

# The Psychology of Encouragement: Theory, Research, and Applications $\Psi$

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## Abstract

Despite the frequent use of encouragement in everyday social life, encouragement remains an understudied topic in positive psychology and counseling psychology. To address this gap, this article resolves ambiguity in terminology and synthesizes diverse streams of theorizing and research to propose an integrative psychological science of encouragement. The author offers a definition of encouragement, delineates its conceptual boundaries, and proposes a conceptual model that provides a taxonomy of encouragement processes. Known as the Tripartite Encouragement Model (TEM), this model charts the foci, features, and levels of encouragement. Encouragement is conceptualized, at different levels, as an act of interpersonal communication, a character strength, as well as an ecological group norm. The author explains how encouragement can enhance the quality of counseling practice as well as practical applications in other areas of psychology. Finally, the author delineates how the TEM can guide future research on the psychology of encouragement.

## Keywords

encouragement, positive psychology, social support, Adler

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A word of encouragement during a failure is worth more than an hour of praise after success.

—Unknown (Morris, 2012)

From everyday conversations between romantic partners to pep talks given by a basketball coach, to discussions on online community forums, encouragement is ubiquitous in everyday social life. Encouragement is one of the most common ways through which individuals express support for one another (e.g., Beets, Cardinal, & Alderman, 2010; Hwang et al., 2011; Jose & Bellamy, 2012). Encouragement is also a prominent theme in several self-help books (e.g., Maxwell, 2008), including those on enhancing marital satisfaction (Rainey & Rainey, 2010) and leadership skills (Dinkmeyer & Eckstein, 1996). Moreover, in the parenting and family science literature, encouragement is considered a key process through which parents provide support to their young children (Roggman, Cook, Innocenti, Jump Norman, & Christiansen, 2013) and family resilience is fostered (Walsh, 2003). In addition, several religious traditions extol the virtue of encouragement. In the New Testament Bible, the Apostle Paul exhorts Christians to encourage one another, particularly those who are disheartened (1 Thessalonians 5:11-15). In the same vein, Sangharakshita (1991), a Buddhist teacher, encourages Buddhists to provide and receive encouragement from members of one's spiritual community. Although not always explicitly articulated, many counseling psychology applications also involve the use of encouragement, given counseling psychologists' historical embrace of human strengths (Gelso & Woodhouse, 2003)—that is, encouragement is embedded within several strength-based approaches to counseling (Scheel, Davis, & Henderson, 2013; Smith, 2006; Wong, 2006a) and supervision (Edwards, 2013) recommended by counseling psychologists.

Despite the pervasiveness and practical relevance of encouragement, the psychology of encouragement has had a somewhat checkered past. As will be demonstrated in this article, the conceptual boundaries of encouragement as a construct remain fuzzy and are in need of clarification. Moreover, research and applications on encouragement over the past few decades have been inconsistent and scattered across diverse fields of inquiry, such as Adlerian psychology (e.g., Watts & Pietrzak, 2000), the literature on self-efficacy and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1997), and the social support literature (e.g., Kratz, Wong, & Vaughan, 2013). There has not been any attempt to evaluate, classify, and synthesize these diverse streams of scholarship under a unifying conceptual umbrella. Moreover, although several handbooks on positive psychology have

been published in recent years (e.g., Lopez & Snyder, 2009; Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011), none included a chapter on encouragement. Notably, the psychology of encouragement has not been linked to the science of positive psychology, especially the psychology of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Park, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Therefore, this article seeks to address these gaps in the literature. I have two main objectives—first, to evaluate and consolidate previous theorizing and research to propose an integrative psychology of encouragement; and second, to delineate the relevance of encouragement to counseling practice. I begin with a critical review of psychological scholarship on encouragement and propose a definition and the conceptual boundaries of encouragement. I define encouragement as the expression of affirmation through language or other symbolic representations to instill courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope in a person(s) within the context of addressing a challenging situation or realizing a potential. I then discuss empirical findings on encouragement, including studies that address multicultural considerations related to gender, race, and culture. I further propose a conceptual model of encouragement processes to aid future research and applications on encouragement. This model explicates three facets of encouragement—features, foci, and levels of encouragement. Next, I articulate the relevance of encouragement to counseling and discuss how the model can be used to enhance the quality of counseling practice. I conclude with recommendations for non-counseling applications (e.g., preventive interventions) as well as future research in counseling psychology and other areas of psychology.

## **Definition and Conceptual Boundaries**

Alfred Adler (1956) was arguably the first psychologist to theorize on encouragement; he considered encouragement a core feature of human development and of any psychotherapeutic treatment. Adler believed that human beings are intrinsically oriented toward social interest—a desire to belong and contribute to others and society. When people lose social interest, they need encouragement, especially with regard to engaging others (Main & Boughner, 2011). Indeed, Adlerian psychologist Dreikurs (1971) considered the ability to encourage others as the single most important attribute in getting along with other people.

Adlerian scholars have elucidated the construct of encouragement in two ways—encouragement can refer to a social phenomenon or to an individual's way of being. Used in the first sense of the word, encouragement has not been consistently defined by Adlerian scholars. Sweeney (2009), an Adlerian psychotherapist, explained that “to provide encouragement is to inspire or help

others, particularly toward a conviction that they can work on finding solutions and that they can cope with any predicament” (p. 90). In contrast, Nikelly and Dinkmeyer (1971) defined encouragement as a non-verbal attitude that communicates esteem and worth to an individual. Dinkmeyer and Losoncy (1996) provided a broad definition that has been commonly cited by Adlerian scholars: “encouragement is the process of facilitating the development of a persons’ inner resources and courage toward positive movement” (p. 7). Adlerian scholars have elucidated a wide range of encouragement skills, including reflective listening, use of humor, communicating faith in others, smiling, non-verbal acceptance of others, expressing genuineness, pointing out others’ strengths, positive reframing, and validating others’ goals (Carns & Carns, 2006; Dinkmeyer & Losoncy, 1996; Perman, 1975; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 2014). For Adlerian scholars, the goal of encouragement is not simply to change behavior but to instill courage and confidence to change; therefore, Adlerian practitioners assert that their focus is more on modifying individuals’ motivation than on modifying behavior (Sweeney, 2009). Carns and Carns (2006) have documented the applications of encouragement skills in a wide range of interventions, including teacher education, classroom management, enhancing student performance, marriage and family therapy, and career counseling.

Grounded in humanistic psychology, the second meaning of encouragement embraced by Adlerian scholars focuses on the core features of a fully functioning person (Adler, 1931/1958; Evans, Dedrick, & Epstein, 1997). For instance, Evans et al. proposed four dimensions of encouragement: (a) a positive view of oneself, (b) a positive view of others, (c) being open to experiences, and (d) a sense of belonging to others (also, see Phelps, Tranakos-Howe, Dagley, & Lyn, 2001). Similarly, Dagley, Campbell, Kulic, and Dagley (1999) developed a measure for children that assessed three dimensions of encouragement: a positive view of the self, a sense of belonging, and the courage to be imperfect.

Adlerian scholars are to be commended for being the first psychologists to draw attention to the construct of encouragement. In particular, a key strength of Adlerian theorizing on encouragement is its emphasis on cultivating individuals’ inner resources and increasing motivation rather than simply modifying behavior (Azoulay, 1999; Sweeney, 2009); these concepts serve as a foil to a strictly behavioral view of human development (Carns & Carns, 2006) and may have been a forerunner to cognitive approaches to psychotherapy (Sperry, 2003).

Nevertheless, Adlerian concepts of encouragement may be too broad to be conceptually meaningful. The conceptualization of encouragement as a way of being that includes dimensions such as being open to experiences and the

courage to be imperfect (e.g., Dagley et al., 1999; Phelps et al., 2001) approximates Carl Rogers' (1951) concept of self-actualization. However, such a conceptualization differs from the way encouragement is typically operationalized in other areas of psychology (e.g., Beets et al., 2010), which focuses on encouragement as an interpersonal act of social support or influence. Similarly, the Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford University Press, 2014) adopts an interpersonal meaning of encouragement by defining it as "the action of giving someone support, confidence, or hope."

Although Adlerian scholars also use the word *encouragement* to refer to an act of interpersonal communication, the aforementioned definition provided by Dinkmeyer and Losoncy (1996), as well as the range of skills associated with this definition (e.g., reflective listening), is so sweeping that it overlaps with other related interpersonal constructs, such as empathy (Elliott, Bohart, Watson, & Greenberg, 2011). Not surprisingly, Adlerian scholars Carns and Carns (2006) acknowledged that encouragement can mean different things to different people. I argue that for encouragement to be a psychologically meaningful construct, it needs to have clearly defined conceptual boundaries. Such conceptual clarity can aid in developing instruments to assess encouragement and in establishing the construct validity of encouragement in future research. In this regard, construct validity includes distinguishing encouragement from other psychological constructs, as well as demonstrating its unique influence on other outcomes (e.g., psychological well-being) beyond the effects of other constructs (e.g., empathy).

Therefore, in this article, I provide a narrower definition of encouragement. I draw from several Adlerian concepts, while also imposing conceptual boundaries that may help distinguish encouragement from other constructs. At its most basic level, encouragement is the expression of affirmation through language or other symbolic representations to instill courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope in a person(s) within the context of addressing a challenging situation or realizing a potential. Several features of this definition should be noted. First, encouragement must be expressed in language or other symbolic representations (e.g., art or hand gestures) to someone else. Non-language symbolic representations can only be meaningfully used to communicate encouragement when both the encourager and the recipient have a common understanding of the meaning attached to the symbolic representations. For example, in the context of a romantic relationship, both partners may develop a mutual understanding that a thumbs-up gesture represents one partner's confidence in the other partner's ability to succeed. This article's review of the literature on encouragement will focus mainly on language-based expressions of encouragement, given that that has been the focus of most psychological empirical research on encouragement (e.g., Hwang et al., 2011).

The requirement that encouragement needs to be communicated in language or other symbolic representations to another person underscores its uniqueness from other related positive psychological constructs. One might have positive thoughts or warm feelings toward another person, but these do not qualify as encouragement if they are not communicated to the other person. In contrast, several other positive psychological constructs, such as gratitude, empathy, and compassion, can be legitimately experienced as emotions (e.g., one can feel grateful) without the need for interpersonal communication. The requirement of language or other symbolic representations also underscore differences between encouragement and other types of social support. Although encouragement can be conceptualized as a form of social support (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996), it differs from other non-linguistic forms of social support, such as companionship (e.g., accompanying a family member to the doctor) and instrumental support (e.g., providing practical help to a friend; Thoits, 2011). A distinction can also be drawn between the experience of being encouraged and the provision of encouragement. The definition of encouragement in this article focuses on the latter. Therefore, even though individuals might feel encouraged without the presence of any interpersonal communication (e.g., “I felt encouraged when I saw the sun rise”), encouragement cannot be provided without interpersonal communication.

Second, this article’s definition incorporates Adlerian notions of encouragement that focus on affirmations to instill courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope (Main & Boughner, 2011). Although encouragement can be expressed through praise and persuasion, encouragement is not identical to these latter constructs. Praise refers to communicating positive evaluations of another person’s characteristics, performance, or products (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). Although, like encouragement, praise involves the expression of affirmation, praise may not necessarily be intended to instill courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope in another person. For example, praise that is merely offered as a form of congratulations would not be considered encouragement. Moreover, praise can be offered merely as feedback for something done in the past (e.g., “Good job on the presentation!”), whereas encouragement always has a present or future orientation. Even when a statement of encouragement refers to a past achievement, the ultimate goal of encouragement is to serve as a stimulus that either strengthens or develops positive motivation, cognitions, emotions, or behavior (Azoulay, 1999), for example, “You have been working very hard on your math problems; keep up the good work because I know you’re going to do well on the test!”

In the same vein, although encouragement can be conceptualized as a form of persuasion in that the encourager intends to influence the recipient’s

attitudes or behavior, not all forms of persuasion are directed at instilling courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope in others or are affirmative. At its core, encouragement is an expression of affirmation—that is, encouragement communicates a positive message about the recipient (e.g., her or his character strengths), the recipient's products or actions (e.g., "Your presentation was so inspiring; have you ever considered a career in teaching?"), or the recipient's situation (e.g., "Your son will eventually realize how much you love him"). Affirmations may also be explicit (e.g., "I have confidence in you!") or implicit (e.g., counselors asking clients a series of questions about their strengths to instill confidence). In contrast, persuasion is broader in scope and can be negative (e.g., warnings, demands, threats, and nagging; Stephens, Rook, Franks, Khan, & Iida, 2010), affirmative (e.g., "I believe you can succeed"), or neutral. Neutral forms of persuasion (which do not include affirmations; for example, "Keep working on what you're doing") are best conceptualized as exhortations rather than as encouragement, as defined in this article.

In addition, a large body of literature from the social psychology of influence delineates the mechanisms through which social influence professionals (e.g., marketing professionals) persuade others to comply with requests (e.g., Briñol & Petty, 2012; Cialdini & Griskevicius, 2010); yet, such forms of persuasion are often motivated by the benefits that accrue to the persuader (e.g., the sale of a product) and are not primarily intended to instill courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope in the recipient of persuasion. In contrast, expressions of encouragement are motivated by the welfare of the recipient.

Third, as encapsulated in this article's definition, encouragement can either be challenge-focused or potential-focused. As reflected in the quote at the beginning of this article and in Adlerian concepts of encouragement (Azoulay, 1999; Sweeney, 2009), encouragement is often provided to individuals involved in challenging situations. Examples include general life stress, mental or physical illness, indecisiveness about life choices, sitting for academic tests, competitive sports, or other activities that require substantial effort or exertion. In this regard, encouragement involves instilling strengths that may potentially address the recipient's perceived limitations. For instance, the instillation of courage reduces fear, perseverance combats a desire to give up, confidence addresses low self-efficacy, inspiration resolves a lack of motivation or creativity, and hope decreases pessimism about the future. However, encouragement can also be offered outside the context of challenging circumstances where the focus is on realizing a potential instead of addressing a problem. In such instances, the encourager communicates her or his recognition of a potential in a situation or in the recipient. An example

would be when the encourager provides an unsolicited suggestion to the recipient to engage in a fulfilling task that will realize the recipient's potential (e.g., "I know you've never thought of grad school before, but I think you're capable of exceling as a grad student"). Having provided a definition and delineated the conceptual boundaries of encouragement, I now discuss empirical findings on encouragement.

## **Empirical Findings on Encouragement**

### *Adlerian Encouragement*

Studies on encouragement based on Adlerian conceptions of encouragement are sometimes difficult to evaluate because of a lack of consistency in the meaning of encouragement across studies. Some Adlerian studies have demonstrated the psychosocial benefits of encouragement based (at least in part) on the humanistic notion of encouragement as a way of being that includes dimensions such as a positive view of oneself and being open to experiences (Evans et al., 1997; Phelps et al., 2001). Other studies focus on the experience of being encouraged (e.g., "What encourages you in school?") without the necessity of interpersonal communications (Superstein, 1994). Such studies operationalize encouragement in ways that fall outside the definition of encouragement in this article. In contrast, some Adlerian scholars have focused on the interpersonal aspect of encouragement in their research. For example, a line of research on the distinction between praise and encouragement showed that children rated a teacher's use of encouragement more favorably than a teacher's use of praise (Kelly & Daniels, 1997), that girls exhibited a higher preference for encouragement versus praise than boys (Pety, Kelly, & Kafafy, 1984), and that an internal locus of control was related to fourth- and sixth-grade students' preference for encouragement versus praise (Kelly, 2002).

### *Social Support*

Empirical findings on encouragement can also be found in the social support literature, given that encouragement has been explicitly identified as a form of social support—and more specifically, a type of emotional support (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996). Many studies in the social support literature involve the provision of encouragement to support individuals' health behavior (Kratz et al., 2013). Several studies attest to the ubiquity of encouragement as an expression of social support. A study on an Internet weight loss community demonstrated that encouragement (e.g., encouragement not to



give up one's weight loss goals) was by far the most frequent type of weight loss social support reported by participants (Hwang et al., 2011). A systematic review of the empirical literature on parental social support for their children's participation in healthy physical activities (66 studies) found that encouragement was the most widely studied type of parental support (31 studies; Beets et al., 2010). The vast majority of these studies demonstrated that parental encouragement was positively related to children's healthy physical activity outcomes, leading the authors to conclude that encouragement may be one of the most influential types of parental support. In other research, encouragement from family members has been found to be positively associated with adherence to a healthy diet (Sallis, Grossman, Pinski, Patterson, & Nader, 1987; Stephens et al., 2010).

### *Verbal Persuasion*

Albert Bandura's (1997) seminal theory on self-efficacy includes four sources of self-efficacy, one of which is verbal persuasion. Verbal persuasion (also known as social persuasion) refers to what people say to others regarding their belief about what others can or cannot do and can strengthen or dampen others' beliefs about their capabilities (Bandura, 1997). Although Bandura's concept of verbal persuasion is not identical to encouragement because it includes both positive and negative persuasion (e.g., "I doubt you can succeed"), studies that have tested this concept have mostly operationalized it to include positive rather than negative persuasion. Studies on students' academic self-efficacy have shown that receiving verbal encouragement with regard to a particular subject was positively related to mathematics self-efficacy among college students (Lent, Lopez, & Bieschke, 1991), math and French self-efficacy among French elementary school students (Joët, Usher, & Bressoux, 2011), and science self-efficacy in middle school students (Kıran & Sungur, 2012), after controlling for other sources of self-efficacy.

Beyond the domain of academics, Neff, Niessen, Sonnentag, and Unger (2013) found that among German working couples, one partner's job self-efficacy was positively related to the other partner's job self-efficacy and that the partner's verbal persuasion was a mediator of this association. In a different study, S. L. Anderson and Betz (2001) showed that college students' experiences of verbal persuasion (e.g., "I received encouragement to socialize as a child") was positively associated with self-efficacy in engaging in social interactions, after controlling for other sources of self-efficacy.

Beyond correlational studies, several experimental studies have tested the effects of verbal persuasion on other outcomes. In one study (Luzzo & Taylor, 1993), college students who were randomly assigned to receive verbal

persuasion from a counselor indicating that they possessed sufficient skills and opportunities to make effective career decisions reported greater career decision-making self-efficacy than those who did not receive verbal persuasion. In another study, both female and male undergraduates performed better on mental rotation tasks when they received encouragement that was purportedly from a peer (e.g., “If you concentrate and try, it can be done well”) as compared with a no-encouragement group (Brownlow, Janas, Blake, Rebadow, & Mellon, 2011).

### *Multicultural Considerations*

Although encouragement is theorized to be relevant across diverse groups of people, the expression, frequency, and importance of encouragement likely vary across gender, racial groups, and culture. There is some preliminary evidence suggesting that encouragement might be relatively more important to the success and well-being of women, minority groups, and some non-Western cultures. A qualitative study by Zeldin and Pajares (2000) revealed that women who excelled in math, scientific, and technological careers perceived that the confidence significant others (e.g., teachers, parents) expressed in their abilities was the most important factor contributing to their self-efficacy beliefs influencing their career choices. The authors argued that many women value relationships as the foundation for their identities, and therefore, the confidence expressed by significant others was more important than their own mastery experiences in building self-efficacy. Similarly, racial minority individuals who routinely face discrimination might rely more on positive social messages from significant others to build their self-confidence (Sue & Constantine, 2003). Aligning with these perspectives, Usher and Pajares (2006) demonstrated that among sixth-grade students, verbal persuasion from others was a significant positive predictor of academic self-efficacy for girls and African Americans, but not for boys and non-Latino White Americans.

Similarly, individuals from non-Western collectivistic cultures might define themselves more strongly in terms of their relationships with others (Tweed & Conway, 2006) and may, therefore, be more open to the influence of encouragement provided from significant others. Lin and Flores (2013) found that among East Asian international graduate students, verbal persuasion from others (e.g., professors, family) was the only source of self-efficacy that was both directly and positively related to job search self-efficacy and indirectly related to positive job search behaviors. The authors speculated that these findings reflect the notion that East Asians may highly value the opinions of important people in their lives.

Cultural beliefs might also influence the value of encouragement in instilling perseverance in others. Because Asians may have stronger beliefs in the utility of effort in fostering success than Westerners (see Tweed & Conway, 2006, for a review), Asian parents may be potentially more adept in encouraging their children to persevere and work hard. In a cross-national study (Jose & Bellamy, 2012), Chinese and Japanese parents' use of encouragement when their young children encountered failure mediated the positive association between parents' incremental theory of intelligence (belief that intelligence could be fostered through hard work) and their children's persistence on difficult academic tasks. In contrast, parents' use of encouragement was not a significant mediator among families in the United States and New Zealand.

### *Summary and Critique*

To summarize, the extant research provides preliminary evidence for the benefits of receiving encouragement from others as well as potential cross-gender, cross-racial, and cross-cultural differences in the use and impact of encouragement. However, three caveats are noteworthy. These findings should be interpreted with caution because encouragement and the constructs associated with encouragement were sometimes operationalized or measured in ways that differed from the definition of encouragement used in this article. For instance, the measures used to assess encouragement in the social support and verbal persuasion literature sometimes include items that would be considered neutral forms of persuasions rather than affirmations (e.g., refer to the scale items in Sallis and colleagues' 1987 study on encouragement to adhere to a healthy diet).

Another limitation is that the aforementioned studies on encouragement focused on the effects of encouragement rather than on the types of encouragement. No known study has explicitly distinguished between the two types of encouragement identified in this article's definition, namely, encouragement that is directed at a challenging situation versus encouragement that helps to realize a potential. Furthermore, research has yet to identify whether certain types of encouragement are more frequently expressed in certain cultural groups versus other cultural groups. It is also likely that some types of encouragement might be more effective than others. Indeed, Bandura (1997) proposed three factors that influence the effectiveness of verbal persuasion in strengthening self-efficacy: (a) effective framing of one's feedback (e.g., emphasizing the progress recipients have made), (b) the credibility of the persuader, and (c) the degree of disparity between the persuader and the recipient's beliefs about the recipient's abilities. Nevertheless, researchers

have focused more on the effects of verbal persuasion on self-efficacy rather than on identifying the types of verbal persuasion that are most effective in fostering self-efficacy.

Finally, Bandura's (1997) notion that some types of verbal persuasion (and by implication, encouragement) may be more effective than others raises several intriguing questions: Are some people more effective encouragers than others? And at an ecological level, do some families, organizations, and countries exhibit stronger norms of encouragement than others? Yet, as indicated in the aforementioned review of the literature, the psychology of encouragement has focused more on the effects of individuals receiving encouragement rather than on the encourager or on group norms on encouragement. In the following sections, I address these limitations by arguing that encouragement is not just as an act of interpersonal communication but also an ecological variable (a group norm) and a character strength.

## **Psychology of Character Strengths and Virtues**

Although counseling psychology has a long tradition of highlighting individuals' strengths (Lopez et al., 2006; Super, 1955), the empirical study of character strengths and virtues has been largely absent throughout much of psychology's history (including that of counseling psychology; Gelso & Fassinger, 1992) until the advent of the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). McCullough and Snyder defined a virtue or character strength as "any psychological process that consistently enables a person to think and act so as to yield benefits to himself or herself and society" (p. 3). (Although positive psychologists have provided contrasting explanations of the differences between character strength and virtues [see McCullough & Snyder, 2000, and Peterson & Seligman, 2004], in this article the two terms are used interchangeably.) Character strengths and virtues share a number of common characteristics: They (a) are morally valued in their own right and not just as a means to an end, (b) have trait-like attributes (i.e., individual differences that exhibit some measure of stability across situations and time), (c) can be modified (e.g., people can cultivate habits to become more generous, patient, and courageous), (d) address the question of the kind of person one should be rather than simply what one should do, and (e) are embodied in paragons who are well-known for their positive demonstrations of these strengths (McCullough & Snyder, 2000; Niemiec, 2013; Peterson & Park, 2009; Sandage & Hill, 2001).

Several classifications of character strengths and virtues have been proposed by positive psychologists. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification scheme based on their Values in Action (VIA) project includes 24

character strengths classified under six core virtues—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Similarly, Clifton and his colleagues at the Gallup Organization have proposed 34 talent themes (Rath, 2007), whereas researchers at the Search Institute (e.g., Benson, 2003) have identified 40 developmental assets for healthy adolescent development, some of which (e.g., integrity, honesty) resemble character strengths. Nevertheless, to date, the psychology of encouragement has not been integrated with the psychology of character strengths and virtues. Some of the previously mentioned classifications of virtues include strengths that overlap somewhat with encouragement. For instance, encouragement can be conceptualized as an expression of the character strength of kindness; nevertheless, encouragement is narrower in scope than kindness because it is uniquely expressed through language or other symbolic representations, whereas acts of kindness can include other types of behavior (e.g., carrying groceries for a person; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Importantly, none of the aforementioned classifications of strengths explicitly addresses encouragement.

This omission of encouragement from the psychology of character strengths and virtues is striking, given that encouragement fits the criteria for what constitutes a character strength (Niemic, 2013; Peterson & Park, 2009). For example, it can be argued that the ability to encourage others is generally regarded as a positive attribute, that there are individual differences in encouragement (some individuals are better encouragers than others), and that despite these individual differences, individuals can be trained to become more encouraging toward others. Similar to the way other character strengths have been conceptualized (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), it is proposed that individuals who strongly possess the virtue of encouragement tend to enjoy providing encouragement to others, are good at doing so, and do so frequently. In the following section, I discuss the implications of conceptualizing encouragement as a character strength.

### **Tripartite Encouragement Model (TEM)**

To address limitations in the foregoing literature as well as to synthesize diverse streams of scholarship on encouragement under a unifying conceptual umbrella, I propose a model that provides a taxonomy of encouragement processes to guide future research and applications. The conceptual basis of this model is drawn in part from the psychology of character strengths and virtues (e.g., Sandage & Hill, 2001), Bandura's (1997) concept of verbal persuasion, and some Adlerian conceptual insights on encouragement (e.g., Carns & Carns, 2006; Kelly, 2002). Known as the TEM, this model delineates three

**Table 1.** Tripartite Encouragement Model.

Facets	Examples
<b>Facet 1: Foci of encouragement</b>	
1. Challenge-focused	“The situation is not as bad as it looks. And I know things will improve.”
2. Potential-focused	“Have you ever considered a career in statistics? I know you’ll be really good!”
<b>Facet 2: Features of effective encouragement</b>	
1. Framing of encouragement message	Effective encouragement messages focus on positive aspects of the recipient’s progress, attitude, strategies, and effort.
2. Perceived trustworthiness of encourager	The recipient views the encourager as an expert or as someone who knows her or him well.
3. Perceived credibility of encouragement message	Recipients are likely to perceive messages that are sincere and realistic as credible.
<b>Facet 3: Levels of encouragement</b>	
1. Interpersonal communication	Communicating an affirmation to instill confidence in a person who is feeling discouraged.
2. Character strength	Some individuals are better encouragers than others.
3. Group norm	Some organizations have a strong culture of encouragement than others.

facets of encouragement processes—foci, features, and levels of encouragement (see Table 1). Although several propositions within this model have yet to be empirically tested, they can serve as a framework for research questions to be addressed in the future.

### *Facet 1: Foci of Encouragement*

Facet 1 of the TEM acknowledges the two possible foci of encouragement reflected in this article’s definition of encouragement—challenge-focused encouragement is directed at recipients facing difficult circumstances, whereas potential-focused encouragement is communicated to help realize a potential (see example in Table 1). This distinction is important because some individuals may be better at communicating challenge-focused encouragement, whereas others may excel more in potential-focused encouragement. Potential-focused encouragement bears some resemblance to one of the 34 talent themes identified by Clifton and his colleagues at the Gallup Organization—the talent

theme of *developer* involves seeing potential in others and a delight in seeing others develop and grow (Rath, 2007). The inclusion of potential-focused encouragement in the model underscores the notion that encouragement is relevant not only when individuals encounter challenging situations but also when the encourager's focus is on nurturing the recipient's personal development. Such a focus dovetails with salutogenic conceptualizations of mental health (Keyes, 2007) in acknowledging that many people are not just interested in resolving problems but also in personal growth and in realizing the full potential of their lives (Robitschek et al., 2012; Wong, 2006a).

### **Facet 2: Features of Effective Encouragement**

The use of encouragement does not necessarily result in the recipient experiencing encouragement or other positive outcomes. Therefore, Facet 2 of the TEM delineates the features that influence the extent to which encouragement produces positive outcomes for recipients. In this regard, three broad principles, based on a modified version of Bandura's (1997) three proposed factors for effective verbal persuasion, are offered. First, the effectiveness of encouragement depends on how the encouragement message is framed. For instance, Bandura observed that persuasion is more effective in fostering self-efficacy when it communicates individuals' progress (e.g., "You have already completed 70% of the work; I know you can complete everything!") rather than their shortfall from a goal. Drawing from Adlerian concepts on encouragement (Azoulay, 1999; Kelly, 2002) as well as Dweck and colleagues' empirical work on the benefits of process versus person praise (Kamins & Dweck, 1999), I further propose that effective encouragement messages tend to emphasize process-oriented factors. Examples of process-oriented factors include the recipient's effort (e.g., "If you keep on working hard like you have been, you will succeed!"), strategy (e.g., "I love how you use your fingers to practice subtraction. Keep doing it!"), and attitude (e.g., "I know you'll succeed because you have a never-give-up attitude!"). Furthermore, the empirical literature on social influence (e.g., Cialdini & Griskevicius, 2010) could be applicable to effective encouragement messages as long as they are intended to instill courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope. For example, drawing from Cialdini's principles of social influence (Cialdini & Griskevicius, 2010), the framing of encouraging messages can include appeals to the principle of consistency (e.g., "You've done this before, so I think you can succeed again") and the principle of social validation (e.g., "Ninety percent of female professors who applied for tenure in our university were successful").

Second, the encourager needs to be perceived by the recipient as trustworthy (Bandura, 1997). For instance, recipients are more likely to trust the encouragement messages they receive if they are offered by people they perceive to be authority figures (e.g., a professor expressing confidence in a student's ability to handle an advanced statistics course) or people whom they perceive know them really well.

Third, the encouragement message should be perceived as credible by the recipient. Bandura (1997) cautioned against the use of overly effusive praise ("You're so awesome!") that might be perceived by the recipient as insincere or unrealistic. Specifically, Bandura suggested that the disparity between the persuader's and the recipient's beliefs about the recipient's abilities should not be too large. For instance, a high school student who is in thinking of dropping out of school because of failing grades might not be easily persuaded by an encouragement message claiming that "You can go to Harvard University if you just work hard." Therefore, effective encouragement may involve identifying recipients' beliefs about their own abilities and careful calibration of encouragement messages to address these beliefs so that they will be perceived as credible. As will be elaborated in our subsequent discussion on motivational interviewing (MI; W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 2013), an encouragement message will be viewed as more credible by the recipient if it is based on arguments endorsed or provided by the recipient.

### *Facet 3: Levels of Encouragement*

The third facet of the TEM focuses on levels of encouragement. At its most basic level, encouragement, as defined in this article, is an act of interpersonal communication. As shown in our earlier review, this is the most common way that encouragement is conceptualized in the empirical literature. However, as the foregoing review of the psychology of character strengths and virtues demonstrates, encouragement, at another level, can be conceptualized as a trait or, more specifically, as a character strength that individuals possess in varying degrees. Simply put, some people are more effective encouragers than others. The factors theorized to determine the effectiveness of encouragement (see Facet 2) are also likely the same factors that characterize effective encouragers. That is, individuals whose signature character strength is encouragement are likely to be good at framing encouragement messages, establishing trustworthiness in the eyes of recipients, and tailoring their encouragement messages to appear credible to recipients.

There are several implications and benefits of the conceptualization of encouragement as a character strength or virtue. For one, the conceptualization of encouragement as a morally desirable attribute (McCullough &



Snyder, 2000) implies that encouragement can and should be taught to others and that individuals, through practice, can become better encouragers to their partners, children, colleagues, friends, and students (cf. Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004). Furthermore, a virtues-based conceptualization implies that encouragement embodies traits of a person's moral character—that is, as a virtue, encouragement integrates an individual's prosocial internal motivations, cognitions, and affect with her or his external behavior (Sandage & Hill, 2001). An important implication is that people who have high levels of trait encouragement are not simply those who are socially skillful or schooled in the art of flattery. Rather, the words of affirmation expressed by effective encouragers reflect their positive motivations, cognitions, and affect toward the recipients. Simply put, individuals whose signature strength is encouragement tend to have a positive view of others, are genuinely invested in the welfare of others, and are excited to see others grow and develop (see also Carns & Carns, 2006, for similar insights from Adlerian psychology).

In addition, Sandage and Hill (2001) argued that virtues are inextricably linked to well-being and health in that they increase people's ability to live a good life. Indeed, empirical findings have demonstrated that some character strengths are linked to a range of positive outcomes for the individuals who exhibit these strengths, including positive mental health, academic achievement, and physical health (Niemiec, 2013). Applying this concept to encouragement, one might expect that the practice of encouragement would yield benefits not only to the recipient of encouragement but also to the encourager. (This hypothesis is further expanded in the discussion on future research toward the end of this article.)

At a third level, encouragement can be conceptualized as a group norm in families, schools, organizations, countries, and other ecological settings. This focus on ecological settings is an important correction to the individualistic bias that exists in most psychological research (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000), including positive psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Wong, 2006b). Such a conceptualization also dovetails with emerging interests applying positive psychological concepts of virtues and strengths to the science of organizational behavior (e.g., Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). As a group norm, encouragement refers to group members' shared perceptions concerning the frequency and effectiveness with which encouragement is communicated by others in a group as well as the extent to which encouragement is valued by others in the group (cf. Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Therefore, an organization that is characterized by a strong culture of encouragement might be one in which members perceive that encouragement is frequently and effectively expressed and valued by others within the organization.

## Counseling Applications

Having described a model of encouragement processes, I now discuss practical applications of encouragement to counseling practice. I begin with a discussion of how encouragement is currently incorporated in counseling theories and therapeutic common factors. I then delineate how the TEM can be used as a framework to enhance counseling practice.

### *Counseling Theories*

Many counseling theories either explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that encouragement can contribute positively to client outcomes. However, because of space constraints, I focus on five counseling theories for which encouragement is a relatively prominent therapeutic focus—Adlerian therapy, solution-focused therapy (SFT), narrative therapy, strength-centered therapy, and MI. Not surprisingly, all five embrace a strength-based orientation to counseling.

*Adlerian therapy.* Probably in no other counseling theory is encouragement more explicitly emphasized than in Adlerian therapy. Developed by Alfred Adler, Adlerian therapy is a complex blend of psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, and strength-based therapeutic processes (Sperry, 2003; Sweeney, 2009; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). A fundamental premise in Adlerian therapy is that human behavior is goal-oriented and socially embedded, and clients' problems can best be conceptualized in terms of how they try to achieve their goals, particularly within the context of relationships with others (Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2006). An important goal in therapy is to help clients gain insights into the mistaken beliefs embedded in their approach to achieving their goals and then to encourage clients toward change.

Adlerian counselors view clients as discouraged (lacking motivation and belief in their abilities to change) rather than ill (Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). Consequently, the counselor's use of encouragement—the antidote to discouragement—is foundational to the process of therapeutic change (Main & Boughner, 2011; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). A central goal of encouragement in Adlerian therapy is to increase clients' intrinsic motivation to change (Sweeney, 2009). One relatively unique feature of Adlerian encouragement is that Adlerian counselors are careful to avoid using compliments that imply an evaluation or approval of the client as a person (e.g., "I'm proud of you!") because of a concern that they constitute an external source of reinforcement (Sweeney, 2009). Rather, because Adlerian encouragement is intended to foster clients' intrinsic motivation to change, encouragement messages tend to

focus on client's progress, effort ("You've worked really hard"), and positive feelings or attitude (e.g., "You seem to enjoy . . ." or "You must be really proud of yourself").

There are several therapeutic skills advocated by Adlerian psychologists that are consistent with this article's definition of encouragement. Examples of encouragement skills that instill hope include telling stories of how others have successfully coped with similar problems, expressing confidence in the client's ability to change, pointing out to the client the positive consequences of change, and asking questions about the client's strengths (Main & Boughner, 2011; Perman, 1975; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). One innovative Adlerian technique is to ask clients to act as if they can do something they fear doing (e.g., speaking assertively; Watts, Peluso, & Lewis, 2005). The rationale for this technique is that when clients begin to act differently, regardless of their level of confidence, they tend to become more confident of their abilities. This technique can be expanded to include the use of encouragement to instill inspiration and confidence by inviting clients to imagine how their lives would be more positive if they were acting "as if" and then by collaborating with clients to select behaviors that would increase the likelihood of success in acting "as if" (Watts et al., 2005).

**SFT.** SFT is a brief, strength-based approach to counseling that adopts the assumption that solutions in counseling are often unrelated to clients' problems (Berg & De Jong, 1996; de Shazer, 1985; Ratner, George, & Iveson, 2012). SFT counselors do not spend too much time discussing the origins of presenting concerns with clients because they believe that understanding a problem is not a pre-requisite for solving it. Instead, the focus of SFT is on identifying solutions and on clients' strengths and positive resources.

Several of the core techniques in SFT reflect counselors' use of encouragement. SFT counselors use the miracle question to help clients imagine in great detail how their lives would be different and what they would be doing differently if a miracle were to happen and all their problem disappeared. In so doing, clients construct an optimistic narrative of how their lives could be more positive. Exception-finding questions are used to identify past successes in clients' lives (e.g., "Tell me about a time in the past when your problem was less severe"), thereby communicating that clients are also capable of producing positive outcomes in their current circumstances ("In the past, you were less stressed whenever you confided in your best friend; I wonder if doing the same thing could help you cope with your current job stress").

SFT counselors also use compliments to express admiration at clients' accomplishments and to explore their strengths (e.g., "Despite how tough

things are for you, you wake up every morning to take care of your kids. How do you do it? What is your secret?"). Each of these techniques can be conceptualized as expressions of encouragement to the client because they not only help clients identify potential solutions to their problems but also instill hope or confidence in their ability to change.

*Narrative therapy.* Narrative therapy adopts the stance that clients make meaning of their lives through narratives or stories that can be authored based on multiple viewpoints (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epstein, 1990). When clients come to counseling, they tell "thin" stories that focus only on a few (and usually negative) experiences out of their myriad life experiences. Therefore, an important goal of narrative therapy is to help clients "thicken" their stories by identifying and drawing out diverse perspectives on clients' problems and counterexamples of events that do not fit their problems.

There are at least four narrative techniques that could reflect the use of encouragement. Exploring unique outcomes is a technique similar to asking exception-finding questions in SFT (e.g., "Tell me about a time when the problem tried to attack, but you were able to resist it") and conveys the optimistic message that if clients were successful addressing their problems in the past, they could also be successful in addressing their current problems. Similarly, developing preferred stories is an intervention that draws out a (typically positive) narrative that has not been given sufficient attention and encouraging the client to elaborate on it. This could involve asking questions to connect an event with other similar events (e.g., "You were really assertive in this instance. If I were to interview your friends, what would be their prediction of other instances in which you're likely to be assertive?"). Such questions could have the effect of strengthening clients' confidence in their own abilities to complete challenging tasks.

The use of therapeutic documents and reflecting teams are two additional narrative techniques that convey strength-based feedback to the client. Both techniques can be conceptualized as encouragement messages designed to instill hope or confidence. A reflecting team can consist of a group of therapists who observe a counseling session and then provide strength-based feedback to the client during a break in the session (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Therapeutic documents may involve letters, certificates, or works of art developed by the counselor, the client, or both. For example, a narrative counselor might draft a therapeutic letter summarizing the client's progress in counseling with an emphasis on the client's strengths as well as suggestions on how the client can apply these strengths to her or his presenting concerns (Rombach, 2003).

*Strength-centered therapy.* Strength-centered therapy (Wong, 2006a) is a therapeutic approach based on an integration of the psychology of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and social constructionist perspectives on counseling. Consistent with social constructionist viewpoints (e.g., H. Anderson, 1997), strength-centered counselors believe that the linguistic terms used in counseling play a crucial role in shaping clients' presenting concerns. An over-emphasis on diagnostic labels and psychopathology in counseling might be discouraging for clients; instead, counselors' preferred set of linguistic terms is that of character strengths. For example, clients' presenting concerns are conceptualized as unrealized character strengths. Therefore, the goal in strength-centered therapy is to help clients identify, label, develop, and utilize character strengths.

Strength-centered therapy is characterized by four phases of counseling, and the counselor's use of encouragement is relevant in each phase. In the explicitizing phase, the counselor helps identify the client's latent character strengths, thereby communicating the hopeful message that the client has the necessary psychological resources to resolve her or his presenting problems. For instance, the metastrategy of polyvocality (Gergen, 1999) is based on the notion that clients can enlarge their understanding of character strengths when they listen to the perspectives of people they admire or trust. The client's supportive close friends can be invited to join in a session of counseling and be asked by the counselor to provide feedback on the strengths they have observed in the client's life and how these strengths can be used to address the client's presenting concerns. In the envisioning phase, the counselor collaborates with the client to identify new character strengths to develop. To help a client elaborate on the strength of gratitude that she or he wishes to develop, the client can be encouraged to project into the future and describe in detail a typical day in the life of "grateful \_\_\_ [client's name]." This vivid description in turn provides inspiration for attaining the vision of being a more grateful person. In the empowering phase, clients are encouraged to exercise their desired character strengths. Counselors can use compliments to encourage clients to persevere in their use of their desired character strengths (e.g., "Wow, it's great that you were able to express gratitude to your wife even though it didn't feel natural to you. With a bit more practice, it would become easier. Who would be the next person to whom you would like to practice expressing gratitude?"). Finally, in the evolving phase (celebrating growth in character strengths and identifying areas for continued growth after the conclusion of counseling), counselors can provide encouragement by asking clients to consider how they can use their strengths to address future challenges that might arise after the conclusion of counseling. Such a focus can help increase clients' confidence that they can cope successfully with future problems.

*MI.* MI is a client-centered counseling approach for addressing clients' ambivalence about change and strengthening their intrinsic motivation to change (W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Consistent with a client-centered philosophy, clients are recognized as experts on themselves and their presenting concerns with a knowledge of what is best for them (Westra & Aviram, 2013). MI counselors express empathy toward their clients' experience of ambivalence about change; they avoid actively persuading clients to change and instead focus more on creating opportunities for clients to listen to their own reasons for change.

Encouragement is most explicitly used in MI when the clients are interested in change but lack confidence in their ability to change. In this situation, MI counselors collaborate with clients to strengthen their confidence. Examples include reviewing past successes as well as identifying and affirming clients' strengths. Two techniques in particular deserve further mention. The confidence ruler technique (W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 2013) bears some resemblance to scaling questions in SFT and involves asking clients how confident they are of implementing the change they desire on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 represents *total confidence*. The counselor might then ask, "Why are you at a \_\_ but not at 0?" and "How can we get you from \_\_ to \_\_ (a higher number)?" Hypothetical thinking is another technique that is intended to increase clients' confidence by drawing on their creativity and strengths (W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 2013). For example, counselors could invite clients to imagine that 3 years have passed and they have succeeded in making the change they want and then write a letter from their future self to their current self to offer words of encouragement.

### **Common Factors**

Although encouragement is a relatively prominent therapeutic tool in the aforementioned five theories of counseling, it is also relevant to several therapeutic factors common to all forms of effective counseling. Common factors refer to the core therapeutic mechanisms of change common to effective forms of counseling, regardless of counseling theory or type of treatment. A large quantitative review of counseling research estimated that 70% of the variability in counseling outcomes was due to common factors and only 8% was due to specific therapeutic ingredients (Wampold, 2001), thus underscoring the primacy of common factors in effective counseling. Although a wide range of common factors have been proposed and studied (e.g., Grencavage & Norcross, 1990; Owen, Wong, & Rodolfa, 2010), two of the four most frequently cited common factors are the therapeutic alliance and hope (S. D. Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 1997). It is theorized that the counselor's use of encouragement directly contributes to both factors.

The therapeutic alliance—conceptualized as the bond between the therapist and the client and their agreement on therapeutic goals and tasks—has been consistently found to be related to positive client outcomes (Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011). Encouragement might help strengthen the therapeutic alliance in several ways. For one, counselors who are effective and genuine in communicating affirmations about their clients (e.g., “This is what I really admire about you . . .”) probably have a greater likelihood of being liked by their clients, which then increases the therapeutic bond. Similarly, counselors who are effective in encouraging clients who are ambivalent about change or lack confidence in their ability to implement change are more likely to elicit stronger counselor–client agreement on therapeutic goals and tasks. Consistent with these views, Bedi, Davis, and Williams’ (2005) study of clients’ perceptions of behaviors that contributed to the therapeutic alliance identified several associated with counselors’ use of encouragement, including positive commentary (e.g., affirmative comments on the client’s progress) and positive sentiment (e.g., expressing positive attitudes).

Beyond the therapeutic alliance, the counselor’s use of encouragement may also contribute to the common factor of hope. Hope or expectancy refers to the clients’ belief that counseling would be effective in addressing their presenting concerns. Studies have found that hope contributes to positive client outcomes, regardless of theoretical orientation (Coppock, Owen, Zagaraskas, & Schmidt, 2010; Larsen, Edey, & Lemay, 2007). That is, the more hopeful clients are that their presenting concerns can be successfully addressed and the more hopeful counselors are in their clients, the greater the clients’ therapeutic gains. In this regard, encouragement might be a key gateway for counselors to communicate hope in clients. In line with this view, one study of brief counseling showed that the item, “the counselor encouraged me to believe I could improve my situation” on a client satisfaction scale best predicted clients’ satisfaction with counseling (Talley, Butcher, & Moorman, 1992). Counselors’ use of encouragement might help instill hope at various phases of counseling. For example, during the role induction phase at the beginning of counseling, counselors may increase clients’ hope by providing reasons why counseling could be effective in addressing their presenting concerns. Counselors’ use of encouragement can also increase hope when clients are discouraged about their perceived inability to change or when they experience a sudden setback.

In addition to the common factors of hope and the therapeutic alliance, therapists’ use of encouragement might also be conceptualized as a principle of therapeutic change (Castonguay & Beutler, 2006) that can help clients engage in therapeutic activities and achieve their therapeutic goals. Counselors’

use of encouragement can be particularly relevant to help motivate a client who lacks the enthusiasm or self-efficacy to try a therapeutic task (e.g., completing a thought record sheet used in cognitive therapy). In such situations, encouragement is frequently used by counselors to strengthen clients' willingness to complete the task (e.g., by reminding clients of past successes, expressing faith in clients' abilities, or explaining the positive benefits of the task).

### *Counseling Applications of the TEM*

Having discussed how encouragement is currently incorporated in counseling theories and therapeutic common factors, I now discuss how the TEM can be used as a framework to further enhance counseling practice. Facet I of the TEM underscores the notion that counselors' use of encouragement can be challenge-focused or potential-focused. To the extent that most counseling theories and psychological treatments are based on the goal of helping clients resolve problems (Wong, 2006a), it appears that, in general, counselors tend to use challenge-focused encouragement more frequently than potential-focused encouragement. In contrast, the use of potential-focused encouragement acknowledges that many clients might not just be interested in alleviating mental illness, but are also invested in personal growth, and living more meaningful lives (Keyes, 2007; Robitschek et al., 2012; Wong, 2006a). As illustrated in the brief vignette below, potential-focused encouragement can be used to address these goals:

Counselor: You've never explicitly mentioned this, but I notice that one consistent theme in our conversations is that you always stand up for the underdog—it's so much a part of who you are. [Counselor provides specific examples.]

Client: Yeah, I never thought of it this way, but it's true. I just can't stand it when people are bullied, and I want to be a voice for folks who don't have a voice.

Counselor: This is such an admirable attribute. I often feel moved when you talk about injustice and how much you care for the poor. And I also sense that it gives your life meaning, does it?

Client: It does!

Counselor: I wonder what would happen if you pay more attention to this attribute of yours, maybe nurture it a little more.

In sum, counselors are encouraged to consider how they can actively incorporate the use of potential-focused encouragement in their counseling practice.



The three broad principles in Facet 2 of the TEM can also be used as a heuristic to help counselors reflect on how they can be more effective encouragers to their clients. In terms of framing counselors' encouragement messages, it is posited that in many instances, implicit forms of encouragement that use questions to draw out clients' own reasons for change or confidence (W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 2013) may be more effective than explicit forms of encouragement (e.g., "I know you can change; just don't give up!"). Counselors can also draw on principles of social influence (Cialdini & Griskevicius, 2010) to frame their encouragement messages. For instance, counselors can use the principle of social validation to communicate encouragement to clients during the role induction phase of counseling. To help a client who is ambivalent about the use of exposure therapy to address a phobia, the counselor could say,

I've worked with many clients who have had the same type of phobia. Most of them successfully overcame their phobia. Although I can't promise you anything, I can say there's a good chance you'll have the same experience.

In the same vein, knowing that the effectiveness of counselors' encouragement messages may be linked to their perceived trustworthiness and the perceived credibility of their encouragement messages can help counselors decide on the timing and crafting of their encouragement messages. For example, counselors might consider waiting until the therapeutic alliance is strong (and therefore, counselors would be perceived as credible by clients) before delivering an explicit encouragement message (e.g., "I really believe you will succeed"). Similarly, counselors' encouragement messages might be perceived by clients as more credible if counselors appear genuine and if the discrepancy between their messages and clients' perceptions of themselves or their situation is not excessive (cf. Bandura, 1997). Given that encouragement is not explicitly identified as a core skill in many textbooks on basic counseling skills (e.g., Hill, 2014; Nelson-Jones, 2012), counseling scholars and trainers could consider how effective encouragement skills can be incorporated in training programs and resources for counselors.

Finally, Facet 3 of the TEM can help broaden counselors' conceptualization of encouragement from merely an interpersonal communication to a character strength they can nurture as well as a group norm that can be cultivated in organizational settings. The emphasis on encouragement as a character strength aligns well with recent conceptualizations of therapeutic common factors that focus on the qualities of effective therapists (Wampold, 2010). For instance, Wampold (2014) has proposed 14 qualities and actions of effective counselors based on a review of theory and research evidence. Two of

these qualities are relevant to encouragement. According to Wampold, effective counselors (a) communicate hope and optimism and (b) are influential and persuasive, attributes related to the character strength of encouragement. The conceptualization of encouragement as a character strength has important implications for the training of counselors. As a character strength, encouragement includes one's internal motivations, cognitions, and affect (Sandage & Hill, 2001). Therefore, the training of counselors in the use of encouragement should not simply focus on specific social skills but also a way of life and an attitude to be cultivated by counselors in their daily lives with their partners, friends, and colleagues. Counselors who actively practice observing potential positive qualities in other people and who convey a genuine delight in seeing others grow and develop are more likely to cultivate the character strength of encouragement.

Beyond character strengths, encouragement can also be conceptualized as a group norm in counseling organizations. Such a conceptualization is valuable because it recognizes that many counselors are not independent practitioners but work in organizations in which their practice is influenced in part by their relationships with colleagues and by organizational culture and climate (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006). Counselors who feel overworked, underappreciated, and discouraged may be less likely to be effective counselors. Therefore, leaders in counseling centers, community mental health centers, and other organizations that provide counseling services could consider whether fostering a culture and climate of encouragement at the organizational level can be beneficial to the psychological health of counselors and, by extension, to the clients they serve. Examples of organizational interventions that may foster encouragement include (a) conducting a survey to assess counselors' perceptions on the frequency and effectiveness with which encouragement is communicated to them in the organization, (b) introducing strength-based supervision of counselors, and (c) developing organizational rituals that facilitate encouragement among counselors. For example, potential-focused encouragement can be communicated in a yearly "project-into-the-future" exercise. In this activity, staff psychologists in a counseling center communicate positive predictions of their interns and practicum students' counseling skills and career advancement in 10 years' time and also provide an explanation (based on their observations of the latter's latent strengths) for why they make these predictions.

## **Applications in Other Areas of Psychology**

Although this article's main application focus is on counseling practice, a few brief recommendations about non-counseling applications are warranted.

Beyond counseling, a natural extension of encouragement applications would be the clinical supervision of counselors. The use of encouragement by supervisors is consistent with strength-based models of supervision that focus on amplifying counselors' strengths (Edwards, 2013). A recent study found that encouragement was perceived by counseling supervisees to be one of the characteristics of effective supervisory skills (Ladany, Mori, & Mehr, 2013). Supervisors could use encouragement to support their supervisees' counseling self-efficacy, particularly novice counselors who are anxious about their counseling skills (Schwing, LaFollette, Steinfeldt, & Wong, 2011). In this regard, potential-focused encouragement (Facet 1 of the TEM) may be particularly helpful in identifying supervisees' latent clinical skills (e.g., "I've noticed that you've a very genuine way of empathizing with your client using disclosure of your feelings. [Supervisor provides an example.] Could you do that more often?").

Beyond counseling psychology, it is argued that encouragement is relevant to multiple areas of applied psychology, including school and educational psychology, family psychology, health psychology, and community psychology. Adlerian psychologists have been at the forefront of applying the construct of encouragement to teaching and classroom management in school settings (Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Daniels, 1997; Sweeney, 2009). Encouragement skills could be incorporated as an integral part of teacher training. As earlier identified in this article's review of the empirical literature, teachers' use of encouragement may be particularly important for nurturing the academic strengths of girls and racial minority children who may strongly value the confidence expressed by significant others (Usher & Pajares, 2006; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). In family psychology, encouragement has been identified as a key parenting skill and source of family resilience (Roggman et al., 2013; Walsh, 2003). Therefore, couples and parents can be trained to become more effective encouragers to nurture healthy relationships and family resilience. To the extent that encouragement is an integral expression of emotional support (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996), training interventions can be introduced to help significant others be more effective encouragers to support their loved ones' health promoting behaviors (e.g., Beets et al., 2010; Stephens et al., 2010). Finally, in the area of community psychology, primary prevention interventions can include training large groups of individuals in the effective use of encouragement to foster psychological and social well-being in communities.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Because the psychological science of encouragement is still in its infancy, it is hoped that this article's definition of encouragement and the TEM can be

used to guide future research. First, perhaps the most urgent research task is the development of new measures of encouragement. As indicated in the foregoing review of the literature, previous studies on encouragement need to be interpreted with caution because the measures used to assess encouragement sometimes do not distinguish between encouragement as defined in this article (i.e., the expression of affirmations) and more neutral forms of persuasions (e.g., Sallis et al., 1987). Hence, the definition of encouragement in this article is offered as the basis for developing new measures of encouragement. In this regard, researchers might want to distinguish between challenge-focused and potential-focused encouragement (Facet 1 of the TEM) in their development of new instruments because they represent different expressions of encouragement and might therefore have different psychosocial correlates. In developing new instruments to assess encouragement, researchers should also be careful to ensure that the items in their scales do not merely focus on praise (e.g., "I enjoy giving positive feedback when others do a good job") but also on the notion of instilling courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope (e.g., "I enjoy telling others that I believe they can succeed"). Based on Facet 3 of the TEM (levels of encouragement), researchers are further encouraged to develop measures that conceptualize encouragement not only as an act of interpersonal communication but also as a character strength and group norm.

Second, researchers can test the extent to which this article's definition of encouragement approximates lay people's understanding of encouragement. For example, researchers can use qualitative research to explore lay people's perceptions of what it means to encourage someone else, positive examples of encouragement, and the impact of encouragement on their lives.

Third, researchers should assess the effectiveness of encouragement messages and interventions. For instance, the effectiveness of encouragement interventions can be tested as an adjunctive intervention to counseling, either in the form of an encouragement letter written by the counselor to the client (e.g., Rombach, 2003) or as a form of social support provided by clients' significant others (e.g., Silk et al., 2013). In the context of psychotherapy process research, researchers can assess whether counselors' use of encouragement accounts for a meaningful proportion of variance in client outcomes. If it does, such findings could suggest that encouragement might be an important attribute of effective therapists that deserves further attention in the training of counselors.

Fourth, researchers could investigate when and for whom (moderators), as well as how, (mediators) encouragement messages produce positive outcomes for recipients of encouragement. For instance, applying Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, researchers can assess

whether positive emotions (e.g., gratitude, hope, and inspiration) mediate the effects of receiving encouragement; that is, encouragement might generate positive emotions in recipients, which in turn broaden their thought–action repertoire (e.g., new insights and flexible ways of thinking) and build their long-term psychosocial resources (e.g., social bonds with others). With regard to moderators, the three principles in Facet 2 of the TEM (features of effective encouragement)—framing of encouragement messages, perceived credibility of the encourager, and perceived trustworthiness of the encouragement message—can be used as the basis to investigate when encouragement messages and interventions are most effective. Researchers can analyze which factors most strongly predict the extent to which an encouragement message produces beneficial outcomes for the recipient. For example, research might clarify whether the content of the encouragement message or the relationship between the encourager and recipient is a more robust predictor of salutary outcomes for the recipient. Drawing an analogy from research findings on the conditions under which praise has a positive effect on children’s intrinsic motivation, it is hypothesized that encouragement messages are most beneficial to recipients when they are viewed as sincere, attribute performance outcomes to controllable causes, do not emphasize social comparisons, enhance perceived autonomy and competence, and communicate realistic expectations (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

Fifth, the conceptualization of encouragement as a character strength (Facet 3 of the TEM) presents several research implications. Given the intrinsic connection between virtues and well-being (Sandage & Hill, 2001), researchers can investigate whether the practice of encouragement produces positive outcomes for the encourager (and not just the recipient of encouragement). Although no known research has directly addressed this issue, empirical findings from other areas of positive psychology may be instructive. Positive psychological intervention studies have found that individuals’ practice of kindness and expressing gratitude to others enhanced their subjective and social well-being (e.g., Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Although the construct of encouragement differs from gratitude and kindness, all three constructs are prosocial strengths that can involve expressing or doing something positive for others. Similar to the hypothesized mechanisms through which gratitude and kindness promotes well-being, the practice of encouragement might enhance encouragers’ well-being by cultivating a positive view of others and self, fostering relational bonds through prosocial reciprocity from recipients, and nurturing self-transcendence by reducing excessive self-focus (Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Future research can test whether these mechanisms mediate the potential benefits of practicing encouragement.

Similarly, researchers can investigate the correlates of trait encouragement (the character strength of encouragement). It is theorized that encouragement would be related to other prosocial strengths such as gratitude and kindness as well as to optimism and social actualization (perceiving that others have the potential to grow and develop; Keyes, 2007). Trait encouragement might also differ as a function of parenting styles. For instance, based on Baumrind's (1973) typology of parenting styles, it is hypothesized that parents with an authoritarian parenting style (low levels of warmth and high levels of control) would score low on trait encouragement, whereas those with an authoritative parenting style (high levels of warmth and control) would have higher levels of trait encouragement.

Sixth, the analysis of encouragement as an ecological group norm is an understudied area that deserves further attention. Encouragement can be studied in this manner by computing the mean scores of encouragement norms across multiple groups (e.g., families, schools, and organizations)—this would enable the testing of random effects models using multilevel modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Several intriguing questions can be addressed: Are encouragement norms at the ecological level correlated with encouragement traits (i.e., character strengths) at the individual level? Do families, schools, and organizations that exhibit strong encouragement norms also exhibit other healthy attributes (e.g., positive mental health) at the ecological and individual levels? Does variability in encouragement norms among university counseling centers (as perceived by counselors) account for variability in client outcomes?

Seventh, although this article has focused mainly on the positive benefits of encouragement, researchers should not ignore potential negative outcomes associated with encouragement. For instance, encouragement of dieting from significant others may contribute to disordered eating behaviors among young adults (Eisenberg, Berge, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013). It is therefore important to clarify the contexts that might determine when encouragement produces deleterious or salutary outcomes.

Finally, multicultural considerations need to be a core focus of encouragement research because the expression, frequency, and importance of encouragement likely vary across gender, racial groups, and culture. For instance, several scholars have observed that East Asians have a greater tendency than Westerners to embrace a worldview that emphasizes the ubiquity of change in one's life circumstances (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001; Tweed & Conway, 2006). Ji and colleagues posited that a belief in the ubiquity of change in events might lead East Asians to remain hopeful in the midst of suffering in anticipation that the situation will eventually change. Researchers could examine the possibility that cultural beliefs about the ubiquity of change might influence

the framing of encouragement messages. Perhaps encouragers who strongly embrace a cultural belief in the ubiquity of change might be more inclined to focus their encouragement messages on recipients' situation (e.g., "I'm confident that things will get better") relative to encouragers who believe in the stability of events.

## Conclusion

This article synthesized diverse streams of theorizing and research to propose an integrative psychological science of encouragement. To this end, I offered a definition of encouragement, outlined its conceptual boundaries, and then proposed a conceptual model that delineates a taxonomy of encouragement processes. Known as the TEM, this model charts the foci, features, and levels of encouragement. I then explored how this model can be used to enhance counseling practice and to guide future research on the psychology of encouragement. A central thesis of this article is that encouragement is an important, albeit understudied, construct that deserves greater attention from counseling psychologists as well as psychologists from other fields. I hope that this article will serve as an impetus for psychologists to explore new horizons of research and applications on the psychology of encouragement.

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