The rise of positive psychology has contributed to the scientific study of human strengths and virtues. This article identifies two types of character strengths: focus strengths, exemplified by creativity, and balance strengths, exemplified by wisdom. Which type we pursue influences how we organize our personal and professional lives, including choices about what we do, where we do it, and what values we promote as professional practitioners, researchers, and teachers. G. A. Kimble (1984) identified two cultures of psychology based on members’ commitments to scientific or humanistic values. In a similar manner, two cultures of positive psychology, defined by the focus–balance distinction, are suggested here. Additional implications of the focus–balance distinction are discussed.

Twenty years ago, Kimble (1984) described two opposing cultures within organized psychology. In surveying members of the American Psychological Association (APA), he found evidence for a humanist culture populated mainly by practitioners and characterized by a commitment to humanistic values, intuition as a source of basic knowledge, idiographic laws, and holism. He also identified a scientist culture characterized by commitments to scientific values, objectivism as a source of knowledge, nomothetic laws, and reductionism. Kimble suggested that the conflicting cultural commitments of the two groups made it difficult for psychologists to understand and communicate with one another. Recent APA presidents have acknowledged this cultural rift and have made the unification of psychology a priority for their administrations (Benson, 2003; Martin, 2001; Smith, 2003).

Twenty years ago, positive psychology did not exist. Whether we mark the beginning of positive psychology with Martin Seligman’s tenure as APA president in 1998, or later with the special edition of the American Psychologist devoted to this emerging subdiscipline (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000b), positive psychology as an organized area of study is clearly in its infancy. Nevertheless, it is an infant that is growing fast. The number of undergraduate positive psychology courses offered at U.S. institutions has risen from zero 5 years ago to more than 100 in 2003 (Murray, 2003). There are now compilations pulling together the work of researchers in the field (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2002; Chang, 2000; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000b; Snyder & Lopez, 2002b) and even a successful self-help translation (Seligman, 2002). Positive psychology has its own conferences (see Martin Seligman Research Alliance, n.d.) and workshops (Authentic Happiness Coaching, 2003), appealing to practitioners and researchers alike.

In this article, I describe two worldviews derived from positive psychology that may, like Kimble’s (1984) two cultures, define the commitments of psychologists, though not along scientist/practitioner lines. I suspect these contrasting worldviews contribute to how we organize our personal and professional lives, what we teach our students, and how we help our clients. Unlike Kimble’s competing cultures, however, these alternate views do not threaten the future of psychology. In fact, understanding these two perspectives may help us better understand the work we accomplish as psychologists and the common goals we pursue as people seeking meaning.

Positive Psychology’s Two Worldviews

Positive psychology attempts to understand positive emotions, positive strengths and vir-
tues, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000a). Researchers attempt to explain scientifically how strengths naturally develop and are maintained and how they can be nurtured to improve people’s lives. According to Seligman (2002), strengths are special traits that meet additional criteria setting them apart from talents and more general personality traits and imbuing them with moral significance. Among these criteria, strengths are valued for their own sake, not simply for the consequences they produce; strengths are traits that most parents wish for in their children; strengths produce good feelings in actors exercising them and inspiration among observers watching their exercise; strengths are supported by cultural institutions, stories told to children, mythic heroes, and role models; strengths are found in prodigies; and, lastly, strengths are ubiquitous across cultures. A partial list of strengths fitting these criteria would include creativity, social intelligence, wisdom, bravery, kindness, fairness, leadership, humility, spirituality, and integrity. According to Peterson and Seligman’s influential classification system (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), strengths are the building blocks of higher order virtues.

By definition, the exercise of virtue is good, but it may also be good for you. Seligman (2002) has argued that people will be happier and live more meaningful lives if they can learn to identify, build upon, and deploy their current strengths and virtues on a regular basis. Positive psychological and physical health effects have been demonstrated for some strengths including optimism (Seligman, 1991), gratitude (Emmons & Shelton, 2002), and spirituality (Myers, 2000; Pargament, 2002). Whether matching individuals with their strengths and building on them will lead to greater happiness, across all strengths, remains an open question.

Many researchers who now study strengths and virtues were doing so long before positive psychology arrived as an organized subdiscipline. The umbrella of positive psychology, however, allowed researchers in clinical, cognitive, social, and other areas of psychology to come together to share and compare their common interests. It is hoped that this cross-fertilization will lead to new areas of research and new ways of seeing older findings (Snyder & Lopez, 2002a). If we look at the scientific study of virtue as a coherent domain, rather than a set of unrelated topics, new patterns may emerge. Peterson and Seligman’s Values in Action (Peterson & Seligman, 2001, 2004) classification system is one example of a productive way to structure the domain. This system identifies 24 universally recognized strengths and organizes them hierarchically under a set of six higher order virtues. But there are other ways we could group strengths and virtues.

The approach of this article is to examine and group strengths functionally. I describe a very simple scheme that examines how the pursuit of character strengths organizes psychologists’ time, effort, and activities and, in so doing, their lives. Two classes of strengths are contrasted: the focus-oriented, or focus, strengths and the balance-oriented, or balance, strengths. For both, the ultimate goal of the individual is to lead a satisfying and meaningful life. The two classes of strengths differ, however, in the paths they recommend to the good life. The focus-oriented individual will look for opportunities to develop and express personal strengths. The balance-oriented individual will look for opportunities to develop and bring about harmony within the self and between the self and others. The day-to-day decisions of people pursuing the two paths will be different, as will their long-term (but not ultimate) goals. To illustrate some of these contrasts, I first describe creativity as a prototypical focus strength. A description of wisdom as a prototypical balance strength then follows.

**Strength Through Focus: Creativity**

This section describes how creativity fits the pattern of a focus-oriented strength. The discussion is limited to a useful conceptualization of creativity, a portrait of creative people, and a description of ways in which the pursuit of creativity organizes the creator’s life. The interested reader is referred to several reviews for broader coverage of creativity (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Gardner, 1993; Simonson, 1999, 2000, 2002a).

Simonton (2000) suggested that creativity necessarily involves originality and adaptiveness. Creative products or solutions must be original, new ways of approaching a problem. Whether we are talking about scientific discoveries or artistic innovations, creative solutions cannot simply replicate what came before. The
Beatles revolutionized the music of their generation by pulling together earlier musical strands in new and original ways; the hundreds of Beatles cover bands that followed their breakup did not. In addition, a creative solution must be adaptive or useful. Solving the structure of DNA was not only original and aesthetically pleasing (for an insider’s description of this achievement, see Watson, 1980), it opened up a whole new area of study whose victories have included the recent mapping of the human genome. In contrast, cold fusion was a novel idea that promised to revolutionize physics in the late 1980s; unfortunately, after capturing much interest and fanfare within the scientific community and lay public alike, the idea proved too good to be true (Taubes, 1993). Solutions that are novel but not adaptive or adaptive but not novel fail to meet the criteria for creativity.

As with most human capacities, individual differences in creativity are the product of both constitution and environment. Creative people generate a broader and more varied array of solutions to problems. Eysenck and others (Eysenck, 1995; Waller, Bouchard, Lykken, Tellegen, & Blacker, 1993) have demonstrated a sizable genetic contribution to this sort of creative thinking. Although genes may set the stage, individual experiences and a permissive social environment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) are also necessary. Creative production requires prolonged exposure to a domain and the development of expertise. Simonton (2000) suggested that most innovators who significantly influence their field do so after an extended apprenticeship period of a decade or more; rarely do novices make important creative contributions. It appears that highly creative people begin with an innate potential to create, but this potential requires nurturing from the environment, effort, and time to mature.

Highly creative individuals tend to share certain personality characteristics and developmental histories (Simonton, 1999, 2000). Creative people tend to be more independent, non-conforming, rebellious, and bold than their less creative counterparts. They also tend to be more intelligent and better read and to have a wider range of interests and hobbies. Highly creative individuals tend to be passionate about what they do; they are energetic and persistent in their creative quest and may be seen by others as workaholics. In addition, they are more introverted, but this is less the case in creative psychologists (Simonton, 2002b). It is important, however, to appreciate that these are modal characteristics and that there are large individual differences among creative people (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This caveat is especially important when we look at rates of psychopathology among creative individuals. As a group, the highly creative—especially artists—appear to experience higher levels of psychopathology than others, a risk that may be reflected in their family pedigrees as well. Most, however, are unaffected (Kaufman & Baer, 2002; Ludwig, 1995). Interestingly, when creative people are affected by psychological difficulties, they tend to be at the margins of psychopathology—neither normal nor severely impaired—and they tend to have higher ego strength, which allows them to create in spite of their burden (Simonton, 2002a).

Simonton (2002b) has described the family lives of those who made creative contributions to the history of psychology. These eminent individuals were less likely to marry, and when they did, they were more likely to marry late in life. They were less likely to have children, and they had less stable, less happy marriages. One study of eminent scientists showed that marriage had a negative effect on scholarly output (Kanazawa, 2000). In contrast, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggested that the marriages of highly creative people are often happy, but a supportive spouse often carries the burden of the creative individual’s freedom to pursue his or her passion.

Creativity illustrates several defining characteristics of a focus-oriented character strength. First, creative people put a great deal of time, energy, and passion into developing one major target of interest (e.g., their work). Second, when pursuing their interests, they are not concerned with balancing other interests, with harmony, or with reconciliation. Creative individuals are autonomous, are independent, and stick to their guns; they are less interested in accommodating others. Finally, when a focus strength such as creativity is being exercised, other interests—personal and interpersonal—recede into the background. This is not to say that the creatively focused individual is in any way antisocial—working in opposition to the interests of others—but simply that she or he is neutral with respect to the needs of others. A conse-
quence of indifference toward others may be strained interpersonal relationships, illustrated by the sometimes difficult family lives of highly creative people. A consequence of inadequate attention to the self may be difficulties in psychological adjustment.

Strength Through Balance: Wisdom

Wisdom has been studied as long as any of the virtues. Theories of wisdom date back to the ancient philosophers and are implicit in most of the world’s religions. Psychologists are relative newcomers to the study of wisdom, but their emphasis on creating testable hypotheses has breathed new life into the study of this ancient virtue. Reviews of philosophical and psychological theories of wisdom can be found in several other places (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Sternberg, 1990, 1998).

The most compatible view of wisdom as a balance-oriented strength is Sternberg’s balance theory of wisdom (Sternberg, 1998, 2001). According to Sternberg (1998), wisdom is

the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values toward the goal of achieving a common good (a) through a balance among multiple intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests and (b) in order to achieve a balance among responses to environmental contexts: adaptation to existing environmental contexts, shaping of existing environmental contexts, and selection of new environmental contexts.

(p. 353)

Tacit knowledge is what people high in practical intelligence use to successfully solve problems. Sternberg (1998) suggested that tacit knowledge is procedural and action oriented. It involves knowing how to get things done; it is useful in helping people achieve goals that are important to them; and it is typically learned through experience, not through others’ direct help. Wisdom is a type of practical intelligence in which tacit knowledge is used to solve particular kinds of problems. Unlike general practical intelligence, wisdom necessarily involves a direction (i.e., for the common good) and a process (i.e., balance). Wise solutions always involve balancing interests of the self with those of others, balancing conflicting interests within the self (e.g., do I push hard to complete a work project on the weekend, or do I take time off to relax and come back fresh on Monday?), or balancing interests of the self within a larger social context (e.g., school, community, country, or God). Wise solutions also balance responses to most appropriately match environmental demands (e.g., if I have an unreasonable boss, do I bend to her wishes, try to change her, or look for another job?). Recognizing how the particulars of a situation contribute to the fit of an appropriate and balanced solution is critical to this conception of wisdom.

Balance is not valued for its own sake, as some sort of aesthetically pleasing symmetry, but because it brings about a greater good. Sternberg (1998) acknowledged that because of different value systems, people will define the greater good differently. But this, in itself, is not a major problem for the study of wisdom or its measurement. Even if there is incomplete agreement about where the greater good resides, considering the greater good can help us understand what wisdom is not. Wisdom is not the application of practical knowledge to purely self-interested goals. According to balance theory, an individual pursuing only his or her own interests, even if they include development and growth, cannot be considered wise.

Baltes and his colleagues (Baltes, Gluck, & Kunzmann, 2002; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) also view the wise as experts in the application of a particular type of knowledge. A wise person’s area of expertise is what they called the “fundamental pragmatics of life,” which includes “knowledge and judgment about the essence of the human condition and the ways and means of planning, managing, and understanding a good life” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 124). People who are wise are valued by others for their good advice. One of the criteria used by these researchers to evaluate wise solutions includes the balancing of self-interests and collective interests for the common good.

Do wise people live more balanced lives than others? Surprisingly little work has been done on this question. Wisdom is typically measured by presenting experimental participants with complicated vignettes about people facing challenges of living that require the balancing of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Sternberg, 1998, 2001). Participants who rate high on wisdom use their special expertise to devise solutions that amount to sound advice for people in the vignettes. Scores on these wisdom tests correlate positively with being nominated as wise
by peers, with being a clinical psychologist, and with tolerance for ambiguity (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Wisdom as a virtue, however, should be more than knowing the right thing to do or giving advice on how to live the good life. Would not the wise person also listen to his or her own advice so as to live the good life? Measuring this kind of wisdom-in-living is likely to be more difficult than assessing balanced responses to vignettes. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine applying the label of wise to people who fail to practice what they preach. We might respect the counselor who is able to give good advice to others, but would we call this counselor wise if his or her own life was an imbalanced mess? It appears, therefore, that the balance-oriented strength of wisdom includes not only what one knows, but also how one lives.

**Contrasting Paths**

Table 1 summarizes characteristics of focus and balance strengths. Creativity, curiosity, analytical intelligence, perseverance, social intelligence and leadership are all considered focus strengths because their development involves focusing interest and energy on personal competence but does not involve the balancing of any intrapersonal or interpersonal interests. Although some individuals may be able to balance other interests (e.g., family life) while focusing, development of the strength itself does not require this. As we have seen, creative geniuses often lead very focused but unbalanced lives. Even leadership and social intelligence, which are inherently social, may not require the balancing of self-interest and the interests of others. One needs only consider historical and modern-day tyrants to understand that leadership can be wholly self-interested.

The balance strengths necessarily involve balancing competing intrapersonal or interpersonal interests. Their development leads to improved competence in balancing specific types of interests. The strengths listed in Table 1 illustrate the range of different interests that can be balanced. Sternberg’s (1998, 2001) wisdom—probably the broadest of the balance strengths—involve a balance among the self, others, and community institutions; a balance between different competing demands within an individual; and a balance between different possible responses to the environment (i.e., changing personal behavior, changing the environment, or finding more tolerant environments). Fairness balances self-interest with the interests of others or the competing interests of two other parties. Citizenship balances self-interest with the community’s interest. Gratitude balances the joy of receiving a gift with the duty to repay the debt (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Prudence balances competing intrapersonal interests, often long-term satisfactions with short-term hedonistic pleasures. And humility balances the recognition of one’s own value with the value of all other things in the world (Tangney, 2002).

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**Table 1**

**Contrasting the Balance and Focus Strengths**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Type of strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associated strengths</td>
<td>Wisdom, fairness, citizenship, gratitude, prudence, humility, kindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal goal</td>
<td>Creativity, leadership, analytical intelligence, perseverance, curiosity, social intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal outcome</td>
<td>Increase personal competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal goal</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal outcome</td>
<td>May choose to apply personal strengths to social ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal outcome</td>
<td>Good relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career track</td>
<td>Variable relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational achievement</td>
<td>Faster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famous exemplars</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate goal</td>
<td>More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfying, meaningful life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

185
The intrapersonal goal of the focus strengths is to increase personal competence, or to become better at what one already does well. If one is creative, one will seek opportunities to further develop and express this creativity. All of one’s energy may be spent pursuing creative opportunities without regard for how this affects other parts of one’s life. Underdeveloped parts of the self may be left that way, because spending time and energy in rehabilitation is effort away from pursuing excellence. Among the balance strengths that have an intrapersonal goal (not all do), the goal is to harmonize personal strengths and weaknesses or to harmonize internal tensions. Wise people will not consistently ignore a personal weakness and may challenge themselves to try new strategies in appropriate settings. A wise but anxious person, for example, might take growth-enhancing risks around close, supportive friends but might avoid situations in which displaying anxiety would have high social costs.

The outcome of pursuing these intrapersonal goals will be different for balancers and focusers. The single-minded pursuit of a creative idea, of an analytic strategy, or of a leadership goal will often lead to an identifiable achievement. When we think of exemplars of focus, we often associate them with some outstanding achievement, like Einstein’s superior intellect and the theory of relativity, Mozart’s creativity and his grand body of music, or Roosevelt’s leadership and his New Deal reforms. The intrapersonal outcome of balance is integration, which is not as easy for others to see. Because integration is less likely to produce a tangible object, we are less likely to identify products and deeds representing exemplary wisdom, gratitude, humility, and prudence.

The interpersonal goal for balance strengths that involve interpersonal interests—again, not all of them do—is harmonizing self-interest with the interests of others. Wisdom, for example, may involve balancing what is good for me and my career with what is good for my family. I may choose in a particular instance to attend a professional conference rather than my daughter’s soccer championships, if the greater good is served in doing so. It is unlikely, however, that I could consistently choose my career over my daughter’s interests and expect the greater good to be served. Citizenship may require me to balance the interests served by standing in solidarity with my neighbors at a town hall meeting with the interests served by enjoying a night out with friends. Of course, harmony does not mean self-sacrifice, but it necessarily entails considering the interests of others. The likely outcome of striving for harmony is good relationships with other people, including one’s spouse, children, friends, colleagues, and community.

Individuals pursuing focus-oriented strengths may choose to balance their interests with those of others, but this is not a necessary part of the pursuit. Curious individuals may pursue greater knowledge without considering the people around them and are not any less curious for doing so. Curiosity would not require me to consider my daughter’s soccer game or a town hall meeting, though I may choose to do so for other reasons. In addition, aiming a focus strength at a social problem does not necessarily involve balance. A creative genius could choose to focus her or his considerable talent on solving a clearly social problem—say world hunger—but this would not necessarily require the harmonizing of self-interest and the interests of others (i.e., she or he could do so “selfishly”). Consequently, the interpersonal outcomes for those pursuing focus strengths are likely to be more variable than for the balance virtues. Among people who choose a focus path, those who consider others’ interests are likely to have better interpersonal relationships than those who do not, but there is nothing about pursuing a focus strength that would require one to consider the needs of others at all.

The career tracks and occupational achievements of successful balance-oriented and focus-oriented individuals are likely to be different. The balance-oriented individual is likely to have a slower paced career, consistent with the sometimes maligned “mommy” or “daddy” track. Big career decisions, such as whether to relocate or work longer hours for a better job—where “better” means more opportunities to develop personal strengths—will be less problematic for focusers. In addition, the smaller, day-to-day decisions should favor advancement in focusers. Imagine a business executive who is offered the opportunity to attend five optional career-advancing seminars over the course of a couple of years. The balance-oriented executive may agree to three of the seminars but opt out of two, citing the need to take care of his family
while his wife attends a similar career-advancing seminar in one instance and the need to take a long-scheduled family vacation in the other. The focus-oriented individual who sees an opportunity to develop his leadership skills has no virtue-related reason not to cancel his family vacation or renegotiate the agreement with his wife. Over a number of years, this pattern of decision making in two equally talented individuals will lead to faster advancement and greater occupational achievement in the focus-oriented individual.

A final contrast highlighted in Table 1 is the ease with which we can find individuals who exemplify focus and balance virtues. It appears far easier to find exemplars of focus than of balance. Creative and analytical geniuses are easy to identify; simply look for people who have most influenced their discipline. Simonton (2002b) named many who have influenced psychology, including Darwin, Descartes, James, Mill, Pearson, Freud, Thorndike, Spearman, Hull, Cattell, and Eysenck. To identify great leaders, look in the history books. In contrast, locating models of balance is harder, and our list may include more mythic characters than people whose lives have been thoroughly documented (e.g., King Solomon and Confucius). Some historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King may be prized for their wisdom, but they are in the history books because of their leadership, a focus strength. Likewise, the great citizens (e.g., Patrick Henry) and models of spirituality (e.g., Pope John Paul II) were often leaders first. Why should this be so? I would suggest that those pursuing a balance path are less likely to become famous, because their achievements are known mainly to those who already know them well. Large groups of strangers are less likely to witness a virtuous individual’s wisdom, gratitude, temperance, humility, or spirituality.

Table 1 illustrates how the balance and focus strengths differ from one another. It is important, however, not to lose sight of their fundamental similarity: People pursue strengths and virtues because they think doing so will lead to a better and more meaningful life. The focus and balance strengths are simply alternative paths to this ultimate goal.

Before a discussion of applications to our lives as psychologists, it is worth mentioning some of the potential misunderstandings of the distinction that I have drawn. First, although balance has been contrasted with focus, this does not mean that the balance strengths do not require focus. The cognitive activities of focusers and balancers may be very similar. For example, the wise person focuses concentration and skill to apply tacit knowledge to complex problems of living (Sternberg, 1998). The fair person focuses critical judgment on relevant arguments and dismisses distractions to arrive at sound decisions that balance the interests of the parties involved. The balance–focus distinction refers less to a style of thinking than to how the orientation organizes the virtuous person’s life. If one is pursuing a balance strength, one must attempt to balance competing interests not only in one’s judgments, but also in one’s life. As mentioned earlier, we would not call someone wise who dispensed advice about a balanced, satisfying life but did not attempt to live it. Likewise, we would not call someone prudent who knew how to balance his or her passions but failed to do so. Focusers, on the other hand, are free to develop their interests without constraint. They may live focused lives that lack intrapersonal and interpersonal balance without contradiction. Of course, focus-oriented individuals may choose to use their considerable talents for the betterment of others. Seligman (2002) suggested that this is both desirable and necessary for a meaningful life. However, this is a later, additional decision. There is no inherent contradiction in selfishly pursuing creative outlets, knowledge, or leadership opportunities.

The two categories of strength described here are not meant to be mutually exclusive. Certainly some of us will pursue several strengths simultaneously, and some may have well-developed focus-oriented and balance-oriented strengths. For example, we might expect to find high levels of creativity and wisdom in the same person, given that each requires higher than average intelligence (Sternberg, 1998). In addition, balanced thinking and living may be quite creative and different from the norm. Likewise, an individual advocating social justice might benefit from a healthy endowment of perseverance. Whether a person pursues one or several different strengths is perhaps less important than how the pursuit organizes his or her life. When strengths are in conflict, does balance or focus prevail?
The two paths to virtue that I have described here are not simply variants of the interpersonal orientations described by different authors as agency versus communion (Bakan, 1966; Wiggins, 1991), individualism versus collectivism (Triandis, 1995), or instrumental versus expressive roles (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Each of these descriptions contrasts the individual working for him- or herself with the individual working for others. Although there are points of contact, these systems do not map well onto the focus versus balance contrast for a number of reasons. First, the individual striving for focus is not necessarily striving for status, domination over others, or mastery over the environment. Focus can be applied in the service of solving communal problems. Second, balance does not mean selflessly furthering the interests of others. Rather, personal interests are given important consideration and are balanced with the interests of others. Third, in addition to interpersonal balance, balancers may attempt intrapersonal balance: balancing their own needs for cognitive, emotional, and behavioral expression, including competing needs for meaningful work, leisure, relationships, and spirituality.

Before moving into the world of psychologists’ work, one more point of clarification is needed. Work, family, leisure, and participation in community affairs are all activities that may be valued and interests that may require consideration from a balance perspective. Work may not receive the same high priority from a balancer that it receives from a focuser who exercises and expresses her or his strengths through work. Nevertheless, a balance orientation is not antiwork and does not contradict a strong work ethic. Balance does not mean loafing or accepting mediocrity in one’s work. Balance may, in fact, mean working harder at more things and may require greater, not less, effort. Both the focus and balance paths advocate lives filled with challenges and purpose.

Our Professional Lives

What We Do

Our professional lives as psychologists are influenced by the choices we make with respect to focus and balance. Do we accept and stay in a job requiring long hours and weekend commitments, or do we take one with more manageable and predictable hours? To what extent do we attempt to balance work, marriage and family, recreation, and community involvement? The focus versus balance distinction presses us to consider whether we would rather be very good at one thing and marginal in many or pretty good at lots of things and exceptional in few. Few of us get to have it both ways. Finally, we are obliged to consider our willingness to promote the development of our loved ones versus our willingness to let them promote us at some cost to them (e.g., the spouse who works harder at home to support and compensate for the “star”). Whether workaholism is an indication of pathology or a reasoned choice driven by passion for what one is doing, it affects others.

Although the focus path does not guarantee greater occupational achievement, it does increase the odds of occupational success to the extent that time and effort matter. Choosing to follow one’s creativity, curiosity, or leadership strengths may have more to do with an inner passion than with a conscious desire to achieve. Nevertheless, the byproduct of a focus orientation may be more tangible achievements.

Where We Do It

Some work settings may be more conducive to the development of balance and others to focus. At research universities, where support for scholarship is high but long hours and arduous publishing pressures are the norm, a focus perspective prevails. Teaching universities and 4-year colleges may offer more flexibility regarding the virtue paths pursued by their faculty. Some faculty members may be so passionate about teaching that they choose long hours and use the classroom as an outlet for their creative, analytical, or leadership skills. Others may do their required teaching but focus their investigative talents as they would at a large research institution, despite more limited support and resources. These examples represent a focus orientation at a teaching university. Other faculty, however, might choose a smaller university because it allows them to combine teaching, research, and a high level of interaction with students with the opportunity to lead a life outside of work that balances family, leisure, and community involvement.
Psychologists working in clinical settings may also have considerable choice over the paths they choose to pursue. Although many clinicians work long hours that may include evenings and weekends, some, especially those who are self-employed, have the option of a more flexible and less intense schedule that offers opportunities for balancing work, family, recreation, and community. Interestingly, although most clinicians encourage balance in their clients (as described subsequently), many opt for focus in themselves. Finally, psychologists in business may seek the more predictable and easily balanced 9-to-5 experience, or they may leap into the focus-oriented executive track to see where their highly developed skills take them.

What We Promote

As practitioners. People seeking the help of therapists typically do so when their lives are out of balance. They may be working too hard, drinking too hard, or playing too hard. They may have unrealistic expectations for themselves or others or may suffer from moods that swing uncontrollably out of their range of manageability. Most often, the role of therapists is to smooth rough edges. We may attempt to alter extreme cognitive distortions (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979; Burns, 1980; Ellis, 1962), to reduce behavioral excesses and ameliorate behavioral deficits (Kazdin, 1975; Paul & Lentz, 1977), or to integrate alienated selves (Rogers, 1951). Whether our clients suffer from mild adjustment disorders or severe disabling schizophrenia, we often teach them flexibility and the importance of juggling the multiple demands of life. Although therapists may encourage clients to develop their strengths, this is usually done to promote rounding, not to create an edge. Psychologists, when doing therapy, appear more likely to promote balance (e.g., wisdom, temperance, and gratitude) than focus.

As researchers. Most of the recognizable names in the history of psychology are researchers and scholars. Most of the creative giants in the field would clearly fit the focus orientation. Simonton’s (2002b) description of psychology’s most influential figures suggests that many of them were passionate and prolific in their work but not always balanced in their personal lives. Often ambitious and driven, psychology’s superstars had more mild psychological disorders and less stable marriages and family lives than their less influential peers.

We might expect today’s most influential researchers to fit the focusing pattern as well. Internal drive and external publishing pressures lead to long workdays that may require sacrifice in other areas. The benefits of successful focusing, however, are large and may include visibility and respect among one’s professional peers, the opportunity to pursue one’s passions, and the chance to leave a legacy in one’s work. Interestingly, there are few models for doing important research from a balance perspective (e.g., at teaching universities). In fact, most professors at teaching institutions received their mentoring at research institutions. Given what we know about the positive relationship between impact and productivity (Simonton, 2002b), it may be extremely improbable that researchers could have an important impact on the field without the immersion most characteristic of focus.

As teachers. How we relate to our students as teachers might be determined in part by the virtue path we personally pursue and the path we see as most valuable for our students. At the undergraduate level, departments are often split and individual faculty often conflicted about whether to target the top students, who are likely to excel and may someday leave their mark on the field, or whether to target average students who want only to better their lives through psychology. How much do we emphasize the importance of theory and method versus application of content to self-understanding and relationships? Faculty may question whether their role is to prepare undergraduates for graduate school or for life. As an example, many courses include an application component to accompany lecture material presented in class. Depending on one’s orientation, an application exercise can be a way to further students’ understanding of theoretical material through a concrete illustration, or it can be a way of encouraging students to incorporate material into their own lives.

Some departments take this a step further, including an applied experience—a course that requires students to complete some sort of fieldwork (e.g., working with children in the schools)—as a graduation requirement. Such a course is quite consistent with a balance per-
spective in that it requires students to work with others, integrate material, understand their interactions, and practice the essential balancing skill of time management. From a focus perspective, however, these applied experiences may be less valuable because they reduce the amount of class time available for deeper analyses of psychological material and reveal little about a candidate’s academic potential for advanced work in the discipline. Similarly, a professor’s orientation may influence her or his tolerance for and accommodation of students whose nonschool lives affect their academic performance. Our own orientation is likely to affect how we casually and formally evaluate our students: Do we view school as one of several important demands on their lives, or do we expect them to make school their sole priority?

At the graduate level, I suspect teachers almost universally maintain a focus perspective. Our job is to nurture and encourage creativity, analytical skills, and perseverance. We hope our students will become leaders in the field. Students are expected to juggle their personal lives and totally commit to their studies. There is little room for a balanced family, recreational, or community life while in graduate school. Sacrifice and a life on hold are almost rites of passage into the discipline.

Psychology is somewhat unique as an academic discipline because it can promote the development of both balance and focus strengths. Because its content is so easily applied to everyday life, students flock to the major. A few other disciplines may grapple with this issue—philosophy, religious studies, and ethnic studies come to mind—but many, including most of the other sciences, do not. Few people take chemistry in hopes of better understanding themselves, their relationships, and how to experience the good life.

Virtuous Lives

This article has contrasted the paths of individuals pursuing virtue through balance and focus. Sadly, many people, perhaps most, pursue neither path. Given all of the other motivations and distractions in life, pursuing virtue simply may not be a priority. The workaholic researcher may come alive in the lab, motivated by the noble passion to create, or may be driven by insecurity, materialism, or a pathological desire for fame. The relaxed 9-to-5 professor may balance a reasonable workload with a rich family and community life or may simply punch the clock before going home to an evening of mind-numbing TV. We are rarely in the position to see how virtue motivates others. Nevertheless, although I seek scientific confirmation, I accept the assumption shared by positive psychologists and ancient philosophers alike that the pursuit of virtue contributes to a better life. I also faithfully believe that the achievements of focusers and the harmony of balancers contribute to a better world.

Focus and balance have been described as competing processes, but, as mentioned earlier, the two paths are not mutually exclusive. It is certainly possible to pursue focus and balance simultaneously, but at any given time, one process will generally dominate. At different stages of life, we might expect the commitment to one or the other path to change. Hard-driving focusers may strive for more balance after the birth of their first child, or middle-aged balancers may focus as never before when they realize how few years are left to make their mark. Some gifted individuals may never have to choose between single-mindedly pursuing their own interests and balancing their interests with the interests of others; focusing on their own interests benefits everyone around them. Most of us, however, must choose.

One of the assumptions of positive psychology is that identifying strengths and exercising them regularly will lead to happier and more meaningful lives (Seligman, 2002). But is this true for all of the strengths? The focus–balance distinction might provide an interesting framework for investigating these kinds of empirical questions. (My prediction: Balance will be better associated with happiness and meaning.)

In 1984, Kimble described two cultures within psychology—the scientific versus the humanistic—that divided the discipline then and continue to divide it today. Twenty years later, the rise of positive psychology has brought to awareness another potential divide: the balance versus the focus path to virtue. The balance–focus distinction is not a trivial one. It determines how we organize our time, our relationships, and our work, inside and outside of psychology. It contributes to our views of what is valuable and what is not. Nevertheless, the
overarching goal of doing good work to make our lives satisfying and meaningful is the high common ground that we share—regardless of the particular path taken—when we pursue virtue.

References


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