CHILDREN AND PRE-ADOLESCENTS' COMPREHENSION OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT. This study aims to analyze the children and pre-adolescents' knowledge regarding terms that designate character strengths and to understand how they perceive the expression of these traits in their and other people's behavior. Seventeen participants aged eight to thirteen were interviewed (M = 10.6; SD = 1.5). For each strength, seven questions were asked, which investigated the definition and examples of the strength expression. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for content analysis, generating categories for each strength. The strengths most easily described by the participants and their respective definitions were: creativity (ability to create things), curiosity and love for learning (searching for knowledge and new experiences), honesty (speaking the truth), love (acts involving affection), kindness (helping and caring for others), teamwork (collaborative works in games or school activities), forgiveness (eight categories regarding their definition, without highlighting any) and hope (longing for a future event). These findings may make developing and evaluating character strengths in this age group more accessible.
Keywords: Character; positive psychology; qualitative research.

COMPREENSÃO DE CRIANÇAS E PRÉ-ADOLESCENTES SOBRE FORÇAS DE CARÁTER: UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO

RESUMO. Este estudo tem por objetivo analisar o conhecimento de crianças e pré-adolescentes em relação aos termos que designam as forças de caráter e compreender como percebem a expressão desses traços nos próprios comportamentos e nos de outras pessoas. Foram entrevistados 17 participantes, de oito a 13 anos (M = 10,6; DP = 1,5). Para cada força foram feitas sete perguntas, que investigavam a definição do termo e exemplos da expressão da força nos outros e nos próprios entrevistados. As entrevistas foram gravadas e transcritas para análise de conteúdo, ao fim gerando categorias para cada força. As forças descritas com maior facilidade pelos participantes e suas respectivas definições foram criatividade (capacidade de criar coisas), curiosidade e amor ao aprendizado (busca de conhecimento e novas experiências), honestidade (falar a verdade), amor

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(comportamento de dar carinho), bondade (ajudar e cuidar do outro), trabalho em equipe (realização de trabalhos colaborativos em brincadeiras ou atividades escolares), perdão (08 categorias a respeito de sua definição, sem destaque para alguma) e esperança (desejar acontecimento futuro). Esses achados podem tornar mais acessível o desenvolvimento e a avaliação das forças nessa faixa etária.

Palavras-chave: Caráter; psicologia positiva; pesquisa qualitativa.

LA COMPRENSIÓN DE NIÑOS Y PRE-ADOLESCENTES SOBRE LAS FORTALEZAS DE CARÁCTER: UN ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO

RESUMEN. Este estudio buscó analizar el conocimiento de niños y pre-adolescentes sobre los términos que fueron designados como fortalezas de carácter, y comprender cómo perciben estos rasgos en sus proprios comportamientos y en los de otras personas. Diecisiete participantes entre ocho y trece años fueron entrevistados (M = 10.6; SD = 1.5). Para cada fortaleza, se hicieron siete preguntas, que investigaron la definición del término y ejemplos prácticos de su expresión. Las entrevistas fueron grabadas y transcritas para el análisis de contenido, creando categorías para cada fortaleza. Las fortalezas descritas por los participantes con mayor facilidad y sus respectivas definiciones fueron: creatividad (capacidad de crear cosas), curiosidad y amor por el aprendizaje (búsqueda de conocimiento y nuevas experiencias), honestidad (decir la verdad), amor (comportamientos afectivos), amabilidad (ayudar y cuidar a los demás), trabajo en equipo (desempeño del trabajo colaborativo en juegos o actividades escolares), perdón (ocho categorías con respecto a su definición, sin énfasis en ninguna) y esperanza (deseo por un evento futuro). Estos hallazgos pueden facilitar el desarrollo y la evaluación de las fortalezas con este grupo de edad.

Palabras clave: Carácter; psicología positiva; investigación cualitativa.

Introduction

Character strengths are one of the pillars of positive psychology. These constructs are defined as positive traits with moral values present in human beings, which can be expressed by behaviors, thoughts and/or feelings. Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined 24 universal character strengths, grouped into six virtues: 1) wisdom and knowledge, 2) courage, 3) humanity, 4) justice, 5) temperance, and 6) transcendence.

Virtues are, historically, the main characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers. The virtue of wisdom and knowledge includes cognitive strengths, which involve acquiring and using knowledge. Strengths related to courage are emotional, defined as traits that encourage the desire to achieve goals in the face of external or internal opposition. Humanity virtue includes interpersonal strengths, characterized by caring for others and making friends, while civic strengths are aggregated to justice and are related to a healthy life in a community. Temperance includes strengths that protect against excess; finally, transcendence is characterized by strengths that involve connections with the universe and are related to the purpose and meaning of life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Box 1 contains the description of the 24 character strengths postulated by Peterson and Seligman (2004), grouped according to the virtues to which they are related.

Box 1
Description of the 24 character strengths

Wisdom and knowledge

1. Creativity: thinking of new and productive ways of describing and doing things.

2. Curiosity: being interested in new experiences; exploring and discovering.

3. Critical thinking: thinking and examining situations from all sides; not taking hasty conclusions; being able to change one's mind based on the evidence.

4. Love of learning: mastering new skills, topics and knowledge autonomously or formally; related to the curiosity strength.

5. Perspective: giving wise advice to others; looking at the world differently.

Courage

6. Bravery: not being afraid of threats, challenges, difficulties or pain; standing up for what is right even if there is opposition; it includes but is not limited to physical bravery.

7. Persistence: persisting in something despite obstacles; enjoying completing tasks.

8. Honesty: speaking the truth; being genuine and acting sincerely; not being pretentious.

9. Vitality: facing life with emotion and energy; doing things 'with all one's heart'; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and active.

Humanity.

10. Love: valuing intimate relationships with others, particularly those with whom sharing and caring are reciprocal; being around people.

11. Kindness: doing favors and good deeds for others, helping and caring for them.

12. Social intelligence: being aware of other people's feelings and oneself; knowing what to do to be appropriate in different social situations.

Justice

13. Teamwork: working well as a group or team member; being loyal to the group.

14. Justice: treating everyone equally; not letting personal feelings influence decisions about others; enabling everyone the same opportunity.

15. Leadership: encouraging a group to be effective and productive; maintaining good relationships within the group.

Temperance.

16. Forgiveness: forgiving those who have done wrong; not being revengeful.

17. Modesty: letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not seeking attention; not considering oneself more special than others.

18. Prudence: being careful with one's choices; not taking undue risks; avoiding saying/doing things you might regret.

19. Self-control: controlling what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling appetite and emotions.

Transcendence

20. Appreciation of beauty: noticing/appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or performance and skill in various life domains (e.g., nature, art, science, and everyday life).

21. Gratitude: being aware of and grateful for good things; expressing thanks.

22. Hope: hoping for the best and working towards it; believing that something good can be achieved.

23. Humor: enjoying laughing and teasing; making other people smile; making jokes.

24. Spirituality: having coherent beliefs about the universe's purpose and meaning; having convictions about the purpose of life, which shape conduct and provide comfort.

Note: Adapted from Peterson and Seligman (2004)

During development, individuals can express strengths, depending on their environment characteristics and temperament. However, an individual rarely expresses all these character strengths throughout life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The characterization and expression of these characteristics have some specificities according to age group. The strengths that children and adolescents express most frequently are love, gratitude and humor, while those least frequently expressed are forgiveness, prudence, self-control and spirituality (Park & Peterson, 2006b). In interviews conducted with Argentinian pre-adolescents between 10 and 12 years old, behaviors related to honesty, kindness, humor and humility were cited more frequently as qualities valued in their personality (Grinhauz & Solano, 2015). In smaller numbers, they also cited behaviors related to forgiveness, love and teamwork strengths as their qualities. On the other hand, love for learning and creativity strengths accounted for less than 1% of the statements. From the parents' perspective, who partially agree with these findings, the most valued strengths in their children were creativity, curiosity, love, kindness and humor (Park & Peterson, 2006a).

Research assessing the 24 character strengths was conducted at the beginning of this century (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), stating that positive characteristics develop intensely and health prevention interventions are most effective during childhood and adolescence (Park & Peterson, 2009). Strengths include several facets (cognitive, moral, affective and interpersonal), which develop together.

Individuals in this age group must recognize the terms and behaviors referring to character strengths to identify these characteristics in themselves and others and, thus, develop them more autonomously. At around 11, children and pre-adolescents have a greater abstract thinking capacity, enabling them to identify character strengths through more complex behaviors (Piaget, 1968, 1972). However, few studies have sought to analyze children and adolescents' recognition and understanding of strengths. To this end, the use of the qualitative method is essential. Considering the above, this study aimed to analyze children and pre-adolescents' knowledge (from 8 to 13 years old) regarding terms that designate character strengths and to understand how they perceive the expression of these traits in their and other people's behavior. This study is derived from a pioneering project for the adaptation and search for validity of the Character Strengths Scale for children and pre-adolescents up to 13 years of age in Brazil since the instrument already has validity evidence for adolescents from 14 years old and adults. This research represents the first stage of this process.

Method

Participants

The participants were 17 children and pre-adolescents (9 female and 8 male) aged between 8 and 13 (M = 10.6 years; SD = 1.5), elementary school students (from 3rd to 7th grade) from three state public schools in the city of Porto Alegre and the metropolitan region. Although the schools were selected for convenience, the participants were randomly selected in each location. Age (between 08 and 13 years and 11 months) and school grade (being regularly enrolled between the 3rd and 7th grades of elementary school) were the inclusion criteria considered for the study, as long as the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) signed by a guardian was not handed in, and grade retention for more than two years in the same school grade were the exclusion criteria adopted. Only one participant met this school criterion.

Design, Instruments and Procedures

This qualitative, exploratory-descriptive and cross-sectional study is the starting point of a research adaptation and search for evidence of Character Strengths Scale validity for children and adolescents, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universidade Federal de Ciências da Saúde de Porto Alegre – UFCSPA (Federal University of Health Sciences of Porto Alegre - opinion 3,226,403). A meeting was held with the principals of different schools to present the proposal, and three institutions allowed the research team to conduct the study with the students. The students were randomly selected for participation among all those enrolled in the target classes, that is, in those whose students met the inclusion criteria. The Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) was sent to the parents or legal guardians of the selected students to inform them about the research procedures and request authorization for their children's participation.

All those authorized by their guardians received an explanation about the study before starting their participation. They were interviewed during school time in a room reserved by the school. The groups were formed by students from the same grade. Initially, two enrolled in the third grade were interviewed. After this first experience, including three students in the following interviews was considered richer in content. Two third-grade participants, three fourth-grade participants, three fifth-grade participants, six sixth-grade participants (divided into 02 groups of 03 students) and three seventh-grade participants were interviewed. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes and were recorded in audio. Later, they were transcribed for analysis by different researchers and the transcripts were reviewed by a single researcher.

The interview questions were structured based on the script previously used by Giacomoni (2002), focusing on happiness, for a similar target audience. Seven questions were asked about each character strength. As an example, the questions on the creativity strength were as follows: 1) "What do you think when you hear the word creativity?", 2) "What does it mean to have creativity?", 3) "What does it mean to be creative?", 4 and 5) "Do you think you are creative? Why?", 6 and 7) "When are you creative? In what situations?".

Throughout the interviews, the research team decided to change the order of investigation of character strengths to reduce the bias of the answers. This decision was taken because, in the first interview, the questions were organized according to the order presented in Box 1, established by Peterson and Seligman (2004). However, the eight and nine-year-old participants showed fatigue and difficulty in answering the last questions (about self-control, gratitude, hope and spiritual strengths), which may have impaired their responses. Therefore, in the second interview, the order of investigation of the strengths was reversed, starting with the latter, considered more complex. From the third interview, the strengths most easily reported and those most difficult to report in the initial interviews were positioned interspersed, considering the findings above. It is important to mention that if the children and pre-adolescents demonstrated they did not understand the term that designated each strength, the researchers reported synonymous terms to verify whether it was a lack of knowledge or meaning of the words. If participants did not recognize the term after this, they were given the strength to bring up examples more easily.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the interviews, the content analysis method was adopted (Bardin, 2016). Open questions were categorized, which dealt with the definitions and behaviors the participants considered expressing concerning each of the 24 character strengths.

The participants' speeches were categorized, observing the similarities among them. Categories and subcategories were created, considering the following characteristics: mutual exclusion, homogeneity, pertinence, objectivity, fidelity and productivity (Bardin, 2016). Each category was assigned a title/theme. The analysis record unit was the word (Bardin, 2016), and the coding, as mentioned, had the meaning of the participants' speeches as a cutoff criterion. For the categorization, all the answers of the interviewees were considered. After this process, conducted by members of a research group in psychological assessment, the categories were reviewed by two expert judges in the areas of psychological assessment and child development, analyzing the pertinence and coherence of the category names with the content of the statements. Finally, a blind categorization was carried out by a third researcher, who received the categories already postulated in each virtue (set of strengths), and the interviewers' responses allocated to each of the strengths. Differences in response between the initial categorization and this second one were discussed until a consensus was reached.

Results

After the analysis, the authors decided to present only the study findings referring to the character strengths with which the participants demonstrated more familiarity regarding the meaning of the terms and the behaviors that exemplified them since, for these strengths, the researchers did not need to offer any clarification. The choice to discuss only these strengths aimed to avoid analyzing the reports of children and pre-adolescents who may have suffered some influence from researchers when explaining the terms they were unfamiliar with. During the data collection, it was noticed that, after the researchers provided the meaning of the word, plus an example about that strength, the participants, probably because they had difficulty talking about the term, gave reports that were very similar to the newly-born-derived from them, not characterizing them as a spontaneous report that reflected their reality.

However, realizing the participants' different difficulty levels in relation to the constructs allowed the researchers to adapt some of the scale's terms (such as humor, gratitude, spirituality, appreciation of beauty and social intelligence) to facilitate their understanding by children and pre-adolescents. About these terms, it was observed that although students did not recognize the terms, when they were informed of the meaning, participants showed familiarity with the characteristic and mentioned more appropriate examples.

Children and pre-adolescents demonstrated knowledge of the meaning (definition) and provided coherent examples of creativity, curiosity, love of learning, honesty, love, kindness, teamwork, forgiveness and hope strengths (see Box 2).

Box 2
Meanings of terms that designate character strengths for the interviewed children and pre-adolescents, based on content analysis

Creativity	
Having ideas (n=4)	
Creating things (n=13)	
Conflict or problem resolution (n=1)	
Curiosity	
Search for knowledge and new experiences (n=19)	Longing for an event (n=2)
Love of learning	Getting what one wants/achieving goals (n=1)
Search for knowledge and new experiences (n=8)	Spending time doing what one enjoys (n=1)
Honesty	
Do not steal (n=3)	Helping and taking care of others or oneself
Speaking the truth (n=5)	(n=2)
Synonym of sincerity (n=5)	Conflict or problem resolution (n=1)
Love	
Loving/being loved by someone (n=16)	Helping and taking care of others or oneself
Giving affection (n=23)	(n=6)
Kindness	
Helping and taking care of others or oneself (n=19)	
Teamwork	
Getting what one wants/achieving goals (n=1)	Related to being joined (n=1)
Collaborative work (n=7)	
Conflict or problem resolution (n=1)	
Forgiveness	
Forgiving after the person has done something wrong (n=9)	Forgiving after a long time (n=1)
	Forgiving through parents (n=1)
Accepting forgiveness without holding a grudge /Not accepting forgiveness (n=2)	Forgiving depending on the bond with the person (n=1)
Not forgiving (n=2)	Forgiving by analyzing whether or not the act was done on purpose (n=1)
Forgiving talking and understanding the other side (n=1)	
Hope	
Longing for/wishing for a future event (n=11)	

Note: n = number of statements with the category content

The creativity strength was predominantly described as the ability to create things and have ideas, varying the examples of what could be created (toys, books, crafts, works, recipes and materials). Two categories were mentioned only once: conflict or problem resolution and spending time doing what one enjoys. In these situations, the participants mentioned exercising creativity when they had to solve a problem or when they drew, respectively.

Curiosity was another strength corresponding to the wisdom and knowledge virtue, mainly defined as the search for knowledge, school content, for example, and new experiences, such as getting to know cities. Participants also defined as curious someone who wants to listen to the conversation of others or ask what is going on in a certain situation. Still, another definition included the expectation about future events and achieving goals.

The love of learning strength was also predominantly defined by the search for knowledge and new experiences (e.g., being fond of studying school subjects). Within this strength, they mentioned the importance of studying to advance to the next grade or obtain an academic education. To a lesser extent, they commented on their love for learning on

trips or new activities. Few reports defined the love of learning as spending time doing what they enjoy, such as reading or studying.

On the other hand, honesty was defined by the participants mainly as the behavior of telling the truth, the term sincerity being referred to synonymously. As for the telling the truth category, the reports were divided between telling the truth after doing something wrong and telling the true story/opinion. To a lesser extent, the participants described behaviors such as not stealing, helping and caring for others or themselves, and conflict or problem resolution also related to this strength expression.

Reports on love strength were generally related to love for family members, expressed by offering affection. They also cited the difference between being loved by someone in the family or between two people, usually couples, and between friends. The love for pets was also cited, and they demonstrate this strength by offering affection to their owners. Reports on love expression through help and concern for others were also identified. To a smaller number, missing someone and demonstrating self-love were cited as ways of expressing this strength.

Kindness, another strength included in the humanity virtue, was also similarly defined among children and pre-adolescents. Most participants defined it as helping and caring for close people (such as mothers and friends) and unknown people (e.g., a beggar or a blind person). Examples ranged from helping with an accident to helping with studying. Only one answer considered exercising kindness by knowing how to solve a conflict or problem. There was also a reference to the kindness intended for oneself, based on self-care.

Teamwork strength was always defined as getting together with peers, especially at school. The examples were based on carrying out collaborative work or games, including the objective of achieving goals or dreams as a team, that is, being united with other people. Forgiveness, classified in the same humanity virtue, was defined as forgiving someone, usually a friend. Children and pre-adolescents cited variations for behaviors related to forgiveness: they understood that one could forgive someone who has done something wrong (e.g., lying, cursing or hurting), conditionally, that is, after analyzing whether the person had the intention to do something or not, just as there can be a conflict between accepting forgiveness and not feeling resentful or not forgiving. Participants also mentioned forgiveness in a more empathetic way, through conversation and understanding the perspective of the other, as well as accepting forgiveness through the parents. Forgiveness was also cited as dependent on one's bond with the person to be forgiven.

The hope strength had a single category: longing for/wishing for a future event. The answers ranged from thinking that a baby will be born healthy or that a person will be cured of an illness to believing in improving their school grades and achieving the desired profession.

Discussion

This study aims to analyze the knowledge of children and pre-adolescents (aged between 8 to 13) regarding terms that designate character strengths and to understand how they perceive the expression of these traits in their behavior and other people's behavior. The character strengths of creativity, curiosity, love of learning, love, kindness, teamwork, forgiveness, and hope were more easily recognized and defined by them. It is interesting to notice that these strengths were homogeneous among all ages.

From the findings, it was verified that the easiness of the participants for the definition of creativity. This strength is developed since the first years of life, mainly in games, being stimulated by parents and school, which can make it more popular with children (Peterson

& Seligman, 2004; Vygotsky, 2004) and thus facilitate the recognition of its meaning. The creative process is essential to the child's development and general maturation. This finding, which indicates the popularity of the term among respondents, differs from the results found among Argentinian pre-adolescents from 10 to 12 years old, who cited behaviors that express creativity in less than 1% of their reports when asked in an open question about their main qualities (Grinhauz & Solano, 2015). In the cited research (Grinhauz & Solano, 2015), the content analysis was conducted by identifying the terms corresponding to the character strengths and their related terms, which were present in the participants' reports. This result differs from the present research, in which, firstly, it was asked what the children or the pre-adolescents thought when they heard the term for each character strength. From this, the divergence of results can be explained in terms of methodology differences between the present and that Argentinian study. The children and pre-adolescents, although they know the term and its meaning, do not necessarily value this characteristic and, therefore, do not define it as one of their main qualities.

There was an overlap of concepts between the character strengths of curiosity and love of learning, as both predominantly defined the search for knowledge and new experiences. Love of learning can be considered a special case of curiosity. Thus, these traits have similarities, as they are expressed through an interest in seeking information and new experiences, as mentioned by the participants. The fact that both strengths are grouped in the same factor in Exploratory Factor Analyses of VIA-Youth adaptations (McGrath & Walker, 2016; Neto, Neto, & Furnham, 2014) and are related to the same virtue theoretically (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) may also explain this conceptual similarity. However, according to a study conducted by Park and Peterson (2006a) with American parents who were asked about their children's qualities, these strengths can be differentiated, considering that curiosity is more closely linked to attitudes such as asking questions all the time and wanting to know what is going on. At the same time, the love of learning is represented by attitudes such as enjoying reading and studying school subjects. This refinement in the definition of these strengths seemed not to have been achieved by the participants in this study, which their age may justify.

In the participants' reports, honesty was defined as the attitude of telling the truth and being sincere, which is consistent with the findings of an Argentinian study in which pre-adolescents identified truth-telling behavior as a personal important quality (Grinhauz & Solano, 2015; Park & Peterson, 2006a). This strength is related to the virtue of courage, as this is a necessary value when one is committed to telling the truth, considering situations where this attitude is not easy (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). However, even though students found it easy to recognize and give examples of honesty, in previous North American studies, this strength was not identified as common in children up to 9 years old, being more easily found in adults (Park & Peterson, 2006a, 2006b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). From this, it is clear that knowing how to define strength is not linked to showing it or even identifying it in oneself, considering the findings of the present study.

Love is a strength that can be developed from the baby's first contact with the mother. Therefore, it is related to the survival of the human being (Bowlby, 2012). Most of the participants' reports on the expression of this strength referred to the family nucleus, while a minority referred to friendships. Although the age group of the participants is characterized by the growth of autonomy concerning the parents and the narrowing and intensification of the relationship with peers, the protagonist role of the family is still perceived as a source of affection for children and pre-adolescents (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005). In this sense, the category of giving affection was the most cited to represent love strength, which

corroborates the findings of an American study that interviewed fathers, mothers and their children from three to seven years old about how they demonstrated and how they perceived the love of each other (Sabey, Rauer, Haselschwerdt, & Volling, 2018).

Regarding kindness, there were more reports within the category of helping and caring for others or oneself. This strength was also one of the most cited in other qualitative studies, which analyzed testimonials from American parents about the qualities of their children (Park & Peterson, 2006a) and reports from Argentinian pre-adolescents about their most valued characteristics (Grinhauz & Solano, 2015). A Canadian study (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015), which asked children from kindergarten to high school to respond, through drawings, to the meaning of kindness, also presented prevalent themes of activities with the family, preserving friendships, showing affection and help when someone got hurt. These findings indicate a similarity in the meaning of this character strength for children and pre-adolescents from different countries.

The love and kindness strengths mean helping, worrying and caring for others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The similarity in the age group reports is expected since these strengths belong to the same virtue. On the other hand, despite the similarities, such strengths differ in some points: love, in general, is expressed towards family and friends, people with whom intimate relationships are established and from whom reciprocity is expected. On the other hand, kindness can be expressed concerning a stranger, although it can also be expressed with known people. Still, for acts of kindness, reciprocity is not necessarily expected (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), unlike love.

The teamwork character strength is often named, in Portuguese, as citizenship. In this research, teamwork was considered more accessible to children and adolescents. Therefore, it has been used since the beginning to designate this strength. The definitions given by the participants were related to the reality of this age group, as the emphasis of the examples fell on activities with peers, such as games and schoolwork. A definition reported by children and pre-adolescents corroborates the definition of teamwork described in another study in which the authors state that this character strength is one of the easiest to be noted both by the child and by the people who live with him, such as the teacher, parents and peers (Rashid et al., 2013).

Forgiveness was the strength for which children and pre-adolescents provided the greatest diversity of responses, which generated a greater number of categories. This finding may indicate the complexity of the conceptual understanding of this strength for this age group. However, regarding strength development, it has been shown that children as young as 5 are already willing to forgive when the transgressor, although not making an explicit apology, demonstrates regret (Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2019). A previous study (Ahirwar, Tiwari, & Rai, 2019), which interviewed mothers of Indian children aged seven on average about how their children dealt with the mistakes of others, showed that these children expressed strength very easily and identifiable. Forgiveness was influenced by social and emotional issues (e.g., age and the type of relationship the child had with the person who made the mistake), the mood, the concreteness of the error and the need for affiliation and playing. This diversity of factors that influence the expression of strength reaffirms the complexity of children's understanding of forgiveness. For adolescents, forgiveness is associated with well-being, and the association of these constructs is even stronger when forgiving friends (Van der Wal et al., 2016).

The results obtained in the analysis of the definition of the terms that designate teamwork and forgiveness strengths align with the findings of an Argentinian study that analyzed the qualities that pre-adolescents most value in themselves. These strengths were

some of the most frequent and clearly described by the participants in that study (Grinhauz & Solano, 2015) and are frequently expressed in North American adolescents' behavior (Park & Peterson, 2006a).

The participants defined hope as a positive vision of the future, corroborating the definition constructed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) studies. This definition is a relatively easier trait to find in young people than in adults (Park & Peterson, 2006b). Parents who actively help their kids reach their goals make it more likely that their adolescents' goals will generate more hope (Munoz, Quinton, Worley, & Hellman, 2019).

Notably, for all the character strengths presented here, more than one example was related to the school context. This mention is understandable, considering the age group studied and the inclusion of participants as students. Besides, data collection was carried out in this environment and the children were peers, contributing to the examples having this connotation. Regarding strengths, some of these characteristics are closely linked to interpersonal relationships, such as love, kindness and forgiveness, and their expression is common in socialization environments. So, the school emerges as one of the most cited among them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This type of response occurred spontaneously in the participants' speech, even though it was clarified that the research was not related to any school activity. Thus, this finding also reflects the importance of the school in developing character strengths, as these constructs are directly related to better performance and positive behavior in this context (Wagner & Ruch, 2015).

Regarding the other strengths, based on the analysis of the children and pre-adolescents' difficulty in recognizing the terms that designate some of them and realizing that, after the research team verbalized the meaning, the participants were able to give adequate examples of them, it was verified the need for adaptation in the translation of the name/denomination of some of these strengths, which was also part of the purpose of this study, as a preliminary stage in an adaptation and search for evidence of validity process of an instrument in this topic for Brazilian children and adolescents. For example, 'humor' could be used as 'good humor' to facilitate children's understanding of the positive connotation of this strength. 'Gratitude' could be referred to as 'being thankful'. Still, it is suggested that the term 'spirituality' be used as 'believe in God', especially in samples similar to this study. However, this term may have limitations. It was seen that the amplitude of strength is not completely understood by children, limiting themselves to belief in God or not. Another suggestion for change for future studies refers to the term 'appreciation of beauty', which was replaced by 'admiration of beauty', to become more accessible for understanding in this age group. The 'social intelligence' strength could be defined as 'knowing/perceiving one's own feelings and the feelings of others'.

It is approximately from the age of 11 that children develop the ability to think in abstract terms, that is, they begin to recognize patterns or a certain regularity of different behaviors, which can be of a physical or mental nature. This identification results in the abstraction of a conceptual entity, which defines the relationship between the elements they refer to at a lower and more concrete level of abstraction (Piaget, 1968, 1972). This developmental characteristic may explain the difficulty observed among younger children in conceptualizing some character strengths investigated in this study, such as critical thinking, perspective, leadership, social intelligence, humility and spirituality. As for the strengths presented here, there were no significant differences in the definitions given by the participants of different ages, perhaps since they are more easily understood because they are encouraged by parents and schools and, thus, are present as characteristics of these children, expressed through a wider behavioral repertoire.

Interventions should be encouraged with children and adolescents in this age group so that they develop character strengths, as previous studies have shown that it is possible to stimulate the development of social intelligence, prudence and gratitude in children, as examples (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007; Lemmon & Moore, 2007; Rothenberg et al., 2017), even if their cognitive maturation process is still ongoing (Park & Peterson, 2006b). In this context, the parents' role is highlighted in developing children's strengths, such as humility, hope and humor, through management and modeling (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Teachers, as important agents of socialization, can also organize activities of this nature. Considering the benefits of the expression of character strengths for social coexistence and well-being, enabling children to acquire more autonomy in the development of their strengths and improve their interpersonal skills, they must be increasingly familiar with the terms that designate these traits and understand how they manifest in themselves and others, either through behavior, thoughts and/or feelings.

Final considerations

This study allowed analyzing children and pre-adolescents' knowledge (from 8 to 13 years old) about the terms that designate character strengths, as well as understanding how they perceive the expression of these traits in their and other people's behavior. As limitations of the study, the small sample and the fact that the participants represent a specific group of children and pre-adolescents, in general of low or medium socioeconomic status, who, although they have access to formal schooling, this is of questionable quality when it comes to stimulating conceptual reflection. Although the group interviews provided reports and examples with richer content, since the participants sometimes complemented each other's speeches and stimulated the variety of reports, they hindered access to the particular understanding of each individual about the aspects under investigation.

The study enabled us to understand how this age group conceptualizes and perceives the expression of these strengths and the importance of this expression from the participants' perspective. This data shows that an instrument can identify the 24 character strengths in children and adolescents, even if there are differences in scores among certain strengths in the majority of this population. However, given some comprehension difficulties demonstrated by the participants, the need to modify the scale to be used with this age group was verified.

Based on the content analysis of the interviews, five new items were created for the Character Strengths Scale for children and adolescents. These items are alternatives for replacing others, as they are more closely related to the target audience's reality. The items referred to bravery (2), social intelligence (1), persistence (1) and appreciation of beauty (1) strengths. Understanding how children and pre-adolescents define the strengths and the terms that designate them can facilitate future research and interventions on this construct in Brazil, considering enhancing character strengths that children need to develop more intensely or those that they identify more easily.

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Authors' contribution

All authors participated in the study design. The first and second authors were responsible for data collection.   The first and fourth authors were responsible for data analysis and interpretation, supervised by the fifth and sixth authors. The first and fourth authors wrote the first version of the manuscript. All authors edited the text and contributed to the writing. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.