

Throwing Caution to the Wind

Glancing at the VIA Signature Strengths survey I thought there were only 24 questions. Honestly, I thought the 240 questions description in the introductory paragraph was a typo. Alas, I went through the survey and in the end I am glad that there were ten questions for each strength. In class we discussed how truthful the data from some of the other surveys could be, especially when a five-item questionnaire was supposed to show how satisfied with life a person is. This survey, despite its length, examined more aspects of each item and I found that a little more reassuring when the final results were displayed.

I was not surprised by my top strengths or my bottom strengths. I was a little more confused by my results for the middle section. Do I really have more optimism than love for learning? I think I have more gratitude than zest, at least sometimes. And why was my caution rating so low? I have always considered myself to be a fairly caution individual and to be careful when taking risks, not to jump into situations unprepared. As someone interested in quantitative psychology, I would have enjoyed seeing a scale for each response, similar to the other surveys we have taken. That way it would be easier to interpret how the scale measures each item and how much differently the strengths were rated. I felt that I had given pretty similar answers for some of the items and wondered if their ranking wasn't just arbitrary since they might have had the same overall score.

One aspect of the survey that I found very helpful was the description on the scores page. The last sentence, "your top five, especially those marked as Signature Strengths, are the ones to pay attention to and find ways to use more often," really struck out to me as a defining aspect of positive psychology. Focus on the positive! This statement reminded me of the article we read for this week, "The Felicity of Virtue." It correlates with the idea that it is easier and more productive to focus on your strengths and to start making yourself a better person by working on traits that you already possess. Instead of showing what your lowest strengths (seems like an oxymoron anyways...) are, the survey results displays the top five and urges the survey-taker to look at those and try to improve their daily life by using them more often.

In the same article the author concludes his first section by questioning whether the happiness hypothesis will be left to the cynic and to follow the Machiavellian and to fake it until you make it (pg. 158), roughly speaking using an AA saying and self-help guru mantra. While I think the rest of the article brushes off the idea that this is the future of becoming a virtuous person, it's an interesting position to consider. What are the benefits of faking it: you could be being nicer and helping others, other people could appreciate your efforts; you can start to examine your own mode of thinking and analyze your current actions; and you can practice a skill you want to master. To me, that doesn't sound too bad. Granted, you're being "fake" and "not real", but if the goal is to become a greater person, I think the means justify the ends.