The strengths perspective in social work: Lessons from practice

Mel Gray1 and Colin Collett van Rooyen2

Abstract

The paper provides an overview of the strengths perspective in social work which offers a critical, radical approach to practice in the sense that, among other things, it questions (i) the dominant deficits-based mental health paradigm, which pigeonholes people in terms of pathology and assigns them disempowering labels; (ii) anti-oppressive practice models that construe clients as oppressed and immediately engender feelings of powerlessness; and (iii) rigid mindsets such as positivism, ardent feminism and structuralism that lead practitioners to approach the helping situation with preconceived ideas that influence the way they listen to, hear and interpret the client’s story and thus the way they design their interventions. It reviews the domains in which strength-based approaches have taken hold from individual counselling, such as solution-focused brief therapy, to community interventions, such as assets-based community development, and narrative approaches which span both the individual and community, to policy where proactive policies, such as family preservation policies, reflect their influence. It then examines its relevance drawing on lessons from practice.

1 Mel Gray is Professor of Social Work and Head of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia and Honorary Research Professor, University of Natal, Durban, South Africa.
2 Colin A.J. Collett van Rooyen is a Social Worker and Research Consultant in Private Practice
Strengths-based approaches present a radical alternative to many current intervention models in the sense that, among other things, they question the dominant deficits-based mental health paradigm, which pigeonholes people in terms of pathology and assigns them disempowering labels; anti-oppressive practice models that construe clients as oppressed and immediately engender feelings of powerlessness; and rigid mindsets such as positivism, ardent feminism and structuralism that lead practitioners to approach the helping situation with preconceived ideas that influence the way they listen to, hear and interpret the client’s story and thus the way in which they design their interventions (Gray, 2001). In this paper, we review the domains in which strength-based approaches have taken hold, from individual counselling, such as solution-focused brief therapy, to community interventions, such as assets-based community development, and narrative approaches which span both the individual and community, to policy where proactive policies, such as family preservation policies, reflect their influence. It ends with an examination of the relevance of the strengths perspective in social work drawing on lessons from practice.

The strengths perspective is not new to social work. Indeed, it has been around for almost half a century and was evident in the writings of Hollis (1966) and Perlman (1957) who urged social workers to focus on client strengths. More recently it has been construed as a rebellion against the dominant medico-scientific paradigm which reduces client symptomatology to problems and pathology (Cohen, 1999). Within social work, it is a reaction against the ‘problem-deficit orientation (which) poses barriers for clients, including the individualising of problems, and fails to take into account the contribution of social conditions and attempts to intervene in this arena’ (Rowlands, 2001, p. 278).
The revival of the strengths perspective in social work is relatively new and originated at the University of Kansas (Chapin, 1995; Saleebey, 1992, 1996, 1999; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989).

It presents itself as a challenge to social workers. The concept ‘worker’ creates much of the challenge for its interpretation has often and historically led to our belief that the burden for the completion of the ‘work’ lies within ourselves – the ‘workers’. The notion of the client as a passive element within the system and in relation to the tasks at hand has naturally tended away from a focus on strengths. Since we are assessed on the efficiency of our ‘work’ – and our work is ‘urgent’ – the quickest way of doing it (we are, after all, the workers) is to ‘just to do it’ ourselves. Instead the strengths perspective sees clients as partners or participants in the helping process at all levels. It focuses on the strengths, assets, skills, capacities, abilities, resilience, and resources of. The language of the strengths perspective is empowering. For example, victims become survivors, needs are ‘gaps’ in resources, problems are challenges, clients are participants, and helping becomes facilitating. In essence, the language of strengths is reflective of core social work values like respect for persons and social justice. Essentially then, a strengths-based model is a model for the practice of sound social work values. It attempts to normalize social work’s power relations through the application of core values in practice and language. Even though social workers might use a structural perspective from which to understand unequal power relations in society and their impact on individuals, groups and communities, they are nevertheless guided in their interactions with people by their values. They approach people with respect, listen to the client’s story, engage with them in the helping process, and focus on those elements of the situation which make them feel
good about themselves and their potential for change. This is sound social work practice, no matter what theory or perspective might inform the practitioner’s intervention.

Saleebey (1999) suggested that, when using the strengths perspective as a guiding framework, practitioners need to adopt an alternative ‘lexicon’. He says that the rehabilitation system is ‘diametrically opposed to a strengths orientation’ and ‘the preferred language replaces the client's lexicon with the vocabulary of problem and disease’ (Saleebey, 1996: 297). The resilience that has been displayed as the person faces adversity is seldom taken into account. A strengths-based approach, by contrast, recognises and builds on this resilience, affording the individual the potential to build on capacities even further (Rowlands, 2001). Saleebey’s (1999) comment that ‘words do have power’ (p. 31) underscores the link between power relations and language and the need for practitioners to reflect and act upon the power imbedded in their interactions with clients and communities. It is important that practitioners move from reflection to action within a strengths framework. Failure to do this leaves the perspective as simply ‘an appealing metaphor’ (Saleebey, 1999, p. 31), a hollow framework without practical direction that only serves as window dressing for a system that many have claimed as one which upholds the status quo rather than makes a positive move towards real change.

While not wanting to minimise the complex situations and contexts, and severe trauma that clients experience, somehow the strengths perspective makes improvement an ever-present possibility. Used appropriately by the social worker, the client or intervention partner also shares the responsibility for the 'work' that has to be done to change the situation at hand. Labels stick to people like flies to fly paper. They follow them throughout their lives and stigmatise them in a disempowering way. The strengths
perspective accepts and acknowledges the resilience of people, their ability to endure extreme hardship and to survive seemingly insurmountable problems. As Herman (1992) observed, there is sufficient evidence to show that enhanced resilience accompanies the scars of past trauma or hardship. The strengths perspective acknowledges this. It affirms people's ability to cope against all odds, and indeed to work beyond mere coping to a point which they may find more desirable than their previous situation; to grow out of survival of adversity, to grow from challenge.

**Strengths-based approaches**

Strengths-based approaches encompass narrative and empowerment models, brief solution-focused therapy, assets-based community development, inductive social policy (Chapin, 1995), and the like. The strengths perspective overlaps with narrative approaches, particularly in the emphasis on non-pathologising, searching for unique outcomes, and externalising the problem. While narrative therapists might not see themselves as advocates, they help people figure out what they want to do and then provide them with the support to carry it through. While some therapists might not use the language of empowerment, their work might still be empowering. Some narrative therapists, like those at the Just Therapy Centre in New Zealand, locate a great deal of their work in the community and in the political arena, so there are many congruencies between their work and empowerment approaches (Madsen, 1999; Tamasese & Waldegrave, 1993). Key proponents of narrative therapy, such as David Epston in New Zealand, Michael White at the Dulwich Centre in Australia, and others certainly have

some very creative ideas about how people can empower themselves. The emphasis in narrative work rests on facilitating processes that enhance the possibilities for people to empower themselves.

Oko (2000) sees strengths-based practice as both a process and a product. As a process it concerns itself with moving from a problem based approach to one that is possibility or solution focused. It is a process of engaging with the person based on key concepts, such as empowerment, partnership, facilitation, and participation. It concerns itself with a language of change. As a product, it can be applied in any number of contexts or situations, e.g., in statutory child protection (Oko, 2000). Hence the notion of ‘strengths-based practice’ is a multifaceted concept and is part of a language of progressive change that rests on a key belief in the possibility of change for people, given the opportunity and resources. Multiple factors contribute to a client's given situation, therefore there is likely to be a diversity of effective solutions available. Uncovering these is a process, not simply a product.

Family therapy, drawing on systems theory, has evolved into solution-focused approaches such as de Shazer's (1985, 1988, 1991) work. Even though his brief therapy model does not have an explicit strengths foundation, it is rooted in the critique of a problem focus. In Australia, there are several models of brief therapy (Cade, 1985, 1987; Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; Durrant, 1992; Durrant & Kowalski, 1993). What unites these approaches as models for strengths-based practice is their move away from disempowering approaches to a non-pathology culture where strengths replace deficits.

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3 See http://www.narrativeapproaches.com
Moving away from disempowering approaches

By now it is clear that the strengths perspective is a way of viewing the client and the helping situation and that there are several strengths-based approaches. Since social workers often work in rigid bureaucratic contexts characterised by social control functions, and where the ideology of pathology and managed care predominates, it is a real challenge to create the space or freedom to situate power in the hands of clients (at all levels). A first step is to move away from conceptions of clients as oppressed that make them feel powerless and instead:

- Ask clients what they know.
- How they survived this.
- What they want to do.
- Help them connect with significant others, community networks, and services.
- Help them engage in advocacy and activism where they lead the charge.
- Work collaboratively with clients. Asks how we can support them.
- Connect with social justice issues, with resource distribution, how people work with larger systems and their access to resources.
- Examine ways to get positive stories to the media that feeds on violence and bad news.

Replacing the pathology culture

A central question in strengths-based practice is how to foster a relationship that the client will experience as both healing and empowering. Not only do mental health professionals characteristically use destructive categories and labels, but clients also put

pressure on them to use a pathology perspective. They want to know what is wrong with them. They want a diagnosis. They want their illness named. They do not necessarily want to hear that they have strengths and can heal themselves when they fall ill and want treatment. Clients want a quick fix, a diagnosis, a pill and a cure. Many do not want to walk the long road of healing.

In attempting to reconstruct the helping relationship, strengths-based practice shares much with a social constructivist perspective in terms of which knowledge is a social construction founded on a collectivist understanding of human behaviour and purpose (Early & Glenmaye, 2000). Hence strengths-based practice recognises:

- The importance of language: Clients are partners, not recipients, who have strengths, assets and resources rather than just needs and problems. We need to develop a strengths vocabulary.
- The mutuality of the helping process: Clients are partners, workers facilitators.
- The importance of the client’s story: Clients are expert on their own situation.
- Acceptance of ambiguity, unpredictability, uncertainty, and irony: There are many ways of knowing and experiencing, and knowledge is ever changing and never complete. Thus we have to accept that it is not always possible to make diagnoses with one hundred percent certainty. Often our judgments are tentative.
- Assessment as collaborative and the outcome of a process of engagement.
- The dangers of oppressive and unexamined practice: It requires that we reflect constantly on what we do as we try to reframe situations from a strengths perspective recognising that construing clients only as marginalised and
oppressed is extremely disempowering. Clients usually do not construe their problems in this way.

Relevance for practice: Lessons in strengths

*Thinking in terms of a strengths perspective requires conscious effort*

The first impulse of most of social workers is towards conducting needs analyses. The urge to determine what is missing or lacking appears stronger than that to locate strengths and resources.

The opening question of ‘what is wrong here?’ needs to be replaced with ‘what is working well?’

Asking ‘what is wrong’ will be met with a list of deficits while asking ‘what is working well’ will elicit an inventory of strengths. While one cannot ignore the needs people feel and express, we can, nevertheless, work on recognising a balance between need and strength. For every need there is a strength that can be nurtured or modeled to meet that need. Also, asking about need results in responses that are often given without a sense of personal effort or investment in the possible solution. Put simplistically, if one asks a person what size house he/she needs, the response may be ‘a ten-roomed house’ because the question does not allude to the level of personal investment and engagement in the process required to attain that need. The question does not ask about building or buying the house. If one were to ask what house a person was prepared or able to build, the response may be somewhat 'downscaled', perhaps to a four-roomed house, as a sense of the investment required to attain the need is implicit in the question.
Keeping assets registers alongside our needs studies

Recognising this at the community level, John McKnight and John Kretzmann of North Western University established the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute\(^4\). They have spent several years documenting the success stories of communities devastated for various reasons. From their research, they developed the ‘asset-based approach to community development’, the basis of which was the idea that all individuals, families and communities have strengths, that they know what they want, and that they have the capacity to rebuild themselves. The role of the community worker is to facilitate the release of this capacity.

Social workers have known this for many years (Hollis, 1966; Perlman, 1957; Saleebey, 1992) but, along with service providers, funding bodies and government agencies, they still insist on concentrating on what is wrong with and missing in communities and design interventions to ‘meet the community's needs’ supported by communities who know only too well that they must emphasise ‘what they do not have’ to draw attention to their plight. We need to keep ‘asset registers’ instead of ‘needs surveys’. We need to encourage community development committees or women’s groups to compile ‘skills registers’, to list what people in the community can do or contribute. If there is a building project, for example, they would then know exactly who the contractor could employ from within the community for specific jobs, like bricklaying and painting, before looking elsewhere to import the skill.

\(^4\) [Http://www.nwu.edu/IPR/abcd.html](http://www.nwu.edu/IPR/abcd.html) Comprehensive information on the compilation of ‘asset registers’ is available for downloading from this website.
The asset-based approach does not deny that real problems and needs exist but chooses to focus rather on strengths. It is based on the belief that just as individuals achieve what they do by concentrating on using their talents, rather than spending all their time emphasising their deficits (which everyone has), so too do communities. Community groups offer opportunities for community members to come together to share their strengths and to find ways of recognising and expanding on opportunities. The deficit model has tended rather to use a service-based approach critiquing shrinking resources to ‘dis advantaged’, ‘marginalised’, ‘excluded’, ‘vulnerable’, or poor communities. Many communities are indeed poor, vulnerable and marginalised. This is not a result of innate, collective, individual characteristics, but rather the result of a broad range of social injustices which have impacted negatively on the community’s ability to develop its strengths to the maximum. South Africa’s historical legacy of apartheid is a prime example of structural social injustice that has left communities vulnerable and disadvantaged. At the same time however, a blinkered view of just the vulnerability and disadvantage pays little respect to the strengths that have allowed such communities to survive despite these circumstances.

**What will evolve in the application of a strengths perspective is a form of 'gap analysis'**

What is working in one location will lead, eventually, to what can work better in other contexts at other times. Also, the direction and magnitude of further movement or development becomes clear. It would be simplistic, as has been noted, not to recognise a level of deficit if it is in relation to what actually works. To head back towards a critical view of needs then, we may suggest that simply asking what is needed be like running a
marathon race from the finish line backwards towards the start. Establishing what is working acknowledges the journey of the marathon, and looks towards the finish line as a development on each step the runner takes.

**Prevailing myths need to be shattered**

Most myths are built upon erroneous interpretations of reality. A prevailing myth within schools is that parents are disinterested or within communities that people are apathetic. Instead the very real constraints preventing people from participating need to be identified and dealt with so as to facilitate their involvement. The strengths perspective is about myth shattering! In terms of practice implications, one of the steps that the social worker needs to take is to gather myths and check them against people’s perceptions of their strengths and resources. This ‘audit’ will allow for real work on shattering myths and building new positive impressions or versions of myths. The goal is to create a new reality and to build positively on it.

**Ownership is important in a strengths perspective**

By involving people at all levels, for example in the school system – school management, learners, teachers, parents, and community interest groups – people begin to feel that they own the project and that they are part of the solution. While ownership is crucial, it must, however, be handled sensitively. People are often not accustomed to the responsibility of ‘positive ownership’. Social work experience has shown that ‘negative ownership’ (living comfortably within a negative situation, or even ‘co-dependence’ in some contexts) can become comfortable. Sensitivity without being condescending must be applied here, allowing people to take ownership when they are ready, heading the familiar (even if
considered conservative by some) social work guide of ‘staying with your client’ – except now it is ‘with your partner’.

The balancing act: The Alice in Wonderland Syndrome

Using the strengths perspective is a ‘game of balance’. The total focus on strengths can alienate some with real and felt needs. A totally ‘blinkered’ view on strengths, that is, not acknowledging needs in a very tacit way, can alienate people and give those working within this perspective an ‘Alice in Wonderland’ syndrome – not everything is fantastical and idealistically perfect. Deficits and needs are, for many, much like emotional or physical pain. They need to be acknowledged. Again, simplistically ignoring loss or deficits and gaps can be seen to be almost akin to saying to someone in grief ‘don't worry - you are strong and will feel better’. Such statements are often of no real value at all and, in fact, often cause certain frustration in not having one’s pain acknowledged. The balancing act is a difficult one and should be guided by the nature and stage of the partnership, the context and the issues at hand and, of course, by the practice wisdom of the persons engaged in this practice process.

Nurturance

Moving with people to shift to a new paradigm or back to an old one that is inherently human but has been lost somewhere needs a nurturing environment and process. One cannot just talk about the strengths perspective, but rather one needs to guide people through the process – comfort comes from all sorts of places, including negativity (as we have noted). Change is not comfortable and thus a move from negativity and deficit needs to be made or facilitated within a nurturing context, where trust and respect are core elements.
Politics - that old game we know so well

Politics seldom feeds on strengths. Rather politics of almost all sorts tend to feed on deficits and the embellishment of needs and problems to suit political ends. Politicians highlight needs and problems and then give people the assurance that they can help them. This is how they gather a following. Thus extreme care in recognizing political dynamics is required when introducing the strengths perspective. In a sense it is highly political in nature – strength is also power. These connotations can result in a complex play between the participants and the power holders, who often prefer to hold power through expression and amplification of the 'needs' (or indeed deficits) of those whom they control.

History and strengths

History will impact on the speed of transition in the use of strengths. Suspicion, exhaustion, and a range of other issues, some related to the facilitator of the process, can impact upon how quickly the process takes hold. For example, in South Africa, many of these issues need to be taken into account. Cultural variations on what a strength is also need to be considered, for example, modern ‘western’ men who cry may be seen to be strong in their sense of identity, that is a ‘modern man’ who is perceived to be ‘in touch’. In Zulu culture this would be seen as a weakness. The variability of the concept ‘strength’ has to be acknowledged. Another example, which evolved from a Crime Reduction in Schools Project (CRISP) (Gray, 1999) related to a Pageant that took place at a partner school. This was a student driven event in a context where the dominant culture was Zulu. Despite possibly critical and feminist interpretations (and some disdain) for Pageants of any nature, the Pageant was seen as a stage for the exhibition of talent and
strengths, for the creation of role models and the development of self-esteem. Perhaps the most important lesson came out of the section of the Pageant reserved for ‘fat girls’. Here special respect was paid to what was seen in Zulu culture by some as an asset – body size, totally in contradiction to what more ‘westernized’ cultural groups would have affirmed. The recognition awarded to these participants was positive proof that this was a process of discovery of strengths, without ridicule, 'drenched' in respect and positive regard. The lessons are many!

**Conclusion**

In conclusion it is clear that the strengths perspective informs a variety of practice approaches all of which share a strengths-focused conceptual umbrella. This is not to say that injustice, oppression, distress, and unhappiness does not exist, neither does it denigrate the very real role played by social structures in shaping people’s problems and woes. This is an important part of our social awareness and a context for social change. However, it entreats us to be ever mindful of people’s capacity for survival, and never to overlook people’s own understanding of their experience. It humbles us as professionals to get down from our expert perch and privilege the knowledge and experience of those whom we serve. We have provided an overview of the strengths perspective in social work and focused specifically on lessons from practice to show that the strengths perspective is more than mere ‘positive thinking’. It provides us with a perspective from which to view people and situations, which focuses on the positive elements in the situation while not denying that negatives exist. This mind switch makes change and growth an ever-present possibility and gives recognition to the strength and resilience of
people, despite their failings and hardships they face.

References


