

A Multidimensional Review of Virtues, Well-being, and its Cultural Paradigms within the Indian Psychological Context

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ABSTRACT

The psychological investigation of human flourishing has undergone a significant shift from deficit-centric models toward a strength-based understanding of the human condition. Central to this evolution is the study of virtues and character strengths, which serve as foundational psychological mechanisms for achieving long-term well-being. This review paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of virtue theory in psychology, contrasting the traditional six-virtue Values-in-Action (VIA) classification with the empirically derived three-factor model encompassing Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Regulation. A significant portion of this analysis is dedicated to the cultural contextualization of virtues within the Indian ethos, where concepts such as Dharma, Karma, and Sadguna offer profound insights into moral living and psychological health. The study adopts a systematic review methodology, synthesizing empirical data from global and Indian-specific research conducted between 1954 and 2025. By utilizing Carol Ryff's Six-Factor Model of Psychological Well-being (Self-acceptance, Personal Growth, Purpose in Life, Environmental Mastery, Autonomy, and Positive Relations with Others) as the primary evaluative framework, the research explores how specific character strengths predict multidimensional well-being across diverse populations, including adolescents, medical students, and the general Indian populace. Findings underscore the predictive power of strengths such as Zest, Hope, and Gratitude, while highlighting the nuanced role of cultural variables in the manifestation of eudaimonic well-being. The paper concludes by emphasizing the essential link between the cultivation of virtue and the attainment of psychological health, arguing that the integration of ancient Indian wisdom with contemporary psychological science is imperative for promoting universal flourishing.

Keywords: Virtues, Character strengths, Well-being, Indian psychology

INTRODUCTION

The discipline of psychology has historically functioned primarily as a science of healing, focusing on the identification and remediation of mental illness and behavioral dysfunctions. While this clinical orientation has yielded significant advancements in alleviating suffering, it has often overlooked the qualities that allow individuals to thrive. The emergence of positive psychology sought to rectify this imbalance by establishing a scientific foundation for the study of positive human functioning (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Central to this movement is the categorization of

virtues and character strengths, conceptualized as the psychological ingredients of a flourishing life (Niemiec, 2018).

Virtue, as a construct, spans the domains of philosophy and social science. Historically, virtue ethics, rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, emphasized the character of the moral agent rather than the mere legality of specific acts (McGrath and Brown, 2020). In contemporary psychology, virtues are defined as stable, trait-like dispositions that are morally valued across cultures and contribute to individual and collective well-being (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The most prominent framework for studying these traits is the

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Values-in-Action (VIA) Classification, which identifies 24 character strengths organized under six core virtues: Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

However, the scientific study of virtue necessitates a transition from philosophical abstraction to empirical precision. Psychologists have increasingly advocated for the systematic scrutiny of virtues as personal attributes that can be measured and cultivated (Cokelet and Fowers, 2019; McGrath and Brown, 2020). This shift has led to the development of more parsimonious models of character, most notably the three-factor model proposed by Robert McGrath, which classifies character strengths into the dimensions of Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Regulation (McGrath, 2015; McGrath, 2021).

To understand how these virtues contribute to life quality, researchers have increasingly turned to Carol Ryff's Model of Psychological Well-being (PWB). Unlike hedonic models that focus on pleasure and life satisfaction, Ryff's model is rooted in the concept of eudaimonia—living in accordance with one's true self and potential. This model identifies six key dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes 1995).

In India, with its ancient philosophical heritage, the study of virtues is a vital necessity for addressing modern mental health crises through culturally sensitive, holistic models (Dev Roy, 2025). The Indian psychological tradition, rooted in the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, conceptualizes well-being not just as happiness but as an integrated state of balance (*Samyavastha*) and moral alignment (*Dharma*) (Lawania and Jain, 2025; Mondal, 2024).

The Evolution and Categorization of Virtues in Psychology

The endeavor to categorize virtues transitioned from philosophical taxonomies to empirical psychological models. Aristotle proposed dividing virtues into moral and intellectual categories (Aristotle, 2009). Plato introduced four cardinal virtues—wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice—which served as a foundational framework for Western.

- **The VIA Classification and the Six-Virtue Model**

The VIA Classification identifies 24 character strengths as “psychological ingredients” leading

to six higher-order virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). These virtues are considered universal, valued across diverse cultural and religious traditions (Dahlsgaard *et al.*, 2005).

Virtue	Description and Manifest Strengths
Wisdom	Cognitive strengths involving the acquisition and use of knowledge.
Courage	Emotional strengths involving the exercise of will to accomplish goals.
Humanity	Interpersonal strengths involving tending and befriending others.
Justice	Civic strengths underlying healthy community life.
Temperance	Strengths that protect against excess.
Transcendence	Strengths forging connections to the larger universe.

While the six-virtue model is intuitively appealing, empirical research using the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) has often found that the structure does not replicate cleanly, leading to the development of the three-factor model (McGrath, 2015).

- **The Three-Factor Model of Virtue**

McGrath (2015) proposed a three-factor model that consistently emerges across different measures and populations: Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Regulation (McGrath, 2015; McGrath and Hall-Simmonds, 2017). These factors represent the fundamental orientations of the “Heart, Mind, and Will” (McGrath, 2021).

- **Caring:** Interpersonal strengths rooted in group cooperation and reciprocal altruism.
- **Inquisitiveness:** Cognitive strengths derived from adaptations for environmental exploration.
- **Self-Regulation:** Strengths involving the organization of behavior to attain long-term goals and suppress automatic responses.

Virtues in the Indian Context

The study of virtues in India is critical due to the region's unique cultural heritage (Lawania and Jain, 2025; Shilpa and Murthy, 2012). Indian Psychology (IP) offers a comprehensive framework fundamentally different from Western models by placing consciousness first (Dev Roy, 2025).

The Indian conception of virtue is embedded in ancient scriptures like the Vedas and Upanishads (Lawania and Jain, 2025; Mondal, 2024). A central

concept is *Dharma*, referring to moral purpose and ethical responsibility (Mondal, 2024). *Dharma* establishes standards for social action and reconciles material pursuit (*Artha*) and desire (*Kama*) with higher principles (Mondal, 2024).

Indian tradition identifies *Sadharana Dharma* (universal duties) such as truthfulness (*Satya*), forgiveness (*Kshama*), and self-control (*Dama*) (Mondal, 2024). Furthermore, the *Trigunas*—*Sattva* (clarity), *Rajas* (activity), and *Tamas* (inertia)—govern the human mind (Shilpa and Murthy, 2012). The cultivation of *Sadguna* (virtuous qualities) involves increasing *Sattva* to lead to emotional equilibrium (Shilpa and Murthy, 2012).

Rapid lifestyle changes and academic stress in India have led to rising anxiety and burnout (Malik *et al.*, 2025; Padhy *et al.*, 2023). Traditional Indian practices such as meditation and self-inquiry (*Atma-Vichara*) improve mental health by fostering inner peace and emotional regulation (Kumar, 2015; Nair and Telles, 2022). Research indicates that detachment (*Ahamkara*) from the ego fosters emotional equilibrium and gratitude (Niemic, 2019).

This research was conducted as a review study aimed at synthesizing literature on virtues and Ryff's model of well-being. The search was performed across specialized databases including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, covering studies from 1954 to 2025 (Lawania and Jain, 2025).

Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed empirical studies and systematic reviews involving diverse populations (Ames *et al.*, 2021). Research utilizing validated measures like the VIA-IS and Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-being (RPWBS) was prioritized. Qualitative analysis of ancient Indian texts was integrated to provide cultural context (Lawania and Jain, 2025).

Character Strengths and Psychological Well-Being

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that individual character strengths serve as foundational, distal predictors of life satisfaction by directly nurturing the six eudaimonic pillars of Carol Ryff's model of psychological well-being. Rather than influencing overall happiness in a vague or generalized manner, specific clusters of virtues target and reinforce distinct dimensions of mental wellness. For instance, self-acceptance—the capacity to maintain a positive, holistic attitude toward

oneself—is most robustly driven by “theological” and energy-giving strengths such as gratitude, hope, and zest.

In contrast, the pursuit of personal growth and a commitment to continuous self-development relies heavily on intellectual strengths, where curiosity and a love of learning act as the primary catalysts for exploring new experiences.

When it comes to cultivating a profound purpose in life and establishing a sense of existential meaning, individuals lean most heavily on the transcendent virtues of hope and spirituality.

Meanwhile, environmental mastery, which reflects a person's capability to navigate complex daily demands and function effectively within their surroundings, is highly correlated with the grounding strengths of persistence and self-regulation.

Autonomy, or the capacity for independence and self-determination against social pressures, draws its variance largely from emotional strengths like bravery and hope, which empower individuals to stand firm in their values.

Finally, the dimension of positive relations with others, characterized by deep empathy, warmth, and intimacy, is naturally predicted by interpersonal virtues such as kindness, love, and teamwork. Together, this intricate network of traits illustrates how distinct internal virtues manifest as specific outer psychological competencies, transforming abstract character traits into measurable life satisfaction.

When analyzing these psychological dynamics within the Indian demographic, unique cultural nuances heavily influence how Ryff's dimensions of well-being manifest and operate. In traditional, collectivist societies like India, individual well-being cannot be fully decoupled from environmental stressors and systemic cultural values.

For example, localized research on 402 Indian medical students highlights a critical vulnerability: intense academic stress severely degrades students' environmental mastery and purpose in life, demonstrating how high-pressure environments can erode structural pillars of mental wellness.

However, cultural framework acts as a powerful buffer against such stressors. Studies indicate that Indian students who actively hold high traditional cultural values—such as familial interdependence and a deep-seated respect for elders—report significantly higher overall psychological well-being than their less culturally

integrated peers. This suggests that the collective family unit provides a crucial emotional safety net.

Interestingly, while Indian society is fundamentally rooted in collectivism, the development of autonomy remains vital. Research on Indian youth indicates that self-determination steadily increases from adolescence into young adulthood, serving as a critical, standalone predictor of life satisfaction despite societal expectations of conformity.

Furthermore, this psychological resilience is prominently visible in highly vulnerable populations; studies on orphaned Indian adolescents reveal that core virtues like humanity and temperance not only positively predict personal resilience but also serve as vital protective barriers that actively reduce psychological distress and behavioral problems. Ultimately, these findings underscore that while the core pillars of psychological well-being remain universal, their expression, development, and cultivation are deeply shaped by the unique socioeconomic and relational landscapes of the Indian context.

Conclusion

The psychological study of virtues demonstrates that they are not merely social expectations but essential psychological resources driving eudaimonic well-being. By moving from a hedonic focus to Ryff's multidimensional model, we gain a deeper understanding of how character strengths like Self-Regulation, Curiosity, and Kindness empower individuals to achieve environmental mastery, personal growth, and self-acceptance.

In the Indian context, the concepts of Dharma and Karma provide a framework where well-being is the natural outcome of a life lived in moral alignment (Lawania and Jain, 2025). Ultimately, the cultivation of virtue is the most sustainable pathway to a life that is not just "happy" in a fleeting sense, but deeply well in its functioning and purpose.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track virtue development within Ryff's framework from childhood through late adulthood. Developing indigenous measures for Indian constructs like *Dharma* and *Sadguna* is critical, as existing scales may not capture collective orientations like "filial duty".

Limitations include a heavy reliance on self-report questionnaires, which are subject to social desirability bias. Additionally, the factor structure of Ryff's 42-item

scale sometimes struggles to replicate in non-Western contexts, suggesting a need for cultural adaptation.

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15

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