The Overuse of Strengths: 10 Principles

A Review of

Divergent (2014)
by Neil Burger (Director)

Reviewed by

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Within the rapidly expanding field of positive psychology an initiative to apply science to the study of character has evolved over the last 10 to 15 years. Scientific rigor has been applied to examine positive personality traits that are universal across nations, cultures, and belief systems (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), culminating in hundreds of research studies in recent years (Niemiec, 2013).

One area within the field that has captured the attention of students, researchers, and practitioners is the overuse of character strengths. The film *Divergent* serves as an excellent springboard for discussion of this phenomenon.

Divergent is based on the book of the same name (the first part of a trilogy) authored by Veronica Roth (2011), who developed the concept and origins of *Divergent* from her study of Milgram's obedience studies, exposure therapy, moral psychology, and social psychology. Roth crafted an engaging, action-oriented, and oftentimes thoughtful novel that plays out surprisingly well in film.

Divergent features a dystopian society that has been divided into five factions—Dauntless, Candor, Abnegation, Amity, and Erudite—each representing a different virtue that its people closely adhere to (e.g., the Abnegation faction prioritizes humility and selflessness whereas the Candor faction emphasizes honesty) and characterized by specific beliefs and rules as noted in each faction's manifesto. Those individuals who are not in a faction—either by choice or failure to meet a faction's demands—are referred to as "factionless" and are described as miserable and unsupported.

These five factions map surprisingly but consistently with the core virtues valued by philosophers, religious theologians, ethicists, psychologists, educators, and other thought leaders over the past 2,500 years, as described in the scientific Values in Action (VIA) Institute's classification of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The results of this systematic research project—supported in later studies—are consistent cross-cultural themes of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence and 24 core strengths that are nested under these larger virtue categories (Biswas-Diener,

2006; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; McGrath, 2014; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006).

The following list of the five factions in *Divergent* provides their correspondence to this contemporary science. I drew these conclusions from reading the *Divergent* trilogy, examining the Faction Manifestos (written by Roth, 2011), analyzing the film, studying the VIA classification of strengths and virtues, and discussing it with others.

> *Abnegation* (the selfless): VIA virtue of temperance. VIA character strength of humility; also prudence, spirituality, and love.
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> *Amity* (the peaceful): VIA virtue of humanity. VIA character strength of kindness; also forgiveness, gratitude, social intelligence, self-regulation, and love.
>
> *Candor* (the honest): VIA virtue of justice. VIA character strength of honesty; also fairness.
>
> *Dauntless* (the brave): VIA virtue of courage. VIA character strength of bravery; also perseverance, zest, curiosity.
>
> *Erudite* (the intelligent): VIA virtue of wisdom. VIA character strength of love of learning; also judgment, curiosity, perspective.

The protagonist in *Divergent* is an adolescent named Beatrice Prior who was born into the Abnegation faction. An early plot development is Beatrice's preparation for the "choosing ceremony," which is an annual tradition for this society in which each adolescent must select a permanent home when he or she comes of age. As described in the book *Divergent*:

> Our dependents are now sixteen. They stand on the precipice of adulthood, and it is now up to them to decide what kind of people they will be. . . . Decades ago our ancestors realized that it is not political ideology, religious belief, race, or nationalism that is to blame for a warring world. Rather, they determined that it was the fault of human personality—of humankind's inclination toward evil, in whatever form that is. They divided into factions that sought to eradicate those qualities they believed responsible for the world's disarray. (Roth, 2011, p. 42)

Each adolescent can choose to stick with his or her family and current faction, or select any of the other four factions as a new family. Once the choice is made, one cannot look back or switch factions. The adolescents are given testing, training, and counsel on this process, with the central tenet of advice being that the adolescent choose what feels most true to his or her identity.

When Beatrice claims Dauntless as her new faction family—believing that this virtue relating to courage and perseverance best characterizes her identity—her family (who are of the Abnegation faction) and the ceremony attendees are stunned. As part of her journey to understand herself, she starts anew by creating a new name, Tris. Tris, like the other initiates, immediately begins to engage in the dangerous and challenging initiation rituals that involve fighting other initiates until only one is left conscious. Tris quickly learns that Dauntless individuals—as do individuals in all the factions—often express their faction's characteristic dauntless (i.e., brave/courageous) behavior too strongly. Their behavior

becomes increasingly risky and foolish, is used to manipulate and abuse others, and is often not integrated alongside other virtues (e.g., using erudition/wisdom to consider other options and the role of context before blindly acting bravely, or using amity/kindness to consider others' feelings before exerting physical courage).

In addition, Tris begins to realize that she is what is referred to as "divergent," which means that she can express the characteristics of any faction strongly. Being divergent is not only confusing to an adolescent coming of age but is quite dangerous in a society based on stark allegiance to one's faction.

Films that have strong positive psychology themes offer a unique opportunity for educators, psychologists, and other professionals to help clients and students to understand well-being and garner a more sophisticated view of one's positive attributes, personality, and the factors that enable and inhibit growth (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). *Divergent* offers a number of these themes aligned with the new science of character strengths, with lessons on core identity (signature strengths), belonging (aligning with others of similar strength), being divergent (expressing a constellation of character strengths), using other faction characteristics to balance oneself (managing strengths overuse), seeing and appreciating others' best qualities (strengths spotting and strengths appreciation), the origins of individuals' strengths, and the importance of mindful strengths use (Niemiec, 2014).

Unquestionably, the theme that the film conveys most intently is overuse of strengths. Consistent with the film's tagline—"what makes you different, makes you dangerous"—*Divergent* educates viewers on what can happen when individuals or a group place too much emphasis on their strengths and neglect maintaining a strengths balance or practical wisdom (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006) as interactions unfold.

Although a key finding in the research on character strengths is the importance of using signature strengths (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), it is possible that individuals can overuse or underuse any of the 24 character strengths and therefore create imbalance in themselves or in one of their relationships as a result (Niemiec, 2014). This is clear in the literature on leadership and the drawbacks to overfocusing on strengths (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011); moreover, Grant and Schwartz (2011) examined each of the 24 character strengths and found evidence for most of these strengths reaching an inflection point when the positive effects become negative. Of course, this point will vary across individuals and context (Niemiec, 2013).

The science of character strengths overuse is young; therefore, what follows is a tentative list of 10 guiding principles or teaching points along with illustrative examples from the film *Divergent*. These points offer a practical conceptual framework for psychologists and other professionals to discuss overuse in clinical and teaching settings:

> 1. Any of the 24 character strengths can potentially be overused. *Divergent* emphasizes five, but, as the earlier list suggests, there are several other strengths represented in the film that are out of balance.

> 2. Each character strength can be viewed along a continuum in terms of its expression in a given situation. The center is a balanced, optimal expression of the strength, whereas the ends of the continuum represent increasing degrees of

overuse and underuse (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, R. Crisp, trans., 2000; Grant & Schwartz, 2011).

3. When a strength is overused, it is no longer a strength. For example, in some scenes Tris brings forth significant bravery to the extent of excluding others, being dishonest, and trying to do everything herself. Such bravery taken too far can be foolhardy or selfish, and therefore it no longer represents the "strength" of bravery.

4. Overuse varies by both the individual's expression (e.g., if 20 people attempt to express creativity at a level of 5 out of 10, the manifestation will be different for each person) and the context (e.g., expressing zest at a level of 8 out of 10 at a funeral setting is likely inappropriate and an overuse of zest, whereas Level 8 expression for zest at a baseball game would likely be appropriate). Thus, one should strive for balance and contextual fit.

5. It is more likely that individuals will overuse their personal signature strengths than other character strengths because signature strengths are the easiest to express and are often done so automatically with a high level of passion. Bravery is a signature strength for Tris, and it comes so easily to her that she often expresses it unconsciously.

6. Overuse becomes a problem when it negatively affects oneself (e.g., persevering so much that it affects one's health) or others (e.g., being so zestful that it becomes annoying to someone). Tris's unilateral expression of bravery and leadership occasionally affects her intimate relationship with faction member Tobias when she neglects to be empathic or honest with him.

7. Overuse can be managed by bringing forth other strengths. This is framed as "bringing balance" to overuse. Tris regularly uses humility to take others' perspectives rather than exerting control, yet she also regularly uses bravery to bring balance to situations where being too humble would not be the best choice for the highest good.

8. The concept of overuse helps practitioners reframe problems in a gentle, honest, and accurate way that offers a new perspective for clients and students. For example, nosiness can be referred to as the overuse of curiosity, stubbornness as the overuse of perseverance, and recklessness as the overuse of bravery.

9. Despite the benefits of reframing, overuse remains a deficit-based approach because it emphasizes what is wrong. Nevertheless, in some situations, this will be a welcomed alternative to a diagnosis, or it can be used as a complement to one.

10. Overuse facilitates another dimension to strengths-spotting and elicits an exploratory process in therapeutic or classroom work. A strengths-spotting exercise for clients and students is to describe from the film the verbal/behavioral qualities of each faction's overused strengths and the consequences that result from overuse. Exploratory questions for deeper dialogue include "At what point does the character's strength become overused or imbalanced? Name examples in which the character finds the optimal circumstance for strength expression. In what ways do

you similarly overuse your strengths? How does this create difficulty for you or others?"

In conclusion, *Divergent* is a unique film and a successful adaptation; no doubt, it is one of the most innovative films to illustrate the overuse of various character strengths and a number of themes in positive psychology. This adds a nuance and depth to several characters (especially Tris) and provides viewers ample opportunities to garner both meaning and enjoyment from the film. Professionals who take a strengths-based approach in clinical practice or who teach courses on personality, positive psychology, developmental psychology, or clinical psychology will want to examine this film through a strengths lens.

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