

A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND VIRTUES IN INTERGROUP RECONCILIATION

Victoria Ackford and Roger Bretherton

University of Lincoln, UK

This paper argues that the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) provides a useful foundation for Character Education (CE) generally and an effective common language for the understanding of Reconciliation specifically. It presents recent literature examining the prototypical elements of CE (McGrath, 2018), and the application of the VIA Classification to the study of peace and inter-group conflict (Niemiec, 2022). It then goes on to report seven interviews with experienced practitioners working in three reconciliation centres (Rose Castle Foundation; the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation; and Reconcilers Together), located in the United Kingdom, Canada, Egypt, and Belgium. Qualitative analysis of the data yielded 14 themes, and 32 sub-themes or codes, related to the use of Character Strengths in the work of reconciliation. While the participants represented different approaches to the reconciliation process, their ability to easily identify constructs from the VIA Classification in the practice of reconciliation supports the usefulness of the VIA nomenclature in providing a common language for both the understanding of and educating for reconciliation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Prototypical Features of Character Education

McGrath (2018) suggested that the definition of Character Education (CE) can be elaborated by means of prototype analysis with recognised experts in the CE field. He hypothesised that a CE programme could be

conceptualised by seven central features: being school-based, structured, and addressing five areas of development (positive psychological attributes, identity, moral growth, holistic growth, and practical wisdom). According to the logic of prototype analysis, none of these features is essential to CE but, 'the more of these features that are present, the more likely it is that the program will be considered character education' (McGrath et al., 2022, p.220). The completed prototype analysis suggested thirty

• **Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:** Roger Bretherton; rbretherton@lincoln.ac.uk

Journal of Character Education, Volume 20(2), 2024, pp. 1–13
Copyright © 2025 Emerald Publishing Limited

ISSN 1543-1223
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

features that experts in Character Education considered to be typical, and fifteen which could be viewed as central to CE (McGrath et al., 2022).

Of particular relevance to the present study are two observations extracted from the findings of the prototype analysis. Firstly, that in ratings of centrality to CE, the term ‘character strengths’ was ranked second among the thirty items. An outcome which McGrath et al. (2022) attribute to the potentially significant effect the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) has had on the perception of CE. Secondly, the network analysis of responses led to recognition of some conceptual overlap between CE and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). In both the network plot and the principal components analysis, flourishing was the concept that appeared to connect the two concepts of education, a confirmation that both CE and SEL are in some way concerned with flourishing, as connected with virtue in the case of CE (Kristjánsson, 2012), or as an individual and communal outcome of SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2019).

1.2. Character Strengths as Education for Flourishing

If then CE is conceptualised to some extent as the development of character strengths for the promotion of individual and societal flourishing, then the literature on character strengths interventions constitutes an evidence base of hundreds of educational practices (see, Niemiec, 2017). These practices are frequently reported in the terminology of controlled-trials more akin to medical disciplines such as clinical psychology, and less often couched in the language of education or pedagogy. Nevertheless, all character strengths interventions are educational in the sense that – whether in clinic, classroom, or community – they aspire to teach skills and practices viewed as morally valuable for their own sake and which contribute to individual and institutional flourishing –

both key criteria for the inclusion of a strength in the VIA classification (Park et al., 2004).

There is an ever-expanding evidence base on the development of individual character strengths and their consequences which includes psychoeducational interventions for inter alia humility (Lavelock et al., 2014), forgiveness (Worthington, 2003), humour (Wellenzohn et al., 2016), gratitude (Emmons, 2013), hope (Lopez, 2013), curiosity (Kashdan, 2009), love (Zhou, et al., 2019) and kindness (Pressman et al., 2015). In addition, there are multiple strengths interventions, such as that proposed by Proyer et al. (2015), which delivered a training programme targeting the development of curiosity, gratitude, hope, humour and zest, over a five-week period, with accompanying improvements in participant wellbeing scores (Proyer et al., 2012). Furthermore, considerable attention has been paid in the VIA CS literature to the daily use of signature strengths, the handful of CS that individuals find easy to access, energising to use and essential to their identity (Niemiec, 2017). A meta-analysis of Signature Strengths interventions (i.e. those which instruct participants to use a signature strength differently each day), found that of 14 studies, 9 reported increases in positive emotion as a result of signature strength use and 7 reported decreases in anxiety and depression (Schutte & Malouf, 2019). This small sample from the relevant literature suggests not only that character strengths can be taught, but that this teaching leads to human flourishing.

1.3. Character Strengths in Reconciliation

These character-related improvements in flourishing and associated positive emotion however are not confined to individuals, they ripple through social networks. The meta-analysis performed by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) reported numerous effects of positive emotion in workplace settings including higher social involvement and volunteering, greater collaboration, improved decision making. Fredrick-

son (2013) sums up her research on positive emotions and love by explicitly stating that love over time ‘...spreads through whole communities’ (Fredrickson, 2013, p6). In similar manner, the recent proposal of ‘Third Wave Positive Psychology’, explicitly emphasises the groups and systems in which people are embedded (Lomas et al., 2021).

This social ripple effect is why VIA Character Strengths can make a significant contribution to Character Education for Peace and Reconciliation. Individual strengths have been identified as explicitly linked to reconciliation. Forgiveness interventions, for example, have been adapted to educational contexts, as part of youth development (Klatt & Enright, 2009), for undergraduate students (Harper et al., 2014) and in character education (Enright et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2011); and have been adapted to several conflicted populations including, the criminal justice system (Day et al., 2008), and children in Northern Ireland (Enright et al., 2003; Enright et al., 2007). This interweaving of forgiveness with reconciliation has been brought together in the Forgiveness Reconciliation Model (Balkin et al., 2016). In similar fashion, the character strength referred to as Judgement has been conceptualised as Integrative Complexity (IC, Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1977) – the ability to apply different perspectives and find links between them – and applied to the reduction of religiously motivated violence (Savage, 2011) and the resolution of divisions within religious communities (Savage, 2008). Forgiveness and Judgement are just two examples of individual Character Strengths taking central place in the process of reconciliation in inter-group conflicts.

In recent years however there has been a growing rapprochement between research on the VIA Classification and the substantial science of peace studies, particularly regarding intergroup reconciliation. Niemiec (2022), reports data from over twenty-five thousand respondents indicating that three levels of peace (inner peace, relational peace, and management of political/religious conflict) require a complex combination of CS. Data from the

same sample also indicated a mismatch between the CS assumed to contribute to inner peace and those which statistically predicted it. Their findings proposed hope, zest, and gratitude as the CS contributing to inner peace, with spirituality and forgiveness acting as secondary facets (Chérif et al., 2022). Furthermore, Shoshani (2021) reported the results of a PERMA-based programme, with an emphasis on character strengths, conducted with 2,228 adolescents in four schools in southern Israel. Participants showed a significant increase in motivation for conflict resolution, compassion toward the Palestinians and hopes for peace, whereas the control group participants showed a significant decrease in beliefs about conflict resolution and hopes for peace. The escalation of conflict in Israel-Gaza during the review of this manuscript in October 2023, only serves to add further poignance and urgency to the reporting of this study. Educational interventions based on the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues should be considered a sound and fitting foundation for the teaching of peace and inter-group reconciliation.

1.4. A Common Language for Reconciliation

We do however recognise that reconciliation is hard to define (Bloomfield, 2006). The three reconciliation centres reported in this study represent differing philosophies and approaches to the definition of reconciliation. The Rose Castle Foundation (<https://www.rosecastlefoundation.org>) and Reconcilers Together (<https://www.reconcilersaltogether.com>), are faith-based networks with a Christian ethos, for them the task of reconciliation is theological, a reflection of the requirement to restore the image of God to a fractured humanity. Consequently, the Rose Castle Foundation (2018) promote the twelve habits of a reconciler which are used to lead reconciliation practice (Knox, 2018): hospitality, curiosity, generosity, empathy, vulnerability, humility, lament, forgiveness, gratitude, hope, stewardship, and creativity.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in Manitoba, Canada (<https://nctr.ca>), however is embedded in the longstanding call made for reconciliation issued by indigenous peoples in North America. For them reconciliation denotes the ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships, finding a way for victims and perpetrators to advance from a past draped in pain and mistreatment into a future of collaboration and relative harmony (Tarusaria & Manyena, 2016). These aspirations draw upon the seven ‘grandfathers’ or ‘gifts’: wisdom, love, respect, bravery, humility, honesty, and truth. Sacred laws viewed as an avenue for understanding the characteristics needed to foster positive change (Absolon & Absolon-Winchester, 2016; Borrows, 2008; Cole, 2019).

Reconciliation is a process that can be used to foster interpersonal good in the world, but it means different things to different people, and some argue that this limits its effectiveness in bringing about actual change (Rettberg & Ugarriza, 2016). However, both the *habits of a reconciler* and the *seven grandfathers* are couched in a language of virtue not dissimilar to that used by the VIA Classification, and this semantic overlap provides a foundation for exploring how the terminology of CS might expand and shed light on the work of reconciliation, even when understood from quite different ideological stances.

While approaches to reconciliation differ significantly, we would expect people working for reconciliation in any context to be able to identify specific CS involved in their work. This study therefore adopts a qualitative method of analysis appropriate for an open and deep exploration (Moen & Middelthon, 2015) of where and how reconcilers recognised CS in the process of reconciliation. Opening the scope of inquiry to include the entire VIA Classification, allowed reconcilers to consider qualities less frequently spoken of in the context of reconciliation and thereby permitted a broader view of how they might be involved in reconciliation. In this sense we expected our interviews with reconcilers of any orientation

to be congruent with the view that the VIA Classification provides, ‘a common language for students, teachers, and the rest of us to understand and call forth what is best in ourselves and others’ (Linkins et al., 2015, p. 64).

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

Seven participants were recruited for the study. The cohort consisted of three males and four females aged between 24 and 45 ($M = 29.4$, $SD = 6.96$). Participants were required to be over the age of 18 and have knowledge and experience of reconciliation workshops. This was to ensure that participants had intimate knowledge of the topic of reconciliation and could offer lived, detailed experience that could be analysed. Participants were recruited by contacting reconciliation centres across the globe. The centres that collaborated were Rose Castle Foundation; the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada; and Reconcilers Together. These centres were spread internationally, with participant locations including the United Kingdom, Canada, Egypt, and Belgium.

2.2 Procedure

Individual interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews lasted around 45 to 60 minutes and were carried out online via both Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Participants provided informed consent prior to the interview and were asked to provide demographic data which consisted of self-report questions on their age, gender, and ethnicity. A semi-structured interview format was employed in which participants were interviewed individually online. They were asked a standardised set of questions concerning the meaning of reconciliation to them and their perceptions of the use of strengths in reconciliation work (See Table 1).

TABLE 1. Semi-structured Interview Protocol
Semi-Structured In-Depth Interview Protocol (adapted from, Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2014)
Background Age - Gender - Ethnicity – Interview Questions Opening Questions What does reconciliation mean to you? • How does one go about trying to achieve it? Main Questions Out of the character strengths you see before you, which would you say are the most important for the process of reconciliation? • What is it about this strength that made you pick it? • Are there any others? (Repeat roughly four times or as required.) How do you think people may use these strengths more effectively in reconciliation? • Are there any specific actions or conversations that can initiate this? Is there a specific virtue section that looks to be more useful in reconciliation than others? And if so, why? • What is it about the combination of these strengths that make them so necessary for reconciliation? What role do you think insert strength here has to play within reconciliation? When reconciliation is proceeding well, what behaviours and emotions do participants often exhibit? • Alternatively, when reconciliation is not proceeding positively, what behaviours and emotions do participants often exhibit? Would you say that there is a strength that is often neglected in reconciliation when it shouldn't be? • What is it about this strength that makes it something people fail to often use? If people are failing to reconcile, what 4 strengths jump out to you as the ones they might be failing to engage? Are there any strengths that, if used too forcefully, could negatively impact the reconciliation process?

Participants were provided with a reference sheet which included a summary of the VIA Classification of Character Strengths, and a comparison of how the strengths may be exhibited if over- or under-used. Participants were invited to consult the sheet to inform their answers. The semi-structured interview format provided an outline for discussion, but interviews were allowed to evolve with the participant. Interviews were recorded, transcribed by a professional transcription service, and checked for accuracy.

2.3. Data Analysis

A coding analysis was performed on the completed transcripts following guidance from Creswell (2009), and Braun and Clarke (2006). A mixed method approach of inductive and deductive coding was used to analyse the data. Themes were created “a priori” using inductive coding and were based on the 24 strengths from the VIA institute. This method was used to structure the code creation around the strengths and give applicable theoretical relevance to the results. The codes were then developed inductively by codebook construction based on systematic analysis of the transcripts. Using a similar method to Selvam (2015), primary coding adopted two criteria in marking words, phrases, and sentences of importance: a) phrasal resemblance to the vocabulary or synonym counterpart of the VIA Classification; and b) semantic resemblance for phrases closely expressing the concepts of different strengths.

The preliminary coded interview transcripts were imported into NVivo software. The qualitative codebook was then developed by re-examination of the primary coding analysis and the generation of further superordinate themes by grouping previous codes into congruent concepts. A coding matrix was then created to identify any significant overlaps in coding and distinguish the recurrent themes garnered from the codes. The completed coded data was then placed into the themes using the character strengths as a template. Subsections within

these overarching themes were represented as separate codes.

2.4. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Lincoln School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee (UOL2022_7931). The study adhered to agreed principles of informed consent, right to withdraw, participant confidentiality and commitment to participant wellbeing. Participants were provided with study information and signed a consent form prior to participation. They were reminded of the right to withdraw from the interview and to withdraw any data provided until the point of analysis, two weeks post-interview. Personal data such as email addresses, used only for organisational purposes, were deleted once the interview had been conducted. All interview data was stored confidentially on a password-protected encrypted server with participants identifiable by an anonymous code known only to the lead researcher. All recordings and transcripts were destroyed after analysis was completed.

3. RESULTS

Analysis of the data produced 14 themes, most of which were pertaining to the questions posed from the interview form. The themes were then sectioned into 32 different sub-themes or codes (See Table 2).

4. DISCUSSION

What follows is a summary of the major themes identified in descending order of frequency of occurrence in the transcripts. This ordering does not imply a ranking of the significance of these strengths in the process of reconciliation, but rather those strengths the interviewees selected as most familiar and applicable to their reconciliation work.

TABLE 2. Summary of Themes and Codes		
Theme	Code	Example
1. Love	1. External love	If you bring love into the equation, then reconcilers can observe the warmth and ‘emotional relationality’ that they could possibly have.
	2. Internal love	Love is not just external: “care for others involved is care for yourself”.
	3. Compassion fatigue	People might find too much love a bit creepy and a bit intense. It may be too much for the person to handle.
	4. Conscious social strategy	Strategic conscious arm of love. Use it to not get pushed in social situations.
2. Judgement	5. Individual accountability	Acknowledgement of the people you have harmed and allowing them to reconnect into their rightful space.
	6. Openness to change	Judgement in being able to understand that something happening previously was bad and not falling into the same process again.
	7. Fairness	Fairness from both sides is important to reach a common perspective.
3. Honesty	8. Emotional authenticity	There is little one will achieve if they are not honest with their feelings and how they communicate.
	9. Recognition of past events	Acknowledgement of what has come before and finding ‘ways to move forward in restoration’.
4. Teamwork	10. Positive collaboration	Coming together to build a better environment for everyone.
	11. Cohesive group thought	Honesty in a cooperative, collaborative way. Process would be quick if everyone was looking to work together.
5. Spirituality	12. Interconnectedness	Spirituality can be used as a means of connection.
	13. Moral bridge	Spirituality in a religious sense has mutual point with non-spirituality. Eg. Definition of life. What people consider as ‘sinful’ or immoral.
6. Perspective	14. Big picture view	Feel more attached to the wider world and that can bring out more understanding in the reconciliation process.
	15. Temporal objectivity	Sometimes during process people pull back. Think about what it means to them and so go into a more internal focus.
7. Forgiveness	16. Magnanimity	Accountability is issued before we can pressure forgiveness.
	17. Healing	Because if you don’t forgive others, then you wouldn’t continue your life without a peaceful heart.
8. Hope	18. Continued optimism	Change is happening and must remain positive that it will continue to do so.
	19. Creativity of thought	And then hope is the same as creativity, seeing what could be and seeing the needful.
	20. Perseverance	Ongoing and continuous work to maintain and develop a respectful relationship.
9. Self-Regulation	21. Negative projection	Some come into organisations and preach that settlers are ‘racist’ and should have a lot of shame and guilt. By putting these negative emptions onto people, it makes them a lot less likely to be open to change.
	22. Circumspection	Requires careful thought and consideration
10. Kindness	23. Equality of worth	Relationship of equals.
	24. Sensitivity	Nice to yourself and others
11. Curiosity	25. Openness to experience	Exploration of beliefs and assumptions to push yourself and be curious about how you developed those ideas and how to change them.
	26. Encouragement of empathy	Get into finding out answers and gaining information about people and therefore becomes a self-sustaining interest.

(continues)

TABLE 2. Continued		
Theme	Code	Example
12. Leadership	27. Limit arrogance	Too much leadership might come off as too authoritarian for the reconciliation process to truly work.
	28. Direction creation	Leaders allow for the conversation to continue to flow.
	Ambassadorship	Good representatives can speak on behalf of those in need and accurately make headway and process for the process of reconciliation.
13. Bravery	29. Protection of others	Courage in the face of battle and standing up for what you believe in.
	30. Vulnerability	Must ‘be willing to hold your feet to the fire and be uncomfortable’.
14. Humour	31. Escape to respite	Use the laughter to be able to push through these tougher topics.
	32. Relationship development	The light-hearted aspect is incredibly important for developing a relationship that’s beyond face level.

4.1. Love (Theme 1) was mentioned most frequently out of all the themes. This suggests a consensus on the importance of love in the process of reconciliation. This is in line with previous research that has discussed the necessity of love in reconciliation (Green, Capitaine & Vanthuyne, 2017; Macar, 2019; Rose, 2002). As a theme, it encompassed how people expressed love for themselves and other people. Participants referenced the conscious use of love in conversations with people to influence their opinions, incorporating Social Intelligence as the ‘strategic conscious arm of love’. (Interview 3, 18.11). Additionally, ‘too much’ love recurred in the interviews as a potential barrier to reconciliation. Compassion fatigue was highlighted as being a possible block for an uninterrupted reconciliation discussion. In a space with opposing views, overt and excessive expressions of love were at times deemed to be uncomfortable to receive and thus damaging open communication.

4.2. Judgement (Theme 2) was also reported as integral to reconciliation. It was the second most frequent strength mentioned with reference to the ability to think through each side before jumping to a conclusion. It was used to explain how an acknowledgement and awareness of alternate viewpoints can help create a positive space for conversation.

4.3. Honesty (Theme 3). Numerous participants mentioned the importance of bringing truth to the process of reconciliation. This

concept of honesty has also been noted previously as a powerful condition of reconciliation (Assefa, 2001; Ramsey, 1988). With regards to honesty Assefa (2001, p.181) notes that ‘If the process manages to get the parties to that point, there is a powerful meeting place there, which can unleash tremendous possibilities for honesty and reconciliation’. As a strength it refers to the ability to bring authenticity into social situations, which in turn opens the space up for vulnerable expression.

4.4. Teamwork (Theme 4). Participants reported that collaboration of some kind was an intrinsic part of the reconciliation process. To advance the relationship beyond a place of conflict, individuals must possess a sense of social responsibility and commitment. We coded two sub-themes of this occurrence. *Positive Collaboration (Code 10)* in which participants noted that reconciliation proceeded well when there had been constructive cooperation within intergroup reconciliation and across the conflict in independent reconciliation. For example: ‘It’s more about coming together person-to-person and coming to a place where you can be in the same space and have a constructive conversation.’ (Interview 4, 1.18). Furthermore, *Cohesive group thought (Code 11)* noted the importance of individuals representing the principles of their community correctly when they engage in reconciliation on behalf of a group. ‘Not always thinking about themselves, they are thinking about the

community.’ (Interview 6, 39.17). However, the participants also sounded a note of caution concerning group cohesion that can deter positive reconciliation, when defined by hate. For example: ‘Losing your individual identity and relying on a group identity that hates another certain group will mean that you can’t see past that hate. The group think means you can’t form an opinion of your own.’ (Interview 3, 39.43).

4.5. Spirituality (Theme 5). Generally, referral to spirituality within the transcripts spoke of the experience of greater meaning when proceeding with reconciliation. It was noted that spirituality is often disregarded within the reconciliation field as many people are concerned by its capacity to be divisive. The ‘industry lacks a well thought through way of approaching reconciliation that incorporates spirituality in any way... Spirituality is so much more than just the main religions; it can really provide a way to connect that goes beyond nationalities and communities.’ (Interview 5, 23.07). Even though explicit references to spirituality may be lacking from reconciliation interventions, there is a significant amount of study linking the two concepts (Bash, 2014; Calma, 2010; Kelly et al., 2015). This potentially indicates a disconnect between the theory of reconciliation mediation and its implementation in practice.

4.6. Perspective (Theme 6) in reconciliation was viewed as the ability to assess the process in a manner that allows for consideration of the world beyond the reconciling group, allowing individuals to benefit from finding insight whilst the reconciliation activity is ongoing. Research into the intersection of perspective and reconciliation is minimal, but participants in this study register perspective as a key element in reconciliation.

4.7. Forgiveness (Theme 7) encompasses the ability to respect the shortcomings of others and let go of past hurt. Although often used in reference to reconciliation (Auerbach, 2004; Hamber, 2007; Worthington, 2003), this research has shown it to be an integral part of the process of reconciliation but not expansive

enough to aid every step of progression. As the seventh theme, the frequency of remarks referring to forgiveness is less than the previously stated themes. This decrease in frequency could be attributable to the capacity for reconciliation to continue without forgiveness (Freedman, 1998). As one participant stated: ‘It’s well within someone’s right not to forgive their perpetrator forgive someone who has hurt them.’ (Interview 2, 7.13). Nevertheless, removing forgiveness would hinder the process and its inclusion brings numerous benefits.

4.8. Hope (Theme 8), and codes associated with hope, were diverse, and participant semantics surrounding hope indicated it to have congruent links with alternate strengths. Overall, participants who addressed the theme of hope, were concerned with a general positive future-minded outlook.

4.9. Self-Regulation (Theme 9). Reconciliation can be a delicate process (Auerbach, 2004) and emotional outbursts are common when discussing vulnerable areas of life. Self-regulation is therefore spoken of as an important strength to apply in reconciliation, in keeping these more erratic states of being to a minimum. The sub-theme of *Negative projection (Code 20)* speaks to the adversarial behaviours that can develop from attempting to proceed with reconciliation from a poor state of self-regulation. For example: ‘Some come into organisations and preach that settlers are ‘racist’ and should have a lot of shame and guilt. By putting these negative emotions onto people, it makes them a lot less likely to be open to change.’ (Interview 1, 35.33). *Circumspection (Code 21)*, on the other hand, codes any acknowledgement that caution should be employed when entering reconciliation. Remaining calm and collected will allow individuals to express their emotions more comprehensively, and ‘transcend from anger.’ (Interview 6, 19.07). In the words of one interviewee, ‘Sometimes people say unseemly things and so to be able to control yourself and your anger in those moments is hugely beneficial.’ (Interview 7, 17.09).

4.10. Kindness (Theme 10) and its employment in reconciliation has received limited attention in previous research, but participants in this study mentioned how kindness can be utilised to create an initial welcoming environment. The VIA Classification differentiates Kindness and Love as separable but related Character Strengths. The brief definition of Love provided in the reference sheet provided to interviewees, defined Love as ‘both loving and being loved, valuing close relationships with others, genuine warmth’; whereas the definition of Kindness is more behaviourally inflected as ‘generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruism, doing for others’ (VIA Institute on Character, 2018). While most interviewees selected love as the character strength most applicable to their work in reconciliation, kindness was viewed as providing a context in which valuable relationships could be formed.

4.11. Curiosity (Theme 11) was viewed as facilitating reconciliation, allowing openness and enthusiasm in learning about a new perspective. Both ‘openness to experience’ and ‘encouragement of empathy’ were viewed as grounded in a curious mind. Fascination with alternate points of view can help to make another side seem less intimidating. It allows people to ‘get into finding out answers and gaining information about people and therefore becomes a self-sustaining interest.’ (Interview 5, 17.26).

4.12. Leadership (Theme 12) in the context of reconciliation was viewed as being a mouthpiece and facilitator to the process of reconciliation. As one participant put it, ‘Leadership can inspire people to start to be team players.’ (Interview 5, 12.16). While leadership has been previously identified as potentially useful in reconciling (Calderón-Valencia & Escobar-Sierra, 2019; Cross et al., 2019), our participants indicated that leadership can be of direct importance in the process of reconciliation.

4.13 Bravery (Theme 13) was referenced as outward action in standing up against intimidating bodies such as governments under the code of ‘protection of others’. However, emo-

tional bravery was also referenced as the ability to open up and be vulnerable with a previous antagonistic relationship under a second code. These findings align with the recent stress on bravery within reconciliation research (Ortega, 2022; Schockman et al., 2019).

4.14. Humour (Theme 14) was the least mentioned theme across the interviews, but participants who did mention it, spoke of its ability to buffer the deeper and darker emotions associated with reconciliation. Interviewees noted how humour provided a pivotal role in developing relationships. This corresponds to previous literature reporting the positive role of humour in reconciliation (e.g. Wood et al., 2018).

5. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The aims and findings of this research are ultimately fairly modest. The semi-structured interview format provided participants with a lexicon of terms from which to draw descriptions of their reconciling activity, but also by the same token may have confined them to the VIA Classification as a reference point for conversation. It is difficult to tell whether using the VIA Classification broadened the range of qualities referenced in the interviews or whether the resulting themes may have been more wide-ranging if the interviews had deviated further from the VIA Classification. It could be argued that this restriction removes one of the primary advantages of qualitative methodology, namely the scope for broad exploration of a given theme (Mack et al., 2005; Moen & Middelthon, 2015).

Even with these restrictions, the findings reported here offer a promising insight into the role of character strengths in the work of reconciliation. The VIA Classification of Character Strengths does seem to provide a good common language which can aid in de-mystifying the complex field of reconciliation. If nothing else these interviews proffer a rationale a wide-ranging appreciation of various

character strengths when educating for peace and reconciliation.

6. REFERENCES

- Absolon, K. E., & Absolon-Winchester, A. E. (2016). Exploring pathways to reconciliation. *Consensus*, 37 (1/2).
- Assefa, H. (2001). Coexistence and reconciliation in the northern region of Ghana. In M. Abu-Nimer (Ed.), *Reconciliation, justice, and coexistence: Theory and practice* (pp 165–186). Lexington Books. .
- Auerbach, Y. (2004). The role of forgiveness in reconciliation. In Y. Bar-Siman-Tov (Ed.), *From conflict resolution to reconciliation* (pp. 147–176). Oxford University Press.
- Balkin, R. S., Perepiczka, M., Sowell, S. M., Cumi, K., & Gniska, P. B. (2016). The forgiveness reconciliation model: An empirically supported process for humanistic counseling. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 55(1), 55–65.
- Bash, A. (2014). Forgiveness, reconciliation and spirituality: A theological perspective. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 4(1) 58–72.
- Bloomfield, D. (2006). *On good terms: Clarifying reconciliation*. Berghof Report No. 14, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/71732957.pdf>
- Borrows, J. (2008). *Seven generations, seven teachings*. National Centre for First Nations Governance.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2) 77–101.
- Calderón-Valencia, F., & Escobar-Sierra, M. (2019). Strengthening the leadership of rites and ceremonies for reconciliation and truth: The case of Socorro Mosquera, manager and human rights defender in Colombia. *Latin American Business Review*, 20(2), 185–210.
- Calma, T. (2010). Respect, tolerance and reconciliation rather than opposition and denial: Indigenous spirituality, land, and the future of religion in Australia. *Pacifica*, 23(3), 322–336.
- Chérif, L., Niemiec, R. M., & Wood, V. (2022). Character strengths and inner peace. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 12(3), 16–34.
- Cole, C. (2019) Towards a pedagogy for reconciliation–Indigenization: What it is and why it belongs in the ESL classroom. *CONTACT Magazine*, (August), 30–45. <https://contact.teslontario.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Christina-Cole.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Cross, T. L., Pewewardy, C., & Smith, A. T. (2019). Restorative education, reconciliation, and healing: Indigenous perspectives on decolonizing leadership education. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 163, 101–115.
- Day, A., Gerace, A., Wilson, C., & Howells, K. (2008). Promoting forgiveness in violent offenders: A more positive approach to offender rehabilitation? *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 13(3), 195–200.
- Emmons, R. A. (2013). *Gratitude works! A 21-day program for creating emotional prosperity*. Jossey-Bass.
- Enright, R. D., Gassin, E. A. & Knutson, J. A. (2003). Waging peace through forgiveness education in Belfast, Northern Ireland: A review and proposal for mental health improvement of children. *Journal of Research in Education*, 13(1), 51–61.
- Enright, R. D., Knutson-Enright, J. A., Holter, A. C., Baskin, T. W., & Knutson, C. (2007). Waging peace through forgiveness in Belfast, Northern Ireland II: Educational programs for mental health improvement of children. *Journal of Research in Education*, 17(1), 63–78.
- Enright, R. D., Rhody, M., Litts, B., & Klatt, J. S. (2014). Piloting forgiveness education in a divided community: Comparing electronic pen-pal and journaling activities across two groups of youth. *Journal of Moral Education*, 43(1), 1–17.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2013). *Love 2.0: How our supreme emotion affects everything we think, do, feel, and become*. Hudson Street Press.
- Freedman, S. (1998). Forgiveness and reconciliation: The importance of understanding how they differ. *Counseling and Values*, 42(3), 200–216.
- Green, R. (2017). Loving to reconcile: Love as a political emotion at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In B. Capitaine & K. Vanthuyne. *Power through testimony: Reframing residential schools in the age of reconciliation* (pp. 74–94). University of British Columbia Press.
- Hamber, B. (2007). Forgiveness and reconciliation: Paradise lost or pragmatism? *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 13(1), 115–125.

- Harper, Q., Worthington, E. L., Griffin, B. J., Lavelock, C. R., Hook, J. N., Vrana, S. R., & Greer, C. L. (2014). Efficacy of a workbook to promote forgiveness: A randomized controlled trial with university students. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 70(12), 1158–1169.
- Kashdan, T. B. (2009). *Curious? Discover the missing ingredient to a fulfilling life*. HarperCollins.
- Kelly, E. F., Crabtree, A., & Marshall, P. (2015). *Beyond physicalism: Toward reconciliation of science and spirituality*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Klatt, J., & Enright, R. (2009). Investigating the place of forgiveness within the Positive Youth Development paradigm. *Journal of Moral Education*, 38(1), 35–52.
- Knox, A. (2018). Examining self-love, love of the ‘other’ and love of the ‘enemy’: A reply to Mitchell. *Global Discourse*, 8(4), 610–614.
- Kristjánsson, K. (2012). Positive psychology and positive education: Old wine in new bottles? *Educational Psychologist*, 47(2), 86–105.
- Lavelock, C. R., Worthington, Jr., E. L., Davis, D. E., Griffin, B. J., Reid, C. A., Hook, J. N., & Van Tongeren, D. R. (2014). The quiet virtue speaks: An intervention to promote humility. *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 42(1), 99–110.
- Lin, W. N., Enright, R., & Klatt, J. (2011). Forgiveness as character education for children and adolescents. *Journal of Moral Education*, 40(2), 237–253.
- Linkins, M., Niemiec, R. M., Gillham, J., & Mayer-son, D. (2015). Through the lens of strength: A framework for educating the heart. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 10(1), 64–68.
- Lomas, T., Waters, L., Williams, P., Oades, L. G., & Kern, M. L. (2021). Third wave positive psychology: Broadening towards complexity. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 16(5), 660–674.
- Lopez, S. J. (2013). *Making hope happen*. Atria Books.
- Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(6), 803–855.
- Macar, E. (2019). The Ecumenical Patriarchate under Patriarch Bartholomew and Greek–Turkish relations. In A. Heraclides, & G. Alioğlu Çakmak (Eds.), *Greece and Turkey in conflict and cooperation: From Europeanization to De-Europeanization* (pp. 129–144). Routledge.
- Mack, N., Woodson, C., MacQueen, K. M., Guest, G., & Namey, E. (2005). *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide*. Family Health International.
- McGrath, R. E. (2018). What is character education? Development of a prototype. *Journal of Character Education*, 14(2), 23–35.
- McGrath, R. E., Han, H., Brown, M., & Meindl, P. (2022). What does character education mean to character education experts? A prototype analysis of expert opinions. *Journal of Moral Education*, 51(2), 219–237.
- Moen, K., & Middelthon, A. (2015). Chapter 10—Qualitative research methods. In P. Laake, H. B. Benestad & B. R. Olsen (Eds.), *Research in medical and biological sciences* (2nd ed., pp. 321–378). Academic Press.
- Niemiec, R. M. (2017). *Character strengths interventions: A field guide for practitioners*. Hogrefe Publishing.
- Niemiec, R. M. (2022). Pathways to peace: Character strengths for personal, relational, intragroup, and intergroup peace. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 17(2), 219–232.
- Orgega, J. (2022) Healing and reconciliation. In J. Orgega (Ed.), *Women, religion, and peace-building: Gusii and Maasai Women of faith in Kenya* (pp. 51–78). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Strengths of character and well-being. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 23(5) 603–619.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press.
- Pressman, S. D., Kraft, T. L., & Cross, M. P. (2015). It's good to do good and receive good: The impact of a ‘pay it forward’ style kindness intervention on giver and receiver well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 10(4), 293–302.
- Proyer, R. T., Gander, F., Wellenzohn, S., & Ruch, W. (2015). Strengths-based positive psychology interventions: A randomized placebo-controlled online trial on long-term effects for a signature strengths- vs. a lesser strengths-intervention. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 456.
- Ramsey, E. (1988). From guilt through shame to AA: A self-reconciliation process. *Treatment Quarterly*, 4(2), 87–107.
- Rettberg, A., & Ugarriza, J. E. (2016). Reconciliation: A comprehensive framework for empirical analysis. *Security Dialogue*, 47(6), 517–540.
- Rose, D. B. (2002). *Love and reconciliation in the forest: a study in decolonisation*. Hawke Institute, University of South Australia.
- Rose Castle Foundation. (2018). *Twelve habits of a reconciler*. Rose Castle Foundation.

- Russo-Netzer, P., & Mayseless, O. (2014). Spiritual identity outside institutional religion: A phenomenological exploration. *Identity, 14*(1), 19–42.
- Savage, S. (2008). Towards integrative solutions to moral disputes between conservative and liberal Christians. *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 27*(4), 320–328.
- Savage, S. B. (2011). Four lessons from the study of fundamentalism and psychology of religion. *Journal of Strategic Security, 4*(4), 131–149.
- Schockman, H. E., Hernández, V., & Boitano, A. (2019). *Peace, reconciliation and social justice leadership in the 21st century: The role of leaders and followers*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2019). Advancements in the landscape of social and emotional learning and emerging topics on the horizon. *Educational Psychologist, 54*(3), 222–232.
- Schutte, N., & Malouff, J. (2019). The impact of signature character strengths interventions: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 20*(4), 1179–1196.
- Selvam, S. G. (2015). Positive psychology's character strengths in addiction-spirituality research: A qualitative systematic literature review. *Qualitative Report, 20*(4), 376–405.
- Shoshani, A. (2021). Transcending the reality of war and conflict: Effects of a positive psychology school-based program on adolescents' mental health, compassion and hopes for peace. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 16*(4), 465–480.
- Suedfeld, P., & Tetlock, P. (1977) Integrative complexity of communications in international crises. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution, 21*(1), 169–184.
- Tarusaria, J., & Manyena, B. (2016). Reconciliation in Zimbabwe: Building resilient communities or unsafe conditions? *Journal for Conflict Transformation and Security, 5*(1), 53–74.
- VIA Institute on Character. (2018). *The VIA classification of character strengths and virtues*. www.viacharacter.org.
- Wellenzohn, S., Proyer, R. T., & Ruch, W. (2016). Humor-based online positive psychology interventions: A randomized placebo-controlled long-term trial. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 11*(6), 584–594.
- Wood, L., Van der Spuy, A., Jayakrishnan, L., & Pienaar, V. (2018) Humour in multicultural South African Texts: Finding common ground. *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications, 4*(3), 179–192.
- Worthington, E. L. (2003). *Forgiving and reconciling: Bridges to wholeness and hope*. InterVarsity Press.
- Zhou, S., Page-Gould, E., Aron, A., Moyer, A., & Hewstone, M. (2019). The extended contact hypothesis: A meta-analysis on 20 years of research. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 23*(2), 132–160.