific research is not only the foundation of positive psychology but also the means by which the field will progress and prosper. Therefore, we found it important to begin each chapter with a brief description of the given strength's core concepts and some of the important research relevant to the strength being discussed. We highlight recent and important studies to help the reader understand the depth of each character strength before he or she begins to view films that focus on that strength. In addition, scattered throughout the chapters, the reader will discover important theories that are relevant to the field of positive psychology; these theories focus on well-being, and whenever possible, we describe the links between the theories discussed and relevant films.

We include an International Cinema section in each strength chapter. We pay particular attention to international cinema because we believe world cinema has a special ability to convey important messages and themes that transcend culture and national boundaries. *International cinema, world cinema,* and *foreign films* generally refer to films from a country other than one's own; therefore, we focus on non-US films in these sections (including films that are not foreign-language films, but which come from the United Kingdom, Canada, or Australia).

This new edition has substantially changed from the original book in a number of important ways:

1. We have added over 400 films, bringing the total in the book to around 1,500 movies.
2. We have added three new chapters in an attempt to be more inclusive of other important areas of positive psychology, including the robust work on mindfulness, resilience, meaning, and well-being. The new chapters also cover positive emotions, engagement, achievement, and, in particular, positive relationships.
3. There are several new appendices we have added because of the feedback of our readers (for example, we now have an appendix that lists positive psychology movies for children, adolescents, and families).
4. The research sections have been "beefed up" substantially with the addition of several hundred new references to support the points being made.
5. We agree with Aristotle's (2000) notion of a golden mean when it comes to virtuous living or strengths expression. Thus, we comment on the overuse and underuse of each character strength and movie examples therein.
6. We have made substantial changes to every exemplar in each chapter. We have either offered a new exemplar for the character strength or changed the existing exemplar to fit a new structure. The new structure includes a description and rationale of the protagonist's various signature strengths, a section on strengths dynamics (how the strengths play out in different settings, are overused, work in combination with other strengths), benefits the character experiences when using the strength, and an explanation of how the character copes with adversity by means of strengths use.
7. In addition to Hogrefe offering an exciting new look with the cover design and an integration of around 90 images from movies scattered throughout the book, we have added two charts on the inside covers – one is a grid of the VIA Classification where the character strengths are shown as pathways to well-being – namely, positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and achievement (Seligman, 2011). The second image, courtesy of the VIA Institute, is a circumplex model displaying each character strength on two continua (Peterson, 2006) – strengths of the mind or heart and strengths that are more strongly intrapersonal or interpersonal.

We are often asked how we selected films for inclusion in this book (and for our book, *Movies and Mental Illness*, 2010). With both books, we have emphasized an eclectic approach in our selection and categorization of films. In addition to searching for films in our own extensive databases, we viewed and commented on every film included by the American Film Institute (AFI) on their list of Top 100 Inspiring Movies (see Appendix I: 100 Years … 100 Cheers: America's Most Inspiring Movies), and many of the films in the AFI's top 100 movies of all time and their top heroes of all time. We felt these were important because they are not arbitrary, but rather have been voted on by some of the world's leading film scholars. We reviewed films found in specialized DVD clubs (e.g., the Spiritual Cinema Circle), and the databases and lists of other movie enthusiasts from around the world. We paid special attention to Academy Award winners and nominees in each category. We reviewed those movies that won awards at film festivals, particularly winners and nominees at Cannes and Sundance. We listened carefully to suggestions made by participants in monthly movie discussion groups, eminent positive psychologists, colleagues, students, film seminar groups, and bloggers. With each film, we systematically assessed whether it met any of the criteria for a positive psychology film (see Chapter 1). Those films that did not appear to meet any of these criteria were eliminated from consideration; some wonderful films (e.g., *A Clockwork Orange*) were deliberately excluded for this reason. Films that might tap into a character strength, but which did so only superficially without substantial depth or meaning were also excluded (e.g., romances with formulaic portrayals of love, or comedies with contrived humor).

Some of our objectives for this book include the following:

1. Viewers will practice the skill of *strengths-spotting,* which will help them more easily recognize character strengths in themselves and others.
2. Viewers will be inspired toward self-improvement or toward acting more altruistically with others. These are explained later as the effects of cinematic admiration and cinematic elevation. This is certainly consistent with the feedback we have received from many individuals who have been forever changed because of a film.
3. Practitioners and educators will use this book to teach and inspire clients and students about positive psychology and character strengths. In fact, some educators have used the first edition of this book as the primary textbook for their positive psychology courses. We believe this

new edition will serve in that role even more effectively than the previous edition.

4. Researchers will use this book as a catalyst to validate, analyze, and advance the concepts of the positive psychology movie, the powerful effects of elevation and admiration, the process of strengths-spotting, and the many interventions offered in each chapter. Students may be well-positioned to conduct this research for their theses and dissertations.

5. In a more general way, we hope the reader will view movies in a fresh way, a way that opens up new avenues of flourishing and how to live a good life.

At the same time, we understand the clear limits to what movies can offer. We remain informed by the comment Alfredo makes to Toto in one of the all-time classic films, *Cinema Paradiso*: "Life isn't like in the movies. Life … is much harder." Despite all the benefits movies have to offer, we are humbled by their limitations.

We recommend the following strategy for using this book. First, review the introductory chapter and then proceed to whichever strength or topic area most piques your curiosity. Then use the appendices to select films that will help you learn more about a particular strength.

We do need to warn the reader: Occasionally, our discussions contain "spoilers." These are intentionally included at those points in which we feel the spoiler will enrich the discussion's content and depth; nevertheless, we hope this will not detract from the viewer's pleasure upon viewing the films we discuss.

We welcome your feedback and suggestions. Feel free to visit our websites and blogs, and do take time to e-mail us your thoughts. But most of all, happy viewing!

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Acknowledgments

Books, like movies, are only possible because of the effort of hundreds of individuals, many of whom will never be recognized for their influence. Here are some that will be:

Our deepest gratitude goes out to our loving families, friends, and colleagues who have supported our work, tolerated the inordinate time we spent watching films, and shared our enthusiasm for debating the merits and shortcomings of movies. These individuals have not rejected or ridiculed us when we have pulled out a light pen in the movie theater, opened a laptop while sitting on the couch watching a DVD, or insisted on viewing two or three movies back-to-back. Special thanks goes to Ryan's precious (and understanding!) wife, Rachelle Plummer, to whom this book is dedicated, and to his son Rhys Evan, who as an infant enjoyed sleeping for 2 hours while Ryan held him with one arm and typed on a laptop with the other arm while watching positive psychology films.

Our publisher, Rob Dimbleby, believed in this idea years ago and enthusiastically supported the project and ever-so-gently twisted our arms to write this new edition (it didn't take much!). We believe this book forms a perfect bookend for our other book, *Movies and Mental Illness*, also published by Hogrefe.

We want to extend a very deep bow of gratitude to Jeremy Clyman. Jeremy, a rising star and blogger in this area, helped us with several of the exemplar sections as we retooled and added new examples. He also conducted important literature reviews and summaries and offered consultation, film suggestions, and enthusiastic support. We question whether we would have made our publication deadline if it weren't for his efficient and effective work. We applaud Jeremy's striking character strengths that he showed with this project, namely creativity, love of learning, humility, teamwork, curiosity, prudence, and bravery.

James Pawelski deserves special recognition for engaging in a mutual, motivational coaching experience with Ryan (we are proud to describe this as an Aristotelian friendship). James' creativity, curiosity, and kindness are only surpassed by his wisdom which he exudes with a mix of practicality, philosophical substance, incisive inquiry, and heart.

Danny Wedding is grateful for the two extraordinary women who shared his life while he was working on this new edition: Pamela Broadman and Connie Horn. They both happily shared dozens of wonderful films (and a few somewhat less than wonderful films) with him during 2011 and 2012.

Many people made important movie suggestions to us that made it into this second edition. A few of the most memorable suggestions came from Hugh Burns, Paul Bryant (Luke), Mark Liston, Kazuo Koya, Keith Oatley, Jacquie & David Wall, Catherine Cogorno, Skip Dine Young, Ken Paul Rosenthal, and the original Media Watch Committee of Division 46 (Media) from the time when Ryan took over as "chairperson." This group includes: Jeremy Clyman, Mary Banks Gregerson, Susan Stone, Michelle Ronayne, and Karen McGraa. Countless other individuals who have attended our workshops and presentations will have to go unnamed but know that we are gratful to you as well.

We appreciate especially the numerous psychologists who wrote film reviews for *PsycCRITIQUES*. Many of these film reviews are available on the *PsycCRITIQUES* Blog: (psyccritiquesblog.apa.org). We have learned much of what we know about films and psychology from reading these trenchant reviews.

One of the best ways to learn is having someone ask you provocative and intelligent questions. With this new field of positive psychology movies, the questions are endless, but we wish to extend our gratitude to those individuals who helped us expand our thinking on this topic by posing good questions to us. A few of the strongest examples were from Kristen Carter, Peter Delany, Michelle Gielan, Vadivu Govind, Jon Haidt, Lucy Hoblitzelle, Claudia Lau, Donna Mayerson, Keith Oatley, Deb Pinger, Pat Snyder, Marta Syrzistie, Anne Marie Turnbull, and Karolina Zbytniewska.

We appreciate the wide support the construct of "positive psychology movies" has received from practitioners, educators, and researchers around the world in positive psychology and related fields. Some of the colleagues who have supported us include: Rhett Diessner, Bruce Smith, Stefan Schulenberg, Ray Fowler, Ad Bergsma, James Kaufman, Kathryn Britton, Senia Maymin, Andrea Goeglein, Neal Mayerson, Donna Mayerson, Gunilla Lundquist, Martha Darwin, Thomas

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Section I

Introduction and Background

Chapter 1
Introduction

No art passes our conscience the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls.
Ingmar Bergman, Swedish filmmaker

Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.
Thomas Merton

The Language of Film Is Universal

The popular expression in the title of this section reminds film viewers of the inherent power of the cinema. Movies transcend all barriers and differences, whether these barriers are culture, language, religion, geographic borders, or belief systems. Language is a way of communicating thoughts and feelings, and it is a system that has particular rules, signs, and symbols that shape it and make it meaningful. Similar rules are found in movies; however, cinema is not restricted to one country or group of people. Therefore, movies are a commentary on more than society – they inform us about the human condition.

Films have many layers that shape the viewer's experience. A film's *plot* provides infrastructure and supports the film's subtext. The *subtext* refers to the complex structure that builds upon the various associations the narrative evokes in the viewer; the plot provides surface meaning while the subtext provides deeper meaning (Dick, 2002). Positive psychology theories, virtues, and strengths lie in the film's subtext. They emerge as powerful themes and motifs, and as qualities within the characters but beneath the storyline. For example, a story about a man and his son at a concentration camp has a complex subtext that includes incredible creativity, sacrifice, resilience, and love (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of *Life Is Beautiful*, 1997). The psychological landscape the characters inhabit (i.e., their instincts, motives, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors) is part of the subtext.

Other subtext components include the culture and customs of setting and location, as well as the social and political dynamics of the communities and organizations portrayed in the film. Another level of subtext is created through the use of *metaphor* – for example, the roses seen throughout *American Beauty* (1999) (see Figure 1.1). The cinematic craft – cinematography, lighting, sound, set design, and special effects – plays an important role in accentuating a film's themes. Consider the visual effects used in *Forrest Gump* (1994) that revolve around a feather (symbolizing hope) floating up into the air at the conclusion of the film (see Figure 1.2). Other aesthetic qualities of the cinema such as the film's music have a strong influence as well. Some studies have found that music can even influence a character's likability and the viewer's sense of certainty that they know the character's thoughts; these are antecedents of empathy in the viewer (Hoeckner, Wyatt, Decety, & Nusbaum, 2011).

Also important for this discussion is the general structure of a movie *character*, especially those from fictional films. This structure

Figure 1.1. *American Beauty* (1999, DreamWorks SKG, Jinks/Cohen Company). Produced by Bruce Cohen and Dan Jinks. Directed by Sam Mendes.

includes the three general areas of corporeality, psyche, and sociality, referring to the characters' outer appearance; their inner states and traits; and their social interactions, roles, and environmental interaction, respectively (Eder, Jannidis, & Schneider, 2010). All three of these features are important for identifying the character's strengths.

The viewer plays the most important role, coparticipating in the act of creating meaning when viewing a film. The viewer's understanding of the film, his or her projections onto the film and its characters, the inferences and assumptions the viewer makes, and his or her openness to the film all influence the effect the film will have on the viewer. Frame of reference, identification with the main character, perceived usefulness of the narrative, and the degree of verisimilitude in the narrative all play a role in fictional narrative experiences as well (Bal, Butterman, & Bakker, 2011). If a viewer understands something about the subtext of a film before watching it (e.g., the strengths and virtues portrayed), this understanding will influence how that viewer focuses his or her attention and subsequently how much benefit

he or she will receive from viewing the film. In almost all cases, we believe reading about and learning about a film before seeing it enriches the cinematic experience.

Stephen Dine Young (2012) offers a framework for understanding these psychological layers of film. He encourages viewers to consider the psychology of the filmmaker, which includes how filmmakers use psychology and how films are often a reflection of the filmmaker's psyche. On another level, he describes the psychology in movies, which includes the unconscious mind, psychological behaviors, psychological treatment, and psychological disorders. On a final level, he explores the psychology of movie viewers – the viewers' experience before, during, and after the movie, the last of which consists of reflective experience, nonconscious effects, and conscious functions.

Fictional works, and in particular films, have been analyzed and interpreted for well over a century, and different approaches to interpretation have emerged. Eder et al. (2010) summarize four main paradigms that cut across disciplines: *Hermeneutic interpretation* views characters as

Figure 1.2. *Forrest Gump* (1994, Paramount Pictures). Produced by Wendy Finerman, Steve Starkey, and Steve Tisch. Directed by Robert Zemeckis.

representations of human beings and considers the historical/cultural background of the characters; *psychoanalytic approaches* concentrate on the psyche of the characters and those they interact with; *structuralist approaches* focus on the construction of characters and the role of visual, audio, and linguistic information; *cognitive approaches* use information-processing theories and emphasize elements of cognition and perception.

Our hybrid approach places the most emphasis on the viewers' experience of the film and their personal interpretation of the narrative and work of art, the core themes, the takeaway messages, and most importantly, the immediacy or potential for impact on the viewer to effect change in oneself and others.

Positive Psychology

There is a history of research and speculation about optimal functioning and the factors that contribute to flourishing (Gable & Haidt, 2005) that dates back to the work of William James (1902) on healthy mindedness and Gordon Allport (1958) and his work with positive human characteristics; this work eventually led to the humanistic movement in psychology. The work of humanistic and existential psychologists such as Abraham Maslow (1971) and his examination of self-actualization, Carl Rogers (1961) and his work with unconditional positive regard, and Irvin Yalom (1980) and Rollo May (1953) on meaning have helped people improve their well-being and find purpose and meaning in their lives.

As president of the American Psychological Association, psychologist Martin Seligman (1998, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) pioneered the field of positive psychology, to bring a stronger focus to the scientific study of what is best about human beings that might optimally complement the prevailing psychology zeitgeist which focused on deficits, diagnoses, and problems. Seligman wanted to bring together dispersed scientists and scholars already studying positive qualities (e.g., altruism, happiness, etc.) and promote further scientific inquiry – and he succeeded. Indeed, the success of these efforts is almost

immeasurable, as countless researchers and practitioners have entered the field across disciplines including business, education, and coaching, and now thousands of articles, theses, and dissertations have been written about one or another aspect of positive psychology.

Seligman (1999) described positive psychology as the study of positive subjective experiences (positive emotions), positive traits (character strengths), and positive institutions. Put simply, positive psychology is the scientific study of human strengths and virtues (Sheldon & King, 2001). Positive psychology is descriptive, not prescriptive. The field describes character, well-being, and other positive experiences and investigates these empirically rather than prescribing and dictating how an individual should "be."

> It is not the job of Positive Psychology to tell you that you should be optimistic, or spiritual, or kind or good-humored; it is rather to describe the consequences of these traits. …
> What you do with that information depends on your own values and goals. (Seligman, 2002a, p. 129)

This movement is important because psychology has predominately focused on identifying, categorizing, and alleviating pathology – that is, the profession has been preoccupied with assessing, diagnosing, and treating psychological illness. The positive psychology movement emphasizes what is going right with people, maximizes their strengths, and fosters future growth. From a clinical standpoint, it is not only about fixing what is broken but also about nurturing what is best (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The flourishing of positive psychology has influenced research and clinical work around the world, and numerous researchers, scholars, and clinicians are currently working on ways to explore what makes life worth living. Handbooks of positive psychology abound and bring together usually over 50 topics of positive human experience that address assessment, theory, research, and practice (e.g., Diener, 2009; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lopez & Snyder, 2004, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2002, 2007). Specific strengths-based research can be found in organizations (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), in psychotherapy (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), in practice-based books (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Bolt, 2004), in meta-analyses (Sin & Lynbomirsky, 2009), and in theoretical models referred to as *strength-centered*

therapy (Wong, 2006). In particular, books and articles addressing the historical and scientific study of happiness have proliferated (see Ben-Shahar, 2007; Gilbert, 2006; Haidt, 2006; Hecht, 2007; Layard, 2005; Lyubomirsky, 2001, 2008; McMahon, 2006).

Organizations and scholarly meetings that promote the continued growth of positive psychology include the International Positive Psychology Association, the European Network of Positive Psychology, the Australia Positive Psychology Association, the Canadian Positive Psychology Association, and several university-based positive psychology centers. Documentary films also have explicitly addressed the positive psychology movement. *Happy* (2011) by Roko Belic offers a contemporary lens on happiness, integrating age-old wisdom, dynamic storytelling, beautiful cinematography, and interviews with leading scientists and the general public. The film offers wisdom from well-known figures in positive psychology: for example, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Richard Davidson, Ed Diener, Daniel Gilbert, and Tim Kasser. Tidbits of happiness research abound in the film, yet the most educational parts of the film emerge in the personal stories of individuals using the principles of positive psychology during personal crises, in situations of extreme poverty, and when others would least expect it (Niemiec, 2011). A documentary film from Norway, *How Happy Can You Be* (2005), examines positive psychology and integrates questions from a skeptical filmmaker. It includes tips to increase happiness levels and provides the perspective of several positive psychology researchers, including Sonya Lyubomirsky, Robert Biswas-Diener, sociologist John Cacioppo, and Ruut Veenhoven, the director of the World Happiness Database in Rotterdam, who has gathered thousands of research studies with happiness data from 120 countries. Tom Shadyac's *I Am* (2010) is strong in the spirit of positive psychology and widens its focus to philosophers, religious and spiritual leaders, environmentalists, and biologists. Each interviewee is asked the question, "What is wrong with the world and what can we do about it?" While the answers are relevant to positive psychologists, it is important to note that positive psychologists would start with a very different question. We suggest the question should be: "What is right with the world and how can we embrace, celebrate, and build upon this?"

Courses in positive psychology, well-being, and strengths are offered in universities and

colleges around the world (including Harvard's most popular class in 2006, with 850 students). There are now several countries with universities that award a Master's in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP), a diploma, or a doctorate in positive psychology. These programs follow the lead of the flagship MAPP program initiated at the University of Pennsylvania. Similar programs can be found in Mexico, Australia, the United Kingdom, Portugal, and Denmark, to name a few. There also are two scientific, peer-reviewed journals that specifically address positive psychology constructs – *The Journal of Happiness Studies* (published in The Netherlands) and *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (published in the United States) – and many other journals that address particular strengths (e.g., the *Creativity Research Journal*).

Despite what its critics may say, positive psychology is not attempting to negate a focus on what is wrong or more specifically contribute to an artificial dichotomy that pits the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; the manual that classifies what is wrong with humans) against *Character Strengths and Virtues* (CSV; the manual that classifies what's right with humans); instead, it seeks to integrate the fullness of the human experience, which includes both good and bad aspects. Positive psychologists understand and appreciate the limitations associated with seeing the field of positive psychology as "happiology" or a paradigm shift in the science of psychology (Peterson, 2006). Positive psychology grows out of robust research on subjective well-being and character strengths, and it links with humanistic psychology and other avenues of inquiry that emphasize wellness.

It is a mistake to think that positive psychology is simply positive thinking, pop psychology, or feel-good spirituality.

Ultimately, the way of the positive psychologist must be to reflect on the nature of living systems – systems in which positive emotions act with negative emotions, character strengths act with character weaknesses, and human virtues act with human vices – intrapersonally, interpersonally, and extrapersonally. (Hogan, 2005)

Character Strengths

Character strengths are stable, universal personality traits that manifest through thinking (cognition), feeling (affect), willing (conation or volition), and action (behavior). These strengths are valued by and beneficial to both oneself and others. These positive psychological characteristics are considered to be the basic building blocks of human goodness and human flourishing.

In their groundbreaking manual *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Peterson and Seligman (2004) compiled a comprehensive system of virtues and strengths based on both empirical and historical analysis. They delineated six human virtues found (nearly) universally in over 200 virtue catalogues spanning 2,500 years and countries across the globe, ranging from the major world religions to the philosophy of Aristotle to the writings of Benjamin Franklin, to the samurai code (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). These six virtues are subdivided into 24 core human strengths. Each strength had to be universal (not bound to one culture) and measurable, as well as meet most of 10 additional criteria that constitute good character (e.g., that the strength be fulfilling in and of itself, that it does not diminish others, that it be trait-like, etc.). Indeed, these strengths are readily found in the most remote areas on the planet (Biswas-Diener, 2006) and are remarkably similar across 54 nations and across the United States (McGrath, in press; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). This text has been referred to, tongue-in-cheek, as "The Manual of the Sanities" due not only to its systematized typology, scope, and data-driven analysis, but also to its focus on the positive features of human experience.

The nonprofit VIA Institute on Character "houses" the VIA Classification (see Table 1.1) and VIA Survey, and promotes the science and practice of these character strengths. *VIA* formerly stood for "Values in Action" but is now a word that stands on its own and in Latin means "the way." Figure 1.3 shows the 24 strengths, their corresponding virtues, and the nucleus of this configuration – the five core areas of well-being discussed later in Section III (Seligman, 2011) – positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and achievement.

Any new science with a "classification system" also needs a tool to measures its elements.

Table 1.1. The VIA classification of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

1. **Wisdom and Knowledge** – cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
   - **Creativity** (originality, ingenuity): Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
   - **Curiosity** (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience): Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
   - **Judgment** (critical thinking, open-mindedness): Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
   - **Love of Learning**: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
   - **Perspective** (wisdom): Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself/others

2. **Courage** – emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
   - **Bravery** (valor): Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what's right even if there's opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
   - **Perseverance** (persistence, industriousness): Finishing what one starts; persevering in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks
   - **Honesty** (integrity, authenticity): Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
   - **Zest** (vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy): Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

3. **Humanity** – interpersonal strengths that involve tending to and befriending others
   - **Love** (capacity to love and be loved): Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing & caring are reciprocated; being close to people
   - **Kindness** (generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"): Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
   - **Social Intelligence** (emotional intelligence, personal intelligence): Being aware of the motives/feelings of others and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

4. **Justice** – civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
   - **Teamwork** (citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty): Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
   - **Fairness**: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness & justice; not letting feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
   - **Leadership**: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen

5. **Temperance** – strengths that protect against excess
   - **Forgiveness** (mercy): Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting others' shortcomings; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
   - **Humility** (modesty): Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
   - **Prudence**: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
   - **Self-Regulation** (self-control): Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

Table 1.1. continued

6. **Transcendence** – strengths that forge connections to the universe & provide meaning
   - **Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence** (awe, wonder, elevation): Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
   - **Gratitude**: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
   - **Hope** (optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation): Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
   - **Humor** (playfulness): Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
   - **Spirituality** (religiousness, faith, purpose): Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose & meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

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Therefore, the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS, also known as the VIA Survey) was created. The VIA Survey, developed by Chris Peterson, is a free, online test that has been found to be psychometrically valid, displaying both good reliability and validity. It offers users a rank-order of their character strengths from highest to lowest (Park & Peterson, 2006c). The study of these character strengths in youths (ages 10–17 years) has received considerable attention, and a valid measurement tool, the VIA Youth Survey (created by Nansook Park), has been developed (Park & Peterson, 2005, 2006b). In less than a decade, over 2 million people across every country across the globe have taken these character strength measures (you can take the VIA Survey and new validated, briefer versions online by visiting http://www.viame.org).

Positive strengths of character are viewed by many as the backbone of positive psychology because the most central areas of our well-being (e.g., relationships, flow, success, meaning, and positive emotions) are enabled by good character (Park & Peterson, 2009a; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Seligman, 2002a, 2011)

There are three conceptual levels in the study of character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), categorized from general to specific: virtues, strengths, and situational themes. *Virtues* are those universal, core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers. *Strengths* are the psychological ingredients or specific routes through which virtues are displayed. *Situational themes*, which is the only level not depicted in Figure 1.1, are specific habits that lead people to display strengths in particular situations. The expression of character strengths varies by peo-

ple's unique constellation of strengths as well as the context or situations in which they find themselves. In this book, we privilege and prioritize the level with the most research – that is, character strengths – and the ways in which these strengths are expressed in films. We will pay particular attention to character strengths when discussing the exemplar films.

Niemiec (2014; 2013) describes several additional character strength principles: For example, strengths are expressed in degrees, are idiosyncratic, have dimensionality, are interdependent, and are plural (Peterson, 2006). Ultimately, optimal expression of character strengths occurs according to a golden mean that balances *strengths overuse* and *strengths underuse* (Aristotle, 2000); optimal expression specifically refers to the right combination of strengths, to the right degree, in the right situation.

The front and back inside cover of this book has two figures. The front figure was mentioned earlier. The back figure is called a circumplex graph (see also Figure 1.4), which was derived from a factor analysis of the 24 character strengths (Peterson, 2006). Although several factor analyses have been conducted on the VIA Survey, typically revealing four or five factors (clusters of strengths), this analysis found two factors – mind/heart and interpersonal/intrapersonal. Strengths of the mind can be seen as those character strengths that are analytical, logical, and thinking-oriented (judgment), while strengths of the heart are more matters of feeling and intuition and are emotionally driven (love). The other continuum notes strengths that are more intrapersonal – typically expressed within oneself (creativity), and those that are more interpersonal – typically expressed
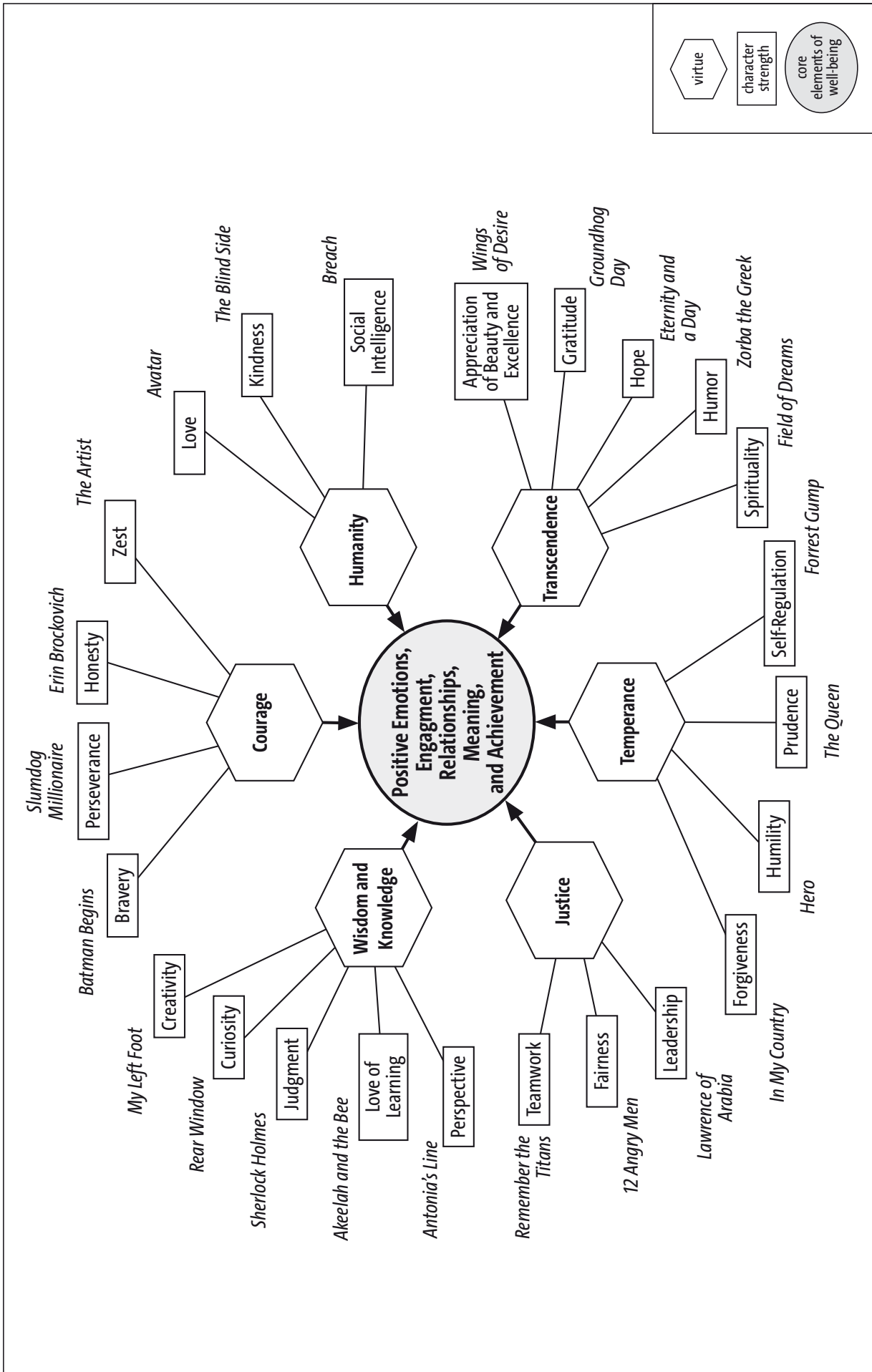
Figure 1.3. The VIA classification of character strengths and virtues. Adapted from Peterson & Seligman, 2004. VIA Classification of character strengths and virtues is copyright VIA Institute on Character. All rights reserved. Used with permission.
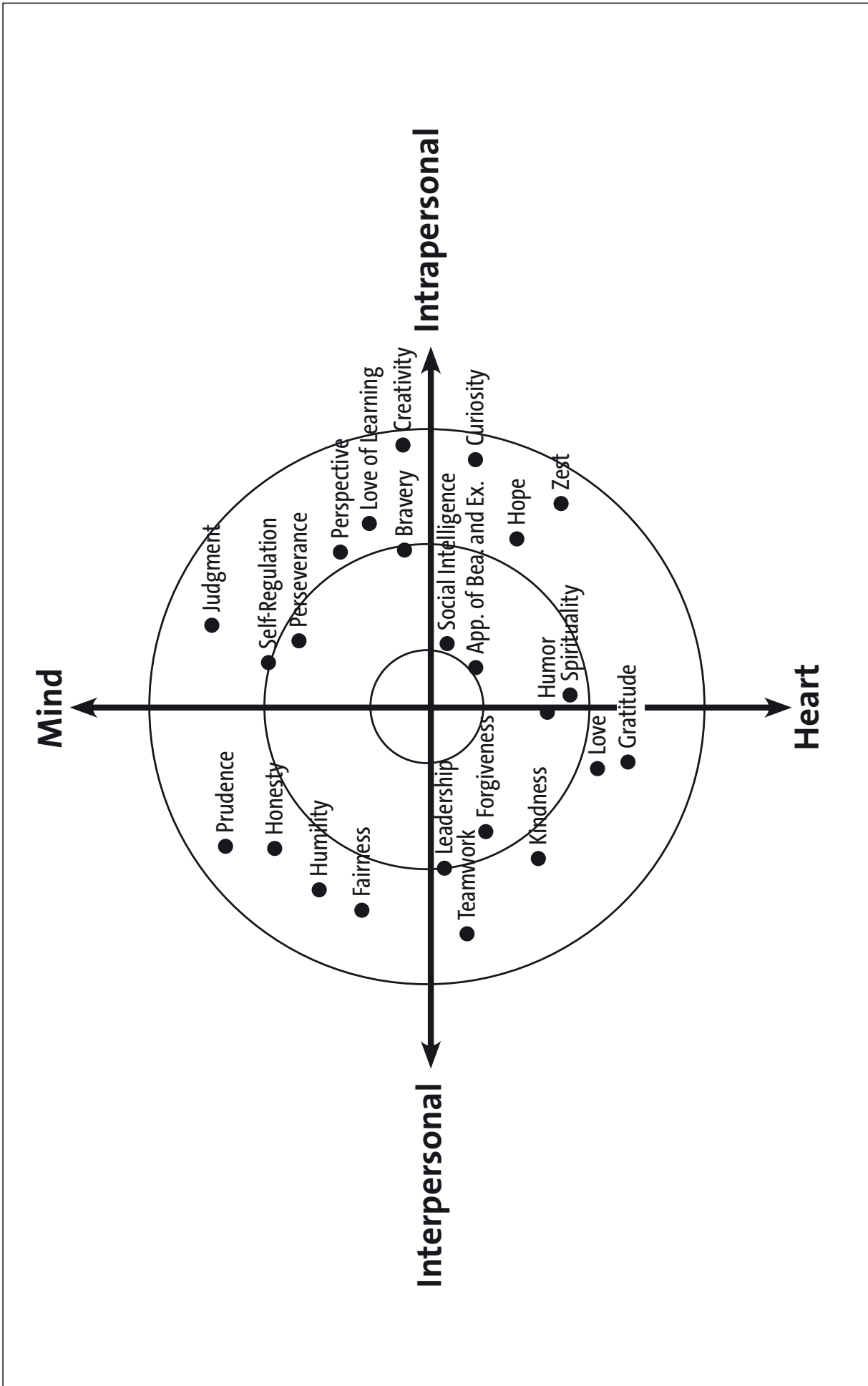
Figure 1.4. Circumplex model of the VIA classification.
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with other people (forgiveness). It is noted that these are not hard-and-fast findings, rather they are general guidelines. In reality each character strength is expressed from all four vantage points; for example, consider gratitude – we can have grateful thoughts (mind), grateful feelings (heart), express appreciation to others (interpersonal), and reflect on how grateful we are to be alive (intrapersonal).

Signature Strengths Research and Practice

One of the most exciting areas of positive psychology is the emphasis given to signature strengths of character. *Signature strengths* are:

- Energizing
- Natural/easy to use
- Core to one's identity
- Feel authentic (i.e., "the real you") when expressed
- Expressed across multiple life domains
- Noted by family/friends as fundamental to who the individual is.

Several studies have linked the practice of using signature strengths with greater levels of well-being, often boosting happiness for as long as 6 months (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2012a; Linley, Nielsen, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010; Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011; Mitchell, Stanimirovic, Klein, & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012; Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009; Peterson & Peterson, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Many of these studies also demonstrated that the use of signature strengths can be effective in treating depression. The exercise most often used is called "using your signature strengths in new ways," and the steps involve taking the VIA Survey online, choosing one of one's highest personal strengths, and then using it in a new way each day. For examples on how one might use each of the 24 strengths in a new way, go to this blog entry: http://blogs.psychcentral.com/character-strengths/2012/04/new-ways-to-happiness-with-strengths/

Longitudinal studies have found the use of strengths to be connected to increases in well-being over time (Wood, Linley, Matlby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011). Certain character strengths (e.g., zest and hope) have been found in repeated studies to have a very strong relationship with well-being (e.g., Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson et al., 2007; Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2009; Ruch, Huber, Beermann, & Proyer, 2007; Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). These "life satisfaction strengths" are:

- Zest
- Hope
- Love
- Gratitude
- Curiosity

One intervention study tested these strengths specifically (but replaced the strength of love with the strength of humor) and found significant relationships with life satisfaction compared with a control group (Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2012).

Character strengths have been shown to be significantly correlated with well-being in educational settings (Proctor et al., 2011), while other-directed strengths (e.g., kindness and teamwork) predicted fewer symptoms of depression, and transcendence/humanity strengths (e.g., spirituality and love) predicted greater life satisfaction (Gillham et al., 2011). In the business domain, many studies have documented a relationship between the presence and use of character strengths and well-being (Harzer & Ruch, 2012a, 2012b; Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). Harzer and Ruch (2012a) found that the level of positive experiences and the experience of work as a calling were higher when four to seven signature strengths were used regularly at work compared with controls who used less than four signature strengths. The strengths of zest, perseverance, hope, and curiosity seemed to play a key role in healthy and ambitious work behavior (Gander et al., 2012b). In a large sample of working adults, the character strengths of wisdom (creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective) were found to relate positively to work performance on a creative task and negatively to stress levels (Avey, Luthans, Hannah, Sweetman, & Peterson, 2012).

Even though significant progress has been made in understanding the benefits and pitfalls of strengths use, this work just scratches the surface, and a tremendous amount of work still needs to be done (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Quinlan, Swain, & Vella-Brodrick, 2012). Future directions for positive psychology research are discussed in Chapter 16.