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Pathways to peace: Character strengths for personal, relational, intragroup, and intergroup peace

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ABSTRACT

Positive psychology has been largely distant from the substantial science of peace studies. This is unfortunate as the mutual synergy between these fields holds vast opportunity. Misconceptions and obstacles underlying this gap are highlighted, alongside counterpoints for each. The purpose is to lay a foundation for the integration of the science of character strengths and peace psychology, across levels of peace, namely personal/inner peace and relational peace with ramifications for intragroup and intergroup peace. To enhance the understanding of this integration, a convenience sample of 25,302 people was examined. Percentages of the participants' perceived highest strengths used for building inner peace and relational peace and for managing political/religious conflict were calculated. Examples of respondents' strategies for using strengths across levels of peace are offered. Among the various findings, perspective, kindness, and honesty were in the top 10 across all three levels. Limitations and future directions for this integration are discussed.

Introduction

When I think of Dr. Marty Seligman, I think of someone with big ideas – not just any interesting ideas – but ideas that have strong scientific grounding, are original, *and* are applicable and impactful. In fact, this is what the character strength of creativity is – offering something that is both original and adaptive, inventive yet practical (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Inspired by Marty's genius creativity, for this special issue dedicated to him, I humbly propose a new area of study for positive psychology. I call for the scientific and practical integration of peace psychology and character strengths.

The science of character strengths, catalyzed by the VIA Classification of 24 ubiquitous strengths found across human beings (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) has blossomed over the years amounting to well over 800 peer-reviewed publications on the VIA Classification and its measurement tools – VIA Survey and VIA Youth Survey – by the time of this paper (VIA Institute, 2021). The 24 character strengths, nesting under six virtues, include creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective (wisdom or cognitive oriented strengths); bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest (courage or emotional/gut oriented strengths); love, kindness, social intelligence (humanity or interpersonal strengths); teamwork, fairness, leadership (justice or community oriented strengths); forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation (temperance or protective-type strengths);

appreciation of beauty/excellence, hope, gratitude, humor, spirituality (transcendence strengths) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The progress of character strengths research has been tracked across domains/topics and based on the quality and quantity of publications, Niemiec and Pearce (2021) labeled some research areas as 'soaring' (e.g., business, education, measurement), 'emerging' (e.g., health/medicine, mindfulness, military, positive psychotherapy, positive parenting, intellectual/developmental disability, workplace/team roles, strengths overuse/underuse/optimal-use, stress management, and positive relationships), or as 'ripe with potential' (e.g., peace, spirituality, environmental behaviors/nature connectedness, social/racial justice, positive leadership, addictions and psychopathology, and sport/performance psychology). The area of peace and conflict studies is indeed an area that has been largely untapped in the field of character strengths.

Cohrs et al. (2013) offer a broad perspective of how peace psychology and positive psychology can inform each other. They, and other peace scientists, discuss a number of levels of peace, including personal/inner peace, relational/interpersonal peace, intragroup peace, intergroup peace, community peace, and national and international peace. Each peace level has its own research findings, enablers, inhibitors, and practices.

This paper builds upon this to offer a foundation for integration and specifically turns to the mutual synergy (and on some occasions, the collision) of character strengths and peace psychology. I suggest character strengths are the sine qua non of peace psychology and the inimitable domain within positive psychology to take on 'peace' and have a positive impact for the field and the world.

Where is peace in positive psychology?

Peace – and its two major framings of *negative peace* (i.e., the reduction of violence, conflict, tension) and *positive peace* (i.e., the building of harmony, equity, balance) – is not a popular area of study in positive psychology. Peace receives at best, passive mention (e.g., creating peace with a meditation), although there are a handful of exceptions (e.g., Cohrs et al., 2013; Neto & Marujo, 2017). In positive psychology's longstanding flagship journal, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, the terms 'peace psychology' or 'peace studies' appeared 0 times in abstracts/titles to date since its founding in 2006, at the time of this writing. In positive psychology's flagship conference, the International Positive Psychology Association conference, at the most attended and arguably most prolific conference in IPPA's 13-year history in 2019, the term 'peace' was almost nonexistent among over 850 didactic/presentation experiences; it appeared in zero of the titles of major presentations (i.e., keynotes, plenaries, invited talks, or workshops), in two, 10-minute presentations, and in one poster (International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), 2019).

Outside of positive psychology, however, there exists an extensive and longstanding, although often disparate, literature on peace. Indeed, there are several thousand research studies on peace psychology (Blumberg et al., 2007; Christie et al., 2008). There are dedicated journals (e.g., *Peace Studies; Journal of Peace Research; Journal of Peace Education*), an American Psychological Association Division (Division 48/Peace, Conflict, Violence), several university 'peace centers' across the globe, and numerous 'programs' (some science-based, some not) that would claim peace as one of their areas of focus, some with international popularity such as nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2003) and restorative justice (Zehr, 2015). There are various research areas that can link to negative peace such as the impressive research on disarming microaggressions (Sue et al., 2019) and to positive peace such as the research on mindfulness (Sedlmeier et al., 2012) and self-compassion (Neff, 2003) for inner/personal peace.

To be sure, there are constructs closely related to inner/personal peace that have emerging literatures, highlighted inside and outside the positive psychology literatures. From the Chinese culture there is 'peace of mind' research, defined as an inner state of peacefulness and harmony; this research shows that peace of mind is higher in Chinese cultures compared with Western cultures (Lee et al., 2013; Yu et al., 2019). Related to this is harmony, which was found across 11 of 12 cultures to be the single most common conception of happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2016). These researchers identified harmony as having four components – inner peace, balance, contentment, and psychophysical well-being – and comment that harmony has been substantially neglected in the scientific field. Arguably, the main work on harmony comes from Swedish researchers who have examined the construct as emphasizing psychological balance and flexibility in life, and with their validated harmony in life scale found that harmony related significantly to peace and balance (Kjell et al., 2015).

Equanimity and serenity are additional related constructs. These connections with peace are also crucial to expand and build upon, especially their unexamined relationship with character strengths. Equanimity is viewed as a nonreactive skill in which the individual accepts their inner experience regardless of the situation, i.e., calm under pressure. Studies link equanimity as an important construct that can be developed through mindfulness practice (Juneau et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021). With regard to serenity, Kreitzer et al. (2009) found three factors of dispositional serenity – inner haven (sense of inner peace, inner calm, inner security, inner strength, inner centeredness), acceptance (of oneself, of that which is outside one's control, and of the transitory nature of life), and trust (in the innate goodness and meaningfulness of life and in the wisdom of the universe). Soysa et al. (2021) extended this research finding that dispositional serenity predicted lower stress and greater mental well-being (over and above mindfulness).

Other peace scientists have emphasized the concept of unity, noting that conflict is the opposite of unity, and that unity is the main prerequisite for peace (Danesh, 2006, 2008).

In addition, it's valuable to add that some cultures have words that relate to peace that might be distinct for that culture or that offer an important nuance of peace for further investigation. For example, the German word *Konfliktfähigkeit* refers to the ability to manage interpersonal conflict constructively and not become personally upset (Lomas, 2019) and the Danish term, *tilfreds*, means to be satisfied and 'at peace'

(Lomas, 2016); these might offer important character strengths insights for relational peace and personal/inner peace, respectively.

Despite these connections with peace and the deep relevance for positive psychology, there remains no exploration or integration with the science and practice of character strengths that has erupted over the last two decades (Niemiec, 2018, 2020). In short, leading peace scientists argue that positive psychology is well-positioned for a focus on peace (Cohrs et al., 2013).

Counterbalancing peace misconceptions

How could a subject as common as peace and with potential benefits therein not received more direct attention in the science and practice of positive psychology, especially considering the reality that peace's cousins, happiness and well-being, enjoy unfettered attention? Below are a handful of misconceptions and/or obstacles I've observed about peace psychology, each followed by a counterpoint or realistic approach.

- Peace seems hopelessly lost in idealism: When people think about peace, they imagine all 8 billion people on the planet getting along with no war or conflict. It sounds impossible – outlandish and far-fetched (e.g., consider the person who says their personal mission is to 'create world peace').
  - Counterpoint: We must approach peace realistically, even if driven by idealism within us. It's important to realize there is likely not one lynchpin for peace just as there is no panacea for ending violence. Liebovitch et al. (2020) explain that research shows there is no single leverage factor that creates sustainable peace, however, their examination of methodologies shows that a large number of positive peace factors can add up to support peace and overcome negative conflict factors.
- Peace seems amorphous. After one gets past the idealism, then immediately follows a lack of clarity about how to approach peace. Are we talking about peace between countries, reducing the conflict among a religious group alongside numerous economic and political tension, pursuing inner peace while feeling overwhelmed, or a marital counselor supporting a couple in conflict?
  - Counterpoint: Peace and peace-work can be very convoluted; such work is laden with complex political, economic, religious, and cultural nuances that shape the reality and trajectory of peace. This can render peace intangible. This amorphous quality of peace can be simultaneously

embraced as a challenge and it can be clarified. The type of peace can be named (i.e., positive or negative peace). The level of peace (e.g., personal peace, relational peace, intragroup peace) and its scientific concepts can be understood (e.g., for relational peace, see Söderström et al., 2021). Actions and/or structured protocols can then be tailored to that level, type, and context. The complex and convoluted nature of peace need not be an enemy of progress and strength implementation.

- When people hear of the work of peace, the impression is peace is the pursuit of something permanent and all-encompassing. Once peace is achieved, it is complete and will always be there.
  - Counterpoint: Such all-or-none thinking impedes progress. Peace is impermanent and by its nature, transient in its gradations and dimensionality. An individual, couple or group may have more periods of peace, longer periods of deeper harmony, and/or sustain resolution on a particular issue, but this does not mean conflict and adversity is permanently absent. Peace is found in moments and created in experiences, whether that be turmoil, ecstasy, despair, or utter boredom. Peace can be a mindset, intervention, emotion, characteristic, or behavior that one returns to over and over.
- Peace seems like something attainable only for the economically advantaged, the fortunate ones, or the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic, Henrich et al., 2010) ones.
  - Counterpoint: Peace is a universal phenomenon and pursued across the globe. It can be a unifier for human beings. Research indicates peace can be pursued and progress made in terms of negative peace and positive peace across cultures and groups (Christie, 2006; Christie et al., 2001).
- Peace is outdated. Peace is something leftover from war generations.
  - Counterpoint: Negative peace focuses on factors that reduce war, violence, and conflict. As wars continue to the present day – as well as relationship and group conflicts – negative peace efforts are highly relevant. One of the most eminent peace psychologists has added and argued that the focus should not exclusively be on negative peace and avoiding war, which has important, concrete, short-term objectives, but should also focus on positive peace (Wagner, 1988). Positive peace efforts involve focusing on building peace such as enhancing collaboration, equity, harmony, and strengths.

- Peace is inactive. Peace seems to be quiet, soft, weak, or static. It isn't forward-thinking.
  - Counterpoint: In reality, peace is the opposite of each of these descriptors. Peace is related to equanimity which is 'calm under pressure' and is a mind that is active and engaged in the present moment. It is highly goal-oriented, hopeful, firm, and tough-minded. Might one of the numerous approaches to peace be that of nonviolence and/or pacifism? Yes, and this is an active, courageous, thoughtful approach as opposed to a mindless, vacuous stance.

Looking only at the misconceptions, obstacles, and underlying impressions of peace, it would seem to be an impossible venture. But, the counterpoints provide the true nature of peace and what it offers the team, the community, the relationship dyad, and the individual. A more accurate view of peace is that it can be realistic, practical, impermanent, unifying, relevant, and courageous. Peace can be discovered in any moment (Nhat Hanh, 1991).

Character strengths and peace: A wide range of integration opportunities for research and practice

Seligman's call to the psychology field, was not only an invitation but an active encouragement to advance the science of what is best in, between, and among human beings (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Cohrs et al. (2013) offered initial thinking for ways in which positive psychology contributes to peace and point out that character strengths offer strategies for inner peace and peace of mind and might contribute to nonviolence, reduced reactivity, and building a global resilience. To their latter point, they argue that the integration of peace psychology and positive psychology is not locked in an individualistic approach. Therefore, the focus here will not solely reside with the level of personal or inner peace (although it will certainly include that), but will venture into relational peace, intragroup peace, and intergroup peace. It will not directly address international or global peace, but the hope is that the integration points offered will provide a meaningful foundation for such discussions.

The integration discussed here aligns closest with what peace scientists refer to as the area of peacebuilding, which is the active building of peace and peaceful relations (through both positive and negative peace), as opposed to other areas of peace, albeit having some overlap. Other areas of peace work, especially in international relations, include peacekeeping (acute situations involving the de-escalation of violence) and peacemaking (fostering agreements in a conflict situation), whereas peacebuilding traditionally has focused on fostering healing in post-conflict situations and preventing further conflict or violence (Christie et al., 2008; Galtung, 1975).

Peacebuilding has been largely unexplored using the lens of character strengths, but there are a couple connections that have been drawn. While not studied with the VIA Classification per se, a peaceful personality has been connected with several enabling factors relating to character strengths such as perspective, self-regulation, open-mindedness, and hope (Nelson, 2014). In addition, Cohrs et al. (2013) hypothesized the character strengths under the virtues of temperance and transcendence as important contributors to peace such as in reducing aggression and reconstructing relationships (e.g., forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation) and in focusing on universal humanity, human rights, nonviolence, and peace activism (e.g., hope, gratitude, appreciation of beauty, spirituality). Other studies have shown that fairness is a core, hardwired component of relational peace (Palagi et al., 2016).

The argument here is that each of the 24 character strengths can be viewed as a capacity to contribute in a meaningful way toward peace, and that there are numerous character strengths concepts and dynamics that are relevant for exploration, research, and practice for peace. I propose three initial levels of character strengths application for the levels of peace.

(1) *Specific strengths*: from curiosity and love to fairness and humility, each of the 24 strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) can be directed in ways to foster positive peace and negative peace. For example, a person can use prudence to pause to think before they speak out of anger when they are in a tense situation, while another person uses social intelligence to understand the context, read the nonverbal expressions, and respond accordingly.

(2) *Character strengths concepts*: There are a variety of character strengths concepts relevant for peace, including signature strengths, the highest, most energizing strengths in an individual's unique profile (Seligman et al., 2005), in which the person makes an effort to use their most authentic, best understood qualities toward behaviors that boost harmony. Phasic strengths refer to those non-tonic strengths the individual uses to rise to the occasion and bring forth strongly when needed (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Peaceful action – especially

negative peace – often requires individuals to step up with their strengths to help in a situation; an individual low in bravery, perseverance, or humility might nevertheless turn to and wield one or more of these strengths strongly to help face an adversity happening against a disenfranchised group, speaking out against an authoritarian leader, or reducing the tension of someone riddled in anger. Other concepts are strengths overuse, strengths optimal-use, and strengths underuse which map out a continuum in which each character strength can be 'too much,' 'just right,' or 'too little' for the situation at hand; overuse and underuse occur when one's character strength expressions bring about a negative impact on oneself or others (Niemiec, 2019). Is a person bringing too much judgment/critical thinking or too much love (i.e., head strengths and heart strengths) to a particularly tense situation? Is the person's underuse of fairness or kindness toward themselves having a negative impact on their inner peace? Is the influx of creative ideas or badgering curious questions (overuses) having an impact on the peace that typically exists in one's relationship?

(3) *Character strengths dynamics*: This strengths level refers to the interaction and/or resulting dynamics among character strengths within oneself or between dyads or groups. Examples include character strengths combinations (bringing two or more strengths together), character strengths synergies (intrapersonally or interpersonally, when two strengths come together and are greater than the sum of their parts), character strengths collisions (intrapersonally or interpersonally, when two or more strengths come together and are in conflict and cause trouble for oneself or others), giving and receiving strengths (the importance of not only expressing kindness, gratitude, humor, curiosity, etc. but also being able to fully receive these strengths), the ordering effect (the relevance of expressing character strengths in a particular order, usually one particular strength prior to another particular strength), the tempering effect (using one strength to manage the intensity of another strength), the towing effect (using a signature strength to boost or uplift another strength), and hot buttons (when the strength used by someone, perhaps overused or underused, is triggering for oneself) (Niemiec, 2018).

Embedded within these levels is the reality that character strengths use does not always lead to positive results; it is possible character strengths can have a negative effect on peace. Because each of the 24 character strengths are fulfilling and positively morally valued in and of themselves even without obvious tangible outcomes (Stahlmann & Ruch, 2020), they are more likely to be positive than to cause affliction. That said, there are a myriad of ways that character strengths can be overplayed or underplayed and negatively affect peace (Niemiec, 2019). For example, too much bravery with one's words might elicit discord in an intergroup discussion, while too little kindness or social intelligence can negatively impact intimacy in a close relationship. Likewise, too little self-regulation and/or too much zest might impact one's quest for inner peace during a yoga or meditation practice. These character strengths overuses and underuses can lead to a small or substantial negative impact and provide a useful lens for understanding oneself and one's interactions. Moreover, this conceptual level can combine with the dynamic level, for example, two groups that are in conflict can understand that their dynamic reflects an underuse of forgiveness to the opposing group, an overplay of fairness, and/or the underuse of humility. Such insights point toward a deepening mutual understanding and can serve to promote new character strengths within each group and between the groups in the interchange.

A separate concept worth noting – and one that is necessarily negatively impactful – is referred to as the misuse of character strengths; this means the individual uses a character strength *intentionally* in order to manipulate or harm another person or group, and has been highlighted specifically in the creativity and leadership literatures (Niemiec, 2018). (The intentionality of the harm makes misuse a separate category from commonplace phenomena of strengths overuse/underuse.) When a person uses their creativity to come up with unique ways to violate another person or uses their leadership to intentionally harm another, they are misusing their character strengths.

Considering these three character strengths levels and the myriad of ways these strengths combine and dynamically relate to one another in one context or the next – and considering the multiple levels of peace itself – the range of areas to investigate and integrate peace and strengths is substantial. Due to the increasing complexity, a matrix of hypothetical integration points is provided in (Table 1).

There are opportunities for each of the 24 character strengths, each of the major character strengths concepts, and the multitude of character strengths dynamics

Table 1. Matrix of integration examples across levels of peace and levels of character strengths application.

General Peace Domain	Peace Level	Character Strengths Level	Example of Integration
Positive Peace (enhancing character strengths to promote harmony, equity, balance)	Inner/personal peace	Specific strength	An individual begins to target her strength of love as a self-care practice of cultivating an internal state of joy.
	Inner/personal peace	Character strength concept	A young man uses his signature strength of hope to build a confident sense of agency and belief in himself to set goals around taking positive social action.
	Inner/personal peace	Character strength dynamic	An executive taps into an intrapersonal synergy of fairness and kindness by limiting the hours of a busy work schedule to emphasize greater self-fairness and self-kindness.
	Relational peace	Character strengths concept	A colleague points out three signature strengths of a coworker, explaining how the coworker use these strengths to great effect at work; the result is a deeper collegial relationship.
	Intragroup peace	Specific strength	While leading a team meeting, the leader turns to humility to hear, value, and validate each person's perspective and relates those views to the team's well-being.
	Intergroup peace	Character strength dynamic	Leaders of two sport teams realize both teams share strengths of perseverance, zest, and prudence; they decide to bring the members of both teams together to explore this mutual intergroup synergy and look for new, harmonious collaborations revolving around these three strengths.
Negative Peace (managing or reducing afflictions, conflict, tension, and/or violence)	Inner/personal peace	Specific strength	A young woman finds calm and balance by using self-regulation of breathing to reduce her physical tension and let go of psychological worry.
	Inner/personal peace	Character strength concept	Turning to his phasic strength of bravery, an individual confronts his anxiety around giving a public presentation as opposed to continuing to avoid it.
	Inner/personal peace	Character strength dynamic	Expressing the tempering effect an individual uses her self-forgiveness to decrease the tension brought forth by too much zest/energy.
	Relational peace	Character strengths concept	While in a tense conversation with one's spouse, the other spouse pauses to consider which character strengths one is overusing and underusing that is contributing to the problem.
	Intragroup peace	Character strength dynamic	A work team is struggling to figure out the direction of a critical project and members are feeling frustrated and confused. The team recalls two of the highest strengths in their 'team culture' are judgment/critical thinking and social intelligence. They post these two strengths terms on a board in clear view for all team members to see at each meeting and they decide to use the combination of these two strengths (i.e., considering all sides of an issue and empathizing with those with opposing viewpoints, respectively) as the mindset for future interactions.
	Intergroup peace	Character strength dynamic	During a heated debate among two community factions, one side decides to display the ordering effect to reduce tension; they deliberately use prudence first (being cautious with word choice), followed by creativity (actively brainstorming and problem-solving solutions).

to contribute in some way to support various levels of peace. The integration is a territory ripe for exploration, therefore, I turn to an empirical investigation.

A pilot study exploring peace and character strengths

To attain data on the connections between levels of peace and character strengths, a first of its kind, study was conducted using a convenience sample of individuals taking the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA Survey) on the www.viacharacter.org website. After completing the test, each user was given the option to take a few

minutes to answer nine questions relating to character strengths and peace. The questions included the following, three foundational items:

- When you think of your own 'inner peace' (feeling calmness, tranquility, harmony) in a particular moment, either alone or with others, which character strength most strongly supports you or creates that 'inner peace' for you?
- When you think of creating peace, however brief, in one of your close relationships, which character strength most strongly supports you or helps create that 'relational peace'?

- When you think of someone who has a different political or religious view than yours, which character strength helps you most in managing that difference or conflict?

These will be referred to as personal/inner peace, relational peace, and negative peace, respectively. After each of these items, the user was offered the opportunity to select up to two (or 'none') character strengths of the 24 strengths in the VIA Classification (i.e., two items for each foundational item) and a write-in response explaining why they chose the strength(s) (i.e., one item for each foundational item). These nine items were presented to users for seven consecutive days in February 2021. A total of 25,302 individuals responded to one or more items. Demographics are offered in (Table 2), and reveal a wide range of respondents with females making up more than half, ages 18–24 making up the largest subgroup (22%), bachelor's or professional degree making up the largest education level (25%), and the United States being the largest geographic location, followed by Australia, United Kingdom, Mexico, Canada, and Brazil.

Percentages for each character strength were calculated and totaled for each level of peace (i.e., personal/inner peace, relational peace, and negative peace), and calculated and rank ordered (see Table 3). These represent the percentage of occurrences individuals selected the character strength in either of their two options. The first two areas (personal/inner and relational) are positive peace phenomena as the item focused on building peaceful harmony/calm while the third area captured negative peace in that some adversity, in this case political/religious conflict, is being managed.

Most participants offered at least one character strength selection to each level of peace. The percentage of people saying 'none' to the option to name a character strength associated with peace was an average of 0% for each level. The percentage of participants indicating only one character strength for a given level of peace (thus saying 'none' for the option to note a second character strength) was 4% (for personal//inner peace), 9% (for relational peace), and 16% (for negative peace). These 'nones' progressively increased which could reflect survey fatigue as participants completed the VIA Survey and then decided to answer the optional additional questions, some items of which required fatiguing, write-in responses. This could also reflect the complexity of the items as there is an increasing degree of difficulty starting with ostensibly the least challenging (personal/inner peace), followed by an item that is likely more challenging (relational peace), and

Table 2. Specific demographics (N = 25,302).

Demographic Area	Specifics	Percentage
Gender	Female	53%
	Male	25%
	Other	<1%
	Skipped	21%
Age	Under 13	<1%
	13–17	5%
	18–24	22%
	25–34	18%
	35–44	14%
	45–54	10%
	55–64	5%
	65–74	1%
	75+	<1%
	Skipped	25%
Education	No schooling completed	6%
	High school/diploma/equivalent	11%
	Associate's degree, some college, or technical/trade training	16%
	Bachelor's or professional degree	25%
	Master's degree	13%
	Doctorate/post-graduate	2%
	Skipped	27%
Geographic Location	United States	29%
	Australia	9%
	United Kingdom	4%
	Mexico	4%
	Canada	4%
	Brazil	2%
	Netherlands	1%
	South Africa	1%
	New Zealand	1%
	Philippines	1%
	India	1%
	Singapore	1%
	France	1%
	Other countries	17%
	Skipped	24%

concluding with a tense topic about reducing or managing an issue that is often highly sensitive, divisive, and conflicted (managing political/religious differences).

The write-in responses individuals offered to describe their rationale for the chosen strength(s) was reviewed, however, qualitative analysis was not conducted. A few examples for each of the top strengths across the three levels is provided later.

General findings

In examining the percentile rankings, perspective and kindness were the only strengths to appear in the top 5 across all three levels of peace. This indicates that across these levels of peace it is important to take in the larger view and consider others' viewpoints while also being caring and considerate with words and actions, whether to reduce conflict or build harmony. Buddhist psychology would consider this as operating under the central tenets of wisdom and compassion to create peace within, with others, and with the world.

Table 3. Top 10 selected character strengths using percentile rankings across three levels of peace in N = 25,302 (maximum of two character strengths selected per person, per peace level).

Personal/Inner Peace (Positive Peace)			Relational Peace (Positive Peace)			Political/Religious Differences and Peace (Negative Peace)		
Character Strength	%	% Ranking	Character Strength	%	% Ranking	Character Strength	%	% Ranking
Love	20	1	Honesty	32	1	Perspective	38	1
Kindness	18	2	Love	32	1	Curiosity	25	2
Creativity	15	3	Kindness	28	3	Social intelligence	17	3
Gratitude	15	3	Perspective	14	4	Fairness	17	3
Perspective	13	5	Forgiveness	12	5	Kindness	13	5
Spirituality	12	6	Humor	11	6	Love of learning	11	6
Humor	12	6	Fairness	8	7	Self-regulation	9	7
Honesty	10	8	Social intelligence	6	8	Humility	8	8
Hope	10	8	Teamwork	6	8	Honesty	7	9
Curiosity	9	10	Gratitude	6	8	judgment	6	10

Honesty appeared in the top 10 across the three levels. This strength relies on the importance of being authentic – true to oneself and true in one's relationships. For many respondents, this was the key path for handling difficult tensions as well as for finding inner calm and building from a solid relational foundation. Love was number one for two levels while gratitude, humor, curiosity, and social intelligence appeared in the top 10 for two levels. The two levels that love, gratitude, and humor were highest in were the levels on positive peace. This indicates the importance of these strengths in building positivity or upward positive spirals (Fredrickson, 2001) and it is not uncommon to find these strengths correlated highly with different areas of well-being (e.g., Wagner et al., 2019). The two levels social intelligence was highest in were those dealing with other people; this indicates that for creating peace between people – whether positive or negative peace – it's important to empathize, read the situation and the body language, and be smart and socially appropriate with word choice and actions. Curiosity was in the top 10 for personal/inner peace and negative peace; this shows the usefulness of exploring others' views, asking questions, and pursuing knowledge/information as opposed to telling others how to think or feel (for negative peace) and the value of exploring possibilities and investigating one's inner landscape (for personal peace).

In accounting for all 24 of the character strengths, 18 character strengths appeared in the top 10 at least once. This indicates a versatility of these character strengths in the service of peace. The six character strengths that did not appear in the top 10 of these levels of peace were bravery, perseverance, zest, leadership, prudence, and appreciation of beauty/excellence. Despite not being commonly reported, these strengths can readily be applied to peace, for example, consider the use of appreciation of beauty by someone who goes out in nature to find tranquility, calm and connection, and consider the many people who turn to bravery and perseverance in order to handle a political/religious conflict.

In considering the virtues of the VIA Classification (outlined earlier) that the character strengths nest under (i.e., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), all six were well-represented across the levels of peace, indicating their relevance and importance in people's lives. For personal/inner peace, all the virtues have at least one strength in the top 10 with the exception of temperance, all the virtues have at least one strength in the top 10 for negative peace with the exception of transcendence, while relational peace has all virtues represented in the top 10.

More detailed exploration of character strengths across personal/inner peace, relational peace, and negative peace follows.

Personal/inner peace findings

For personal/inner peace, from a positive peace perspective of promoting harmony and balance in oneself, 20% of participants listed love in one of their two choices as a central strength, followed by kindness (18%), creativity (15%), gratitude (15%), and perspective (13%). Taken as a group, this reflects the importance of fostering an inner environment that is caring and compassionate while also balanced with stimulation of new ideas and the wider perspective of life. The rapidly growing science of self-compassion and its multiple benefits (Neff, 2003; Neff et al., 2007) might be viewed as reflected in these choices. This cluster of strengths also suggests that inner peace might be necessitated by a balance of heart and mind – using heart-dominant strengths (e.g., love, kindness, gratitude) and mind/wisdom-oriented strengths (e.g., creativity, perspective).

A wide range of responses were offered by participants to explain their rationale for how the character strength(s) supported them in building up inner peace. (Table 4) offer a mix of participants' insights across the top 5 strength percentages for inner peace.

Relational peace findings

For relational peace, from a positive peace perspective of promoting harmony and equity in one's close relationship(s), 32% of participants listed honesty in one of their two choices as a central strength, followed by love (32%), kindness (28%), perspective (14%), and forgiveness (12%). This indicates a large degree of agreement in regard to the character strengths most important for building peace in a close relationship.

One can examine these five as a cluster of interrelated strengths. Similar to the building of inner harmony, there was a strong perception that the building of relational harmony requires a loving-kindness and wider perspective, and indeed research has shown that the cultivation of love can increase social connectedness (e.g., Hutcherson et al., 2008). But for this level, the interpersonal components of directness and truth-telling (i.e., honesty) and the capacity to let go of the little irritations of others and being willing to forgive are uniquely critical for relational harmony.

(Table 5) provides several ways in which participants thought about how character strengths contribute to their relational or interpersonal level of peace.

It's worth pointing out that the questions on relational peace and inner peace focused on positive peace, therefore it cannot be assumed that negative peace at these levels would reveal the same respective data. Questions to tap into negative peace at the inner level would revolve around reducing inner conflict and unhealthy self-criticism while negative peace at the relational level would query the use of strengths to reduce a relationship conflict or ongoing problem. In fact, it could be hypothesized that different strengths might emerge more frequently such as humility (e.g., admitting one's mistakes, limiting defensiveness) for reducing conflict in a relationship and self-regulation to lower anxiety and stress for inner peace.

Negative peace findings

For the management of a difference or problem – a negative peace perspective – 38% of participants listed love in one of their two choices as a central strength, followed by curiosity (25%), social intelligence (17%), fairness (17%), and kindness (13%). These were the strengths individuals prioritized in thinking about how

Table 4. Participant responses for how character strengths boost personal/inner peace.

Top character strengths for inner peace	Explanations for why/how the strength is helpful for creating inner peace (verbatim responses)
Love	I love giving and being loved, the feeling it brings to people knowing they're cared for and wanted makes my heart happy.
	I don't often feel peaceful these days, but when I do, it's the peace of being close to people I care about. Especially when cuddling my kids and my husband.
	My inner peace usually comes from a place of love and laughter. I enjoy making others feel like they are loved and I love making them laugh. I also feel most at ease when I feel loved.
Kindness	Acts of kindness help me to feel peaceful because I know that there is good in the world.
	When I feel calm and comforted, I feel a sense of larger kindness or benevolent consciousness that is present in the world and available to me if I can quiet enough to tap into it. I am also soothed by kind inner monologues and recalling kind words from others.
	I feel most inner peace when I have been able to help someone.
Creativity	When I try to find peace, I use my creativity to paint a picture in my head.
	Creativity has always grounded me, it's a meditative process.
	Creating things from scratch makes me feel calm.
Gratitude	Gratitude creates peace by placing me in the present moment.
	Gratitude helps put things back in perspective for me and centers me into a state of mind I want to act out of all the time.
	When I stop to acknowledge the things I have in my life and that I am grateful for, I feel peace and gain a greater perspective on small obstacles that might stand in my way.
Perspective	My 'inner peace' stems from looking at the world through different lenses.
	I feel most calm when I have a relaxed view of the different things that are happening within me and around me.
	Seeking 'inner peace' is trying to find calm in a frantic world. Appreciating that having moments of calm is important in using perspective. Having those moments of calm enables me to persevere and deal with life's pressures.

they would handle a conflict or difference that is particularly divisive, as classically characterized with political or religious discord.

Perspective was the overwhelming favorite strength and this instance marked the single highest percentage (38%) for any single strength at any level. This suggests that when confronting conflicts, having a default approach of stepping back to see the bigger picture rather than getting lost in the details, the opinion, or the body language or voice of the other, is pivotal. Within this wider view, the exploratory nature of curiosity, the second highest strength reported, might further

Table 5. Participant responses for how character strengths boost relational peace.

Top character strengths for relational peace	Explanations for why/how the strength is helpful for creating relational peace (verbatim responses)
Honesty	If I don't think the person in front of me is honest, I will not try to create an atmosphere of peace.
	Honesty helps open communication channels. Real honesty is not simply about expressing emotions but also finding peace and alignment with emotions and the mind. Being honest with yourself helps creating peace in one mind. When one is at peace with themselves, it is easier to be honest with others.
	Honesty and vulnerability in any relationship creates peace within self and a safe space with the other person.
Love	Love allows me to be vulnerable, feel safe, protected, and cared for in my relationships, and to have an all-around sense of peace.
	If I am in a relationship and we are having issues, I feel like my love brings peace.
	I believe if you love someone you only want the absolute good for them and you can create peace between people by sharing your love and heart with one another.
Kindness	Kindness is fundamental in close relationships to create peace and assure the other of one's respect for the other.
	Taking time to listen to another and reflect on the other person's perspective allows me to move toward relational peace.
	Remembering kindness helps me be compassionate and present.
Perspective	Perspective allows me to think from a different standpoint. It takes me out of my emotions and lets me think about the situation logically.
	To have perspective in a relationship is key to understanding the person with whom you are trying to develop relational peace.
	In order to create peace within a close relationship you need to have perspective on the other person's opinion or outlook.
Forgiveness	A sense of peace and connection is restored in my personal relationships when I forgive others for things I perceive they have done or not done that upsets me.
	To keep relational peace means to be able to forgive and forget. Love heals all and you heal yourself and others with forgiveness. You must always provide love and forgiveness to keep a relationship peaceful.
	Understanding how another person views a situation often allows me to reach a middle ground of understanding and mutual respect. Forgiveness allows me to acknowledge that people are not perfect beings, but we are all trying our best.

transform conflict through the approach of asking the other person questions as opposed to proclaiming or convincing them of one's own righteousness on the political or religious view. Social intelligence, fairness, and kindness involve a degree of empathy toward the dissenting person and treating them in a way that they have a right to be heard. These strengths hold the humanity of the other as opposed to a view that reduces the person to 'less than.'

These negative peace findings might have relevance to multiple levels of peace including managing conflicts and problems to build relational peace, intragroup peace, and intergroup peace. A positive peace perspective that might propose questions such as, What character strengths would help you build peaceful relations toward someone with a different political/religious view?, was not explored in this study.

(Table 6) offers a sampling of participants' reflections on how character strengths help them to manage differences or problems, in the context of political/religious differences.

Taken together, across the three levels, these data support the theory that all 24 character strengths are possible for both creating positive opportunities and for managing adversity (Niemiec, 2020). Across the 25,302 respondents, all of the character strengths were named and examples given across the three peace levels. For example, the lowest character strength reported across any level was the strength of zest for the political/religious differences item (negative peace). While that percentage of responses rounds to zero, there were, nevertheless, 98 people who reported zest as central to handling these conflicts. Therefore, all 24 strengths are capacities that hold potential to be of benefit across the levels of peace.

In considering these connections, empirical and theoretical, it is argued that the VIA Classification of character strengths holds strong potential as a common language of and for peace.

Summary, limitations, and future directions

There are a number of factors to promote peace, both positive and negative, across the various types of peace, as opposed to one single lever (Liebovitch et al., 2020). One of the factors that has been largely unexplored is the science of character strengths. Indeed, the integration of peace and character strengths has been highlighted as one of the integration areas that is ripe for development in the positive psychology field (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). Character strengths might provide a substantial value-add for peace research, for improving existing peace programs, and for serving as the framework for new peace programs.

Not only is the examination of the role of specific character strengths for particular levels (e.g., love for inner peace; honesty for relational peace; perspective

Table 6. Participant responses for how character strengths manage negative peace.

Top character strengths for negative peace	Explanations for why/how the strength is helpful for managing a political or religious difference or conflict (verbatim responses)
Perspective	Remembering that every person's views are influenced by their individual life experiences, culture, etc. promotes feelings of understanding and acceptance when others disagree with me.
	I try to understand why that person may have a perspective that is different from my own. Is it their environment? Upbringing? Do they have certain information that I am unaware of? Being curious about why they may think the way they do is important to understanding someone else.
	I think when it comes to someone who has different views from yourself, whether they be political or religious, understanding perspective is imperative in order to manage or solve any conflict. Without perspective, it is very difficult to know where another person is coming from, which will not help diffuse any situation.
Curiosity	Curiosity makes me want to know more about someone's belief so I can understand what they believe and why.
	I am curious when others have different beliefs than I do. I prefer to learn from them than to judge.
	I am genuinely interested in learning about different ways of looking at a situation even if I never agree with the person.
Social Intelligence	Being able to read a person's views and opinions on a deeper level despite what they may be verbally telling you, can tell you a lot about them.
	I have learned the benefit of having the emotional or social intelligence to accept/acknowledge those with different opinions. It's OK to be different, and sometimes it's best not to inflame a situation. No one ever changed their mind by losing an argument.
	I think people hold their beliefs for a variety of reasons and if you can see them as whole, beyond their political or religious views, in context of their lives, their situations emotional or otherwise, it helps me bridge what I may not otherwise understand (or, in some cases even feel like I can abide).
Fairness	I chose fairness because everyone should be free to share their religious views or political views without me being blinded by that choice. I will be fair to everyone regardless of religious and political views.
	No matter how different our opinions we always have to treat that person with fairness, to give them the option of expressing their views.
	We all have the right to our own opinions, so I chose fairness because I think it is only fair that everyone can live by their own political and religious views.
Kindness	I chose kindness because deep inside I don't want a person to hurt inside, especially someone I care about – even if they oppose my beliefs.
	Kindness teaches me to give dignity and respect to those who have different political and religious views than me.
	With kindness you can put yourself in the other's shoes.

for negative peace) important, but equally relevant is the territory of character strengths concepts such as signature strengths, the overuse, underuse, and optimal use of character strengths, character strengths synergies and collisions, phasic strengths, and character strengths dynamics. These offer a legion of possibilities for researchers and early pioneer practitioners.

As the creation of peace involves multiple layers of social/psychological phenomena and cuts across individual, group, and societal levels, there is far more that we don't know. Thus, an empirical study was conducted to begin an exploration of the integration and mutual benefit of peace and strengths. The study revealed several character strengths connections and concrete anecdotes from participants for building peace and managing conflict.

There are some limitations to highlight. When participants selected the character strengths they use to build peace, for simplicity purposes, definitions were not provided. As many participants were taking the VIA Survey for the first time, their knowledge of the strengths was likely low (strengths knowledge/experience was not assessed). While the 24 strengths reflect a user-friendly language, some strengths may not be immediately clear in terms of their meaning (e.g., prudence) and thereby less likely to be selected. If a definition were provided in the future, alongside a short practical example relating to peace (e.g., a prudent person is often good at pausing to think before they speak or act and therefore can prevent problems from escalating), that might offer new perspectives and different reports of character strengths use.

The sample used had the advantage of being international, however, it was not a representative sample and thereby interpretations are limited in drawing conclusions about any group of people. Examining character strengths frequencies, levels of use, and practice applications within a specific group, team, culture, or population would be a valuable project.

It's also worth noting that the questions posed do not provide a full picture of all the levels and permutations of peace or all the levels of character strengths, for example, there was not a direct measure of applicable character strengths concepts (e.g., signature strengths) or character strengths dynamics (e.g., intrapersonal synergies), nor was there a focus on negative peace for the inner/personal level or the relational level or on positive peace for the political/religious conflict item. There was no direct examination of intragroup and intergroup peace; ideally

future studies would examine the character strengths levels dynamically within and between groups.

There are some resulting practical considerations that warrant scientific investigation. Those character strengths that emerged highest for each level and/or across levels might be examined specifically as possible targets of interventions for peace; the character strength constellations (e.g., top 5) might be brought forth together and tested in a practical program for creating peace in individuals, relationships, or groups. More specifically, it would be of value to understand the role of signature strengths awareness and expression, one of the most consistent and robust findings in positive psychology (e.g., see meta-analysis by Schutte & Malouff, 2019), as tested across the peace levels. In addition, any character strengths dynamic could be the subject of exploration, for example, the character strengths ordering effect: Might there be an optimal order of character strength expression that serves to make it more likely that conflict will be reduced in an intergroup dialogue (e.g., prudence then gratitude then curiosity)? Is the order different for close relationships and the boosting of harmony in that relationship (e.g., starting with love or forgiveness)? Are these strength 'orders' better supported with a starting point of expressing one's most authentic signature strengths? Or, is there a character strength or two that might be a universal starting point for tense conversations (e.g., perspective, kindness, or social intelligence)? Any dynamic, concept, or specific strength can be treated with such investigation on any peace level.

To conclude, despite a number of misconceptions, there is substantial opportunity for a scientific exploration of the integration of character strengths and peace psychology. The integration outlined here is theoretical, empirical, and aspirational. It is offered with humility despite the potentially profound ramifications of such a foundation. Whether fleeting or steady, small or substantial, we can pursue a peace infused with core strengths of character. This would be a peace that is unifying and courageous, inclusive and deep, meaningful and imminently practical to positively impact our lives and the lives of others.

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Disclosure statement

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to Dr. Marty Seligman for his lifelong inspiring legacy characterized by tirelessly catalyzing tidal wave shifts in the field of psychology, innovating strong psychological science, and directly and indirectly impacting countless lives toward the better angels of their nature. Second, I dedicate this paper to two of the few people in positive psychology thus far who have prioritized peace in their work, who operate with both exuberance and gentleness – Dr. Helena Águeda Marujo and the late Dr. Luis Miguel Neto.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, upon reasonable request.

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