

Developing Character Identity: A New Framework for Counseling Adults in Transition

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Counselors working with adults in transition can integrate the principles of character development with talk therapy, creating a framework for dialogue about the relationship between clients' character identity and their personal struggles and successes. Intervention strategies are proposed focusing on developing character identity for more effective decision making and authentic living.

A fundamental part of a counselor's role is working with clients in transition. Adult transitions can be especially challenging to facilitate because they can involve several *life domains* at once (Hall & Young, 1999). Life domains refer to the aspects of an individual's living that influence personal well-being and include interpersonal relations, leisure, work, and community participation (Schalock, 2004).

Transitions involving life domains, whether by choice or not, demand decisions regarding how to move forward. Counselors who work with adults in transition can help by identifying effective coping and decision-making strategies (Hall & Young, 1999). However, past patterns of ineffective strategies along with poor intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics might exist for individuals. Wrosch and Scheier (2003) found that personal factors indicating emotional stability, openness to experience, and responsibility significantly increased the quality of life experienced in the domains identified by Schalock (2004).

Various interventions are available for counselors to use in their work with adults in transition. The study of character development is an emerging trend in three theoretical orientations—dynamic psychiatry, transpersonal psychology, and the recently coined positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The approaches are also similar in their focus on holistic, developmental well-being. The mental health professions

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now seem to focus their attention on the preventative developmental approaches to client well-being that emphasize strengths versus pathology. However, ideas of character development as a strength and as a potential weakness are underutilized as a way of understanding adult living. Therefore, the focus of this conceptual article is to introduce a new way for counselors to facilitate dialogue with adults in transition. The Character Identity Development Model (CIDM; Hall, 2005b) is a template for identifying a client's level of self-awareness and their level of character identity development. The model can further serve as a benchmark of therapeutic progress as related to a client's practice of good character and overall sense of well-being (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The Character Identity Inventory (CII; Hall, 2005a) is presented as a client self-report instrument on virtue practice that I have used extensively as a method for determining the relationship between virtue practice and a client's struggles and successes in life. I have provided specific questions for client reflection and dialogue. A case study using a real-world scenario demonstrates the therapeutic use and benefits of both the model and the inventory.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

In 1996, Leming noted that character development was one of the fastest growing movements in the field of education. The trend remains (Schaeffer, 2003), as evidenced by the variety of character building initiatives at the local, state, and national levels. More than 90% of the respondents to a *Phi Delta Kappan*/Gallup poll supported teaching character education traits to students in the school system (Starr, 1999, ¶14).

Furthermore, there are indications that character development serves as a vehicle for preventing problems later in life (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Brooks & Goble, 1997).

The earliest concepts of the process of developing character stems from the works of Plato and Aristotle who respectively discussed ideas of virtues and the propensity of human beings to receive and practice virtues in such a way that they become habit (Robinson, Jones, & Hayes, 2000). Although there are varying definitions of the content and process of character education (e.g., Berkowitz & Bier, 2004), Murphy's (1998) definition of character serves as a representative example. He defined character as "coming to understand, care about, and practice virtue" (p. 159). Similarly, Ryan and Bohlin (1999) framed character development as knowing the good, loving the good, and doing the good. Both definitions address the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains, which Williams (2000) said must receive equal consideration in the various stages of child development. Damon (as cited in Berkowitz & Bier, 2004) noted earlier, however, that the formation of virtues may begin in childhood, but they develop over the life span.

THE VIRTUES OF CHARACTER

There are various labels identifying the components of character, such as *core ethical values* (Character Education Partnership, n.d.), *universal values* (Hall & Pasquinilli, 2005), and *virtues* (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Cornett and Chant (2000) determined that the virtues embraced by most character education initiatives are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Additional virtues encouraged by proponents include self-discipline, compassion, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, faith (Bennett, 1993), and selflessness (Lasley, 1994). Although there is much overlap among lists of virtues that constitute good character, no list is universally used. Peterson and Seligman (2004), however, compiled an extensive classification of common virtues found in diverse world cultures. They identified six *core moral virtues* (wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) representing 24 personality traits called *character strengths*. Their compilation serves as the initial template used by researchers in the positive psychology movement to empirically study well-being as it is related to virtue (Hall, 2005b).

CHARACTER AND WELL-BEING IN ADULTS

The K-12 school system has long been considered the logically appropriate setting in which to encourage and teach virtues (Schaeffer, 2003), and rightly so, because the practice of virtues begins in the formative years (Williams, 2000). Unfortunately, a large segment of the adult population may have missed the experience of a structured character education and development program. For many persons, knowledge about the practice of virtues and character development have been gained in various hit-and-miss ways (e.g., military, virtuous parents, character-based school systems, and churches). As such, there seems to be an adult population at various levels of competence in their methods of developing and practicing the virtues that form character (Hall, 2005b). After September, 11, 2001, however, there seemed to be a major increase in adults' desire to know about and develop good character (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Thus, the interest in character development and its impact on individual well-being and societal betterment had now crossed into the mental health disciplines and the general community (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Yeager (1998) determined that well-being is not achieved simply through the development of isolated skills and behavior but also by maintaining the attitude and desire to do what is right on an ongoing basis. Peterson and Seligman (2004) later added that virtues do not exist in isolation but are interdependent as they contribute to well-being. If one accepts the notion that the practice of virtue is related to well-being, then one could assume

that there is a relationship between degrees of well-being and degrees of character development.

A FRESH LOOK AT THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION

Cardinal and Shadow Virtues

Virtues, as I conceive them to be used for therapeutic intervention within the framework of my proposed character identity model, represent an integration of virtues described in various character development literatures (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Character Counts, n.d.; Character Education Initiative, 1998; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The emerging group of similar virtues was identified as *cardinal virtues*, with their polar opposites labeled as *shadow virtues*. The term *cardinal* virtue was used by Thomas Aquinas to describe those four virtues (wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice) that are considered pivotal in human development (Davies, 1993). The term *shadow* comes from Jungian theory (Stevens, 1999) and represents the parts of being that are denied, yet important to know. Developed virtues are considered cardinal virtues. Cardinal virtues are used frequently and are positive strengths to identity. Underdeveloped virtues are considered for the purpose of the model as shadow virtues and may be vices if used negatively or are harmful to personal development or interactions with others. My purpose, as a counselor, was to design a template that could then be used as a way to help clients identify the character traits they practice on a daily basis. These virtues would represent their character identity.

The Character Identity Development Model

The Character Identity Development Model (CIDM; Hall, 2005b) is an adaptation from the character development literature and the Structural Adjustment Model of Identity Development (Hall & Young, 1999). Furthermore, the CIDM is based on the assumption that the practice of character is related to well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Yeager, 1998) and could be used as a therapeutic framework. The CIDM presented in this article is a way to integrate the components of character development into personal counseling with adults. The model is designed to serve as a framework for dialogue about the relationship between one's character identity and personal struggles and successes. Furthermore, intervention strategies focus on developing the character identity in a way that will lead the client to more effective decision making and authentic living (Rogers, 1989; Wrosch & Scheier, 2003).

Using this model to integrate character development with personal counseling

1. provides a unique way for understanding personal struggles;
2. views character identity in terms of various degrees of development as opposed to the idea of either having character or not having it; and
3. encourages client exploration, reflection, and decision making based on using positive character traits as a guide.

The CIDM offers a holistic framework for understanding and counseling adults using a character-based approach. The model is based on four developmental stages of character identity reflecting two broad areas: (a) a person's level of awareness regarding his or her unique character identity and (b) a person's degree of character identity development and relation to his or her decision making and involvements in various life domains (e.g., career, home life, community participation, relationships). Figure 1 shows an outline of the model and the four stages.

Phase 1: Existing

Individuals in the Existing stage may feel uncertain about the direction of their life in one or more life domains (e.g., relationships, career; Schalock, 2004). Feelings of simply going-through-the-motions may emerge, with little reflection on the reasons for feeling complacent (Hall & Young, 1999). There may also be inconsistency in their value system as related to decisions and involvements. For example, an individual may abhor drinking and driving but may do so to remain part of a peer group. Additionally, individuals may be unaware of their character identity and how practicing certain underdeveloped virtues may be negatively influencing the way they think, feel, and behave.

Phase 2: Working Dissonance

Dissonance is a form of tension that exists when what people know or believe differs from their behavior. A person in this state also has a natural tendency to seek resolution (Hall & Young, 1999). When the dissonance of feeling complacent in a life domain reaches a certain point, a common reaction is to change one's situation. For example, an individual may be unsatisfied with her or his current relationship and begin looking for other opportunities for intimacy. However, without understanding why the complacency exists, the new relationship may be incongruent with the practice of good character. A strategy would be for the individual to determine her or his character identity (cardinal and shadow virtues) and how the prac-

		Character Structure	
		Developed	Underdeveloped
Level of Awareness	Aware	Cardinal Practice	Working Dissonance
	Unaware	Aligned	Existing

FIGURE 1

Character Identity Development Model (Hall, 2005b)

tice of shadow virtues had contributed to previous relationship problems. By doing so, the individual may realize that she or he was not honest in the relationship and was inflexible with her or his expectations of the other person. It is also important to determine how practicing cardinal virtues is positive in one's life domains (Hall, 2005b). Individuals are encouraged to know the good (gather information and awareness about virtues), love the good (value the knowledge about the virtues), and begin doing the good (practicing cardinal virtues).

Phase 2 is a point in development when individuals may decide to address the dissonance in several ways. Talking with others, seeing a counselor, or reading are common approaches (Hall, 2005b). Part of the challenge for an individual at this time is trying to understand why the struggles exist. On the basis of that awareness, an individual needs to make changes in thought or behavior, leading to better coping and decisions (Hall & Young, 1999). The CII (Hall, 2005a) can be used to (a) recognize an individual's current character identity, (b) understand how this identity developed, (c) learn how the practice of cardinal virtues has contributed to life enjoyment, and (d) learn how the practice of shadow virtues has added to life struggles. Taking responsibility for current behavior and desired change is crucial at this stage.

Phase 3: Cardinal Practice

Individuals enter Phase 3 after completing the CII and with the knowledge of how their current character identity works for and against them in life domains. At this time, a certain degree of commitment is needed to develop shadow virtues into cardinal virtues and continue practicing existing cardinal virtues in relation to their decision making. Self-reflection is still at a high point at this stage because new patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving are being tested (Hall, 2005b). In this phase, an individual consciously knows the good, loves the good, and is doing the good.

Phase 4: Aligned

Being aligned represents a habitual congruence between an individual's cardinal virtues, decision making, and chosen involvements (Hall, 2005b). Doyle (1997) believed that character development best occurs through example, study, and practice, which will eventually become habit. Dissonance within an individual at this time is minimal because of alignment. Critical self-reflection is also at a minimum because old patterns of underdeveloped shadow virtues in decision making are developing into cardinal virtues. It is important to note that an individual may experience alignment in a specific life domain (e.g., work) yet still be in the working dissonance phase in another life domain (e.g., relationships). The intent, however, is to move toward alignment in all facets of daily living (Hall, 2005b).

THE CII

As a self-help guide or tool for therapeutic intervention, the CII (see Appendix) helps both the client and the counselor to note strength of character or weakness in character. Character should not be viewed as an either/or situation—either you possess it or you do not—but with the belief that each virtue can exist in varying degrees of development (Hall, 2005a). The CII helps the client identify virtues as being either underdeveloped or developed. Virtues that are marked toward the left side of the continuum and are used in thoughts, feelings, and behavior are considered cardinal virtues. These virtues also represent a client's strength of character. Virtues that are underdeveloped are considered shadow virtues. These virtues, in relation to thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, contribute to struggles a client experiences in the various life domains. An overall glance at the ratings for the virtues can give an indication of related patterns of problems or strengths. The following are steps to help a client explore their character identity using the CII.

Step 1. The client should fill out the CII reflecting life domains (e.g., career, family relationships, peer/work relationships, leisure).

Step 2. For each shadow virtue identified, the following questions should be reflected upon: (a) How is the virtue practiced? (b) How does practicing the virtue (in its current stage of development) harm you? (c) How does practicing the virtue (in its current stage of development) help you? It is important to get a clear picture of how an individual uses the virtues in their decision making within the identified life domains.

Step 3. For each cardinal virtue identified, the following questions should be reflected upon: (a) How do you practice the virtue in your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors? (b) How does practicing the virtue help you in your decision making and daily living? (c) How can you use this virtue to help you with your struggles?

It is important, through reflection on cardinal virtues, to help the client identify what is working in her or his life and recognize that cardinal virtues can be used as leverage to help develop shadow virtues.

Step 4. Consider ways that the shadow virtues can be developed into cardinal virtues. An example is provided in the following case study.

CASE STUDY OF TYE

A client, Tye, made an appointment to see me. His presenting problems were difficulty in work relationships, especially with a male coworker, and

continual verbal fighting with his spouse. Tye was a 43-year-old Native American man in a middle-management position with a large manufacturing company. He had been married to the same woman for 15 years. They had two children together, ages 13 and 9 years. Tye stated that he was reluctant to participate in counseling but came at his wife's insistence and because of his desire to resolve the frustration in his life. Tye seemed to clearly be in the working dissonance stage. He wanted to resolve the tension yet was unaware of how to make necessary changes in his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Tye was asked to fill out the CII, noting the degree of each virtue practiced in his work and home life. I explained the purpose of the inventory and that the results would give us a common language to discuss his struggles and areas of needed change. The results showed interesting correlations between his practice of specific shadow virtues and his struggles in the work setting. Tye had marked his practice of virtues close to hate, dishonesty, idleness, inflexibility, and resentment. He stated that he actually disliked, as opposed to "hating," his coworker (another mid-manager competing for the same advancement opportunities) and resented the political games he felt forced to play to get ahead. Because of this resentment toward the company culture, he became idle in his behavior and inflexible about any change suggested by management. Furthermore, Tye considered himself to be somewhat dishonest with colleagues, not because he told lies but because he withheld information that would benefit his coworker and put himself at a further disadvantage.

We discussed how the practice of these shadow virtues reinforced negative thoughts and feelings about himself, his coworker, and his job. We then talked of practicing the opposite cardinal virtues (love, honesty, perseverance, flexibility, and forgiveness) as they related to his struggles at work. Tye began to honestly reflect on his own limitations and how he had been reluctant to update his skills because of a fear of failure. He noted that he actually enjoyed his work and the company and that he was projecting his frustration with himself onto the company and his coworker. Tye reestablished his commitment to his work and focused more on himself and his own development rather than on competing with coworkers. After consultation with his manager and consideration of his own expectations of himself, Tye signed up for advanced training. Instead of blaming coworkers and the company for what he had labeled as a "stagnant" 3 years of employment, Tye worked on forgiving himself for his participation in his own misery and his previous reluctance to face his fear of losing worth as he grew older. After a few sessions of using the character identity language and template, Tye began to consciously make everyday decisions in alignment with practicing cardinal virtues. As a result, his anxiety and frustration about work was reduced, and his worth as a person and employee increased.

SUMMARY

Issues brought to counseling by adults in transition represent a unique opportunity for counselors. Often the transitions represent changes in various life domains—such as relationship, career, or leisure involvements—and may occur simultaneously. The manner in which transitional decisions are made can be understood in relation to the practice of virtues. Furthermore, exploring a client's struggles through a character identity framework gives the counselor and client a common language to discuss interventions and goal attainment. The practice of good character is a lifelong endeavor that has an effect on a person's well-being. Counselors working with adults in transition can integrate the principles of character development with talk therapy, creating a framework for dialogue about the relationship between clients' character identity, the practice of virtues, and their personal struggles and successes.

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APPENDIX

Character Identity Inventory (CII)

Directions: Place a vertical mark along each continuum in the **Range** to identify your degree of development (and practice) of the virtues. It may be helpful to place a vertical mark representing a life domain (career, family relationships, work relationships, leisure) along each continuum. Label the marks with the corresponding life domain (C, FR, WR, L). Additional domains can be added if desired.

Cardinal Virtues	Range	Shadow Virtues
Love		Hate
Courage		Cowardice
Honesty		Dishonesty
Faith		Disbelief
Self-Discipline		Lack of self-discipline
Perseverance		Idleness
Flexibility		Inflexibility
Responsibility		Irresponsibility
Compassion		Cruelty
Trustworthiness		Unreliability
Selflessness		Selfishness
Forgiveness		Resentment

Note. Developed virtues are considered cardinal virtues. Cardinal virtues are used frequently and are positive strengths to identify. Undeveloped virtues are considered shadow virtues and may be vices if used negatively or are harmful to personal development or interactions with others (Hall, 2005a).

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