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Groups Wiki for 2) Strengths:

Other Wikis:

Search Wiki:

[View](#) [Edit](#) [Links](#) [History](#)[Reload this page](#)

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Playing to your strengths



Do you tend to recognise and use your current strengths? Or do you constantly scrutinise your weaknesses, and think about how you can improve them? The strengths-based approach is a relatively new perspective in psychology, which guides people towards making the most of what they are already good at.

Contents

[Introduction](#)[Suggested First Paper](#)[Activities!](#)

History

Cultural Beliefs

Gap between theory and practice

Applications:

- Occupational
- Clinical
- Educational
- Social Care
 - Youth
 - Alcoholism

Wild Uncritical Claims

Conclusion

References

Introduction

Positive psychology takes a different approach to most forms of psychology as rather than focusing on the problems and deficits of the individual, it focuses on their human strengths, positive behaviour and virtues (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology's basis is that personal happiness is constituted by more than the lack of problems and deficits. Positive psychologists are now trying to empirically map strengths. The strengths-based approach aims to provide a means of classification and measurement similar to the widely accepted classification manuals used for psychological disorders (i.e. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)).

Strength-based approach emphasises the importance of developing the strengths of a person in both clinical and non-clinical settings. It believes that people should not just focus on problems and weaknesses, as strength development is a far more productive and personally rewarding strategy (Baylis, 2004). Despite the emphasis on strength, it is recommended that there should be a balanced focus on both strengths and weaknesses so that individuals can both progress and benefit in many areas (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006).

The strength-based approach will be discussed by looking at its history and culture. The theory behind the strength-based approach will be contrasted with how it is used in practice. The applicability to different areas of practice and its influence on society will be examined and wild uncritical claims in this research area will be highlighted. See below the core virtues.



Core Virtues : Virtue Description

Courage: Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal; examples include bravery, perseverance, and authenticity (honesty)

Justice: Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life; examples

include fairness, leadership, and citizenship or teamwork

Humanity: Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others (Taylor et al., 2000); examples include love and kindness

Temperance: Strengths that protect against excess; examples include forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-control

Wisdom: Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge; examples include creativity, curiosity, judgement, and perspective (providing counsel to others)

Transcendence: Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and thereby provide meaning; examples include gratitude, hope, and spirituality

Suggested First Paper

<http://www.pprc.gg/uploads/strengths.pdf>

A primary article in strength based approach is: ‘Strengths Use as a Predictor of Well-Being and Health-Related Quality of Life’ by Proctor, Maltby and Linley (2011). There is a lot of research on the examination of strengths using the Values-In-Action (VIA) strengths classification system. However, there is little research on understanding how strengths are used and its relationship with well-being, health-related quality of life (HRQOL), and VIA character strengths. The VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire was created by Peterson & Seligman (2004) and measures 24 Character Strengths that define 6 encompassing virtues, including wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. It is a self-report questionnaire of 240 items measuring the degree to which an individual endorses each strength. VIA is largely supported and has shown to have cross-cultural validity (Park et al. 2006). However, others such as MacDonald et al. (2008) have put forth an argument which questions its validity and Aspinwall & Staudinger (2003) have expressed conceptual objections towards VIA (for further detail see Proctor et al., 2011).

135 undergraduate university students took part in this cross-sectional study. They completed measures of strengths use, subjective well-being (SWB), self-esteem, self-efficacy, and HRQOL, and endorsed five top VIA strengths. Results showed that strengths use is a unique predictor of SWB, but not HRQOL. The VIA strengths of hope and zest were significant positive predictors of life satisfaction. The most commonly used VIA strengths were: love, humour, kindness, social intelligence, and open-mindedness. The least used VIA strengths were: leadership, perseverance, wisdom, spirituality, and self-control.

Overall, results suggest an important link between generic strengths use and specific VIA strengths and their impact on SWB. This study found that overall, individuals who use their strengths, have greater subjective well-being and this is related to both mental and physical HRQOL. Due to the findings reported here, it has been suggested that additional research is needed to support the generalizability of previous research that has shown consistent and robust positive associations between the character strengths of hope, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity and life satisfaction. Results found in this study show that only two of the five theorised “strengths of the heart” are related to increased life satisfaction and that one of these strengths is related to reduced life satisfaction. .



This research shows that a strength-based approach is a unique predictor of subjective well-being when controlling for self-esteem and self-efficacy, and that strengths use is also able to predict the unique influence of specific character strengths on subjective well-being. This has extended current knowledge by showing evidence of important theoretical and practical links between existing strengths conceptualizations. It also has important implications for applications in work and education as it will enable people to increase their subjective well-being.

Activities!

Got ten minutes?? Check out this extract of a speech given by world famous Author Marcus Buckingham on the power of applying strengths in schools and at work :

Clip provides an introduction to the strengths movement from one of its founding fathers - Go Put Your Strengths To Work (its a bit cheesy!!): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jo5Sh2DoVY8&feature=related>

In a nutshell:

Find several on-line assessments (free!) at www.authentichappiness.com.

History

Positive psychology has come a long way in the past decade, evolving from an enthused idea to a highly regarded sector within the world of psychology. In a sense the uncovering of this academic finding has sparked a new light towards realising ways of analysing the human operations. The historical trend of

psychology highlights the imperfections of the individual, and what challenges them (Tong, 2011). This includes anxiety, stress, or mental illness. From this advancement we can now take into account these areas and counter them with different techniques and practices to aid the overall wellbeing of the individual.

The strength approach has been shaped and constructed by many theorists; most importantly, the collaboration of Maria Montessori, Carl Rodgers, Abraham Maslow, and Martin Seligman. Each of these individuals has attributed the strengths approach in a different light. Both Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow had ties to the humanistic branch of psychology and focused on the overall wellbeing of the individual. Montessori concentrated more on the educational aspect of the strength approach. She investigated the links between children's success and the strength approach.



Abraham Maslow

Positive psychology pioneer Martin Seligman developed a theory in which individuals focus on their own personal strengths to progress themselves whether it is in the workplace, social situations and decision making (Seligman, 1998). The strength theory's main purpose is to promote success in whatever situation is presented. Seligman and Peterson developed a study where they outlined individual strengths and other characteristics for people to help uncover their own potential (Seligman, 2002).



Martin Seligman

The strength theory has progressed into the social work field, where Seligman's theory is well practised (Seligman, 2002). They emphasize the idea of using the individual's personal strengths and characteristics in order to assist in the process of uncovering any issues or crises affecting the patient. This practice is "an attempt in response to the demand for ending the longstanding conflict between social work values and practice" (Tong, 2011).

Cultural Beliefs

The popularity of the strengths approach has been steadily growing in Western societies, such as the USA and the UK. However, there is some research to

suggest that there are cross-cultural links within this area of positive psychology.



Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman (2005) compared strengths discussed in literature from around the world. They found 6 key strength categories that were consistently valued in Eastern and Western cultures, across time (see Table 1 at top of page).

There are also sub-cultural applications of the strengths approach. For example, it has been used in therapy and counselling settings with individuals who are homosexual, when exploring issues about identity and self-esteem (Mohondro, 2009).

Other sub-cultural groups also benefit from strengths-based approaches in counselling – one example (discussed by Harley and Dillard, 2005) focussed on the identity problems faced by young African-Americans.

Tedmanson and Guerin carried out research into strength-based approaches being used in remote indigenous communities in Australia, and found that it enhanced community as well as individual mental health and wellbeing (Tedmanson and Guerin, 2011). Hays' (2007) approach begins with the assumption that all clients and their cultures have strengths and supports that can be developed and reinforced as part of the therapeutic intervention. She discusses the importance of strengths when used with ethnic minorities to help individuals feel they are not 'less than' citizens.

Tse, Divis and Li (2010) used the strengths model with Chinese migrants experiencing mental illness. Service user participants regarded the strengths model as helpful in assisting their settlement and integration into the host society. It was concluded that to provide culturally responsive strengths-based mental health services to Chinese migrants, it is critical for a number of factors to be taken into account, including language barriers and settlement issues.

Gap between theory and practice

Many books, essays and articles have been published on the strengths based approach since its formation. It has also helped give rise to an entire industry, a profitable one at that,



which promises individuals a more fulfilling and positive life at a price which can wildly vary from a tenner (usually taking the form of a self-help book) to several thousands of pounds which covers anything from therapeutic sessions to group workshops and one-on-one coaching. However, is the strengths approach equally grounded in practice as it is in theory? Is there enough consistent and significant empirical data which can support it?

The most essential claim that every individual has a strength has been partially supported by Allport (1961), Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Diener (2006). Robles (2008) successfully showed that an individual's strength can be used to achieve excellence. For example, by focusing on successful athletes, he wrote about how individuals that excel at certain areas have identified and used their strengths in order to achieve their goals. There is also some evidence showing that strengths can be nurtured and that it is in fact advantageous to use one's strength (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Alternatively, there is also evidence that focusing on the negative aspects of an individual does not consistently lead to improvement. For example, Clark (1998) writes that juvenile delinquents can ask themselves two questions after committing a crime: "How did I get into this mess?" and "How do I get out of it?". For the past century, psychology deemed the first question more important and therefore psychologists tried to find out what caused a youth to commit a crime (negative) rather than try to figure out how change the behaviour (positive) (Waters, 1994). This method proved to be less fruitful than expected and therefore in the past decade or so many counsellors began turning their heads to the second question and choosing to focus on a practice that is more strength-based (Clark, 1998). The theory behind the strength-based approach is not a new concept and is justified well, however it is yet difficult to say the same about the practice as it has only very recently began being implemented.

See the *Wild, Uncritical Claims* section for more discrepancies between theory and practice.

Applications

Occupational

An organisation is more than just the sum of the individual employees that compose it. The most basic, and arguably the most important form of strengths investment lies with each employee. Strength-based organisational development, also known as strengths-based leadership, asserts that employees

are most productive when operating within their strengths (Rath and Conchie 2008). As it is the imperative for any company's management to rectify a situation that produces counterproductive outcomes it is therefore important to develop employee strengths - something that is often overlooked despite being an effective strategy for improving a company's production.

At the core of the strength-based organisational development (SBOD) lies the belief that an employee's potential grows much more when they focus on nurturing their strengths rather than fixing their weaknesses (Rath 2007). Therefore, the aim of the SBOD is to develop an efficient, productive and successful organisation by focusing on developing employee strengths. In other words, increasing organisational success by assisting employees to perform optimally. This concept fits in rather well with the field of Positive Psychology – the scientific study of optimal human functioning (Sheldon, Frederickson, Rathunde, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Focusing on the identification and development of the strengths of an individual, organisation, community, and system, this strength-based approach builds upon what works



for the employee and what he/she is successful in and passionate about. The approach does not ignore weaknesses, as it is commonly believed, but rather focuses on building talents and minimising the effects of weaknesses (Clifton and Harter 2003)

The Gallup Organization, founded in 1958, is committed to studying human nature and behaviour. Having employed the world's leading scientists from various fields, the consultants at Gallup help organisations grow by increasing service users' engagement and maximising employee productivity.

<http://www.gallup.com/home.aspx>

Individual strengths can be identified by monitoring spontaneous actions, yearning or areas of rapid learning. In 1998 Gallup designed a Web-based assessment called the Strengths Finder (available at <http://www.strengthsfinder.com>). The software assists individuals in discovering their strengths by measuring the predictability of patterns in behaviour using results collected from a forced-choice inventory. The results reveal dominant themes of talents which predict the greatest potential for building on the strengths of leaders and followers.

Overall, organisational designs consist of specifying three elements: strategy, structure, and systems (Kiedal, 1995). Strategy is concerned with how the organisation will interact with its competitive environment in order to fulfil the

mission of the organisation. Structure represents the form of the organisation: its people, divisions, departments, and functions. Systems are the sets of interacting elements that receive inputs from the environment and transform them into output discharged into that environment. These three elements of organisational design each exert an effect on how leaders determine the style of leadership they will utilize, demonstrating that organisations must consciously build the desired leadership style into their organisational design. This implies that in order to see strengths-based leadership develop among the leaders of an organisation, it must be built into the design of the organisation.

Organisational leadership (OL) that does not focus on employee strength runs a 91% risk of its workforce not being engaged. On the other hand, OL that does focus on employee strengths has a 73% chance of its employees being engaged (Rath and Conchie 2008). This is essential seeing as an engaged employee is one who forms a broad and deep connection with their organisation (Gebauer and Lowman 2008). Engaged employees are more productive and contribute to organisational success. Clifton and Harter (2003). A study by Buckingham (2007) found that when individuals accept promotions that deal them away from their strengths they become less engaged, eventually awakening one day to find themselves unfulfilled, bored, drained and frustrated. The results were consistent in a study done by Arakawa & Greenberg (2007) who showed once again that strength-based leadership is correlated with increases in employee optimism, engagement and project performance.



To conclude, strengths-based leadership is the culmination of an innovative movement asserting the importance of strengths with over 30 years of research. Yet many organisations are still not actively leveraging the strengths of their leaders and followers. Fewer than two out of ten Americans tend to believe that they work in a role that utilises their strengths most of the time (Buckingham 2008). Over half of all American employees believe that they will experience bigger gains by fixing their weaknesses rather than building upon their strengths (Buckingham

2007). And despite the available research demonstrating the benefits of strengths-based initiatives for individual and organisational success, most organisations are not engaging their employees using a strengths-based leadership model and most individuals don't even realise the growth potential of building upon their strengths.

Clinical

Traditionally, mental health practitioners have tended to focus on symptoms, illness and dysfunction using diagnostic tools such as DSM or ICD. Similarly, social models of mental health have attributed mental health issues to negative social factors such as poverty, domestic violence, unemployment and so on, drawing more towards deficits than strengths. Counsellors and psychotherapists may believe that mental health problems are caused by the individual's thoughts attitudes and beliefs and may work with them to challenge these negative beliefs. However, again, the focus is on 'faulty thinking'. Over the years there has been a shift in perspective with the introduction of the strengths-based approach. It has been implemented widely

in the design and delivery of mental health services in New Zealand, Canada, North America, Japan and increasingly so in the UK (McCormack, 2007).

The Strengths Model (Rapp 2006) allows for new and creative ways to work with clients that honour their skills, competencies, and talents as opposed to their deficits. It may be described as 'agnostic' as it does not dispute with or subscribe to any particular model or theory of mental health. The patient's survival skills, abilities, knowledge, resources and desires are all examined in therapy in order to find out how they can assist in meeting their goals. A basic assumption of the strengths perspective is that human beings have the capacity for growth and change and this can be achieved over time through the various stages of therapy (Early & GlenMaye, 2000).

The Scottish Recovery Network

Strength-Centred Therapy proposed by Wong (2006) is focused on the key aspect of 'social constructionism' which views client's subjective views about their own pathology and well-being as more important in therapy than the expert opinion of the therapist. In this way, clients and therapists work together to develop new meanings for clients' experiences and learn to expand their strength vocabularies to help them view their life experiences more positively.

Therapy consists of weekly sessions over the course of a few weeks or months. It is divided into 4 stages; Explicitising, Envisioning, Empowering and Evolving.

Explicitising

The first stage aims to help clients to recognise their existing character strengths without overlooking the initial problems or concerns for which they went to therapy in the first place. This is achieved through validating clients' concerns in a way that also highlights their strengths. For example, a client who goes to therapy feeling depressed could have these feelings validated by also pointing out the client's courage and bravery for having shown up for therapy in the first place. Another effective strategy is to view an apparent character flaw as a positive aspect of an individual's personality. For example, a child with ADHD who is described negatively by his teachers as 'a daydreamer who does not stay focused on the topic at hand' maybe turned around and seen as a child who has the potential ability to be creative if he uses it appropriately.

Envisioning

In the second phase of therapy, clients will identify the strengths they seek to develop and how these will help reach their therapy goals. Another approach is the use of a sentence completion task such as "I am more likely to achieve my goal of if I am a(an) person". The words used by clients to complete the sentence will likely be related to character strengths. The therapist will then encourage clients to elaborate on the meanings of these strengths to ensure that the client and therapist are on the same line of thought.

Empowering

The third stage focuses on motivating clients as they begin to believe that using their strengths can positively affect their lives. This may be achieved by incorporating creative exercises for the development of habits which in turn

will lead to an effective use of strengths such as volunteering at a charity in order to promote kindness and generosity. Clients are also stimulated to surround themselves with people who will support them in the strengths-development process. Finally, this phase will focus on determining in which context the client's strengths will be useful and when they may become problematic. For example, a client who is working on honesty and genuineness as strengths may find them useful in a number of contexts but telling her boss that he has bad breath may result in her finding herself out of work. This is why combining honesty with social intelligence in this context is important.

Evolving

This is the termination stage of the therapy and involves the process of making strengths-development a never-ending process. Progress is reviewed and celebrated and together the therapist and client identify areas for further growth as well as ways in which clients can use their strengths to deal with future problems or challenges that may arise.

Educational

The strength approach can be applied in education and can be particularly effective as it is at a critical developmental stage of a person's life where they have to make key choices about their future. A good place to study character strengths is University, as it provides many opportunities for students to develop on a variety of psychological dimensions including values, competences, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, identity, self-concept, and personality traits (e.g., Astin, 1993; Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). It has been found that there is a link between character strengths in youth and academic success, health promoting behaviour and life satisfaction (Park & Peterson, 2006; Ma et al, 2008; Lounsbury et al, 2009). However, in education, recognition of strength is fairly narrow (Park, 2009).

Character strengths are regarded highly in many different areas, including industry and society. However, education focuses on academic measures of success which may not be sufficient for life after education. What needs to be asked is whether strengths identification could enable individuals to progress further, who otherwise would fall through the academic net. Widening the application of strength outside of academic success would allow greater application of skills for employers and wider society (Hirschorn, 2011).

Studies have found that academic failure may negatively affect young people's motivation to pursue their work and increase their life potential. Strength-based measures of success could be an additional part to education (Hirschorn, 2011). Using strength-based measures in education also links into the social aspect of youths (discussed later on).

Example:

Teenage parents are a specific group of the youth population and this is a good example of how education can help the social aspect of youths. Interventions for teen pregnancy seem to fail continually (Cater and Coleman, 2006). An interesting twist to this apparent failure is that teen pregnancy may not be accidental, rather it is planned. Motivation behind teenagers planning a pregnancy includes factors like poor academic performance and poor self-efficacy and a desire to prove capability: "Bringing up a baby was perceived as providing a sense of purpose, one that provided a sense of capability and satisfaction, and was better than having a low paid, dead-end job" (Cater and Coleman, 2006, p. 65).

Self-



efficacy:

Self-efficacy beliefs apply to a wide range of young people in education. Academically struggling students are likely to have poor self-efficacy which leads to frustration and failure (Wilson and Michaels, 2006). Academic achievement is positively associated with self-efficacy which helps students to make future life choices (Pajares, 2009). To help prevent poor self-efficacy, a strength based approach should be considered as this will go beyond an academic approach of broadening measures of success. Applying a strength-based approach to education would allow students to develop character strengths which are valued by industry and society. It would allow every student to succeed in the areas of their choice and make life decisions based on this strength. This would enhance self-efficacy and motivate all young people equally (with or without academic success) to develop their skills.

Life Satisfaction:

A common opinion of positive psychology is that character strengths contribute to individual well-being and happiness. Therefore, higher levels of character strengths should be associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009). However, this has been contested and it has been questioned whether people should focus on developing only their strengths, or should they address both strengths and weaknesses. If you just focus on your strengths then you are not wasting time and energy on trying to perform better with unsatisfactory results. However if you focus on your weaknesses as well you can become a more well-rounded person with abilities in different areas which you can apply to different areas of your life. A study has been performed to determine which method should be used when teaching positive psychology (Diessner, Rust & Reade, 2009). The students were either assigned to develop two character strengths or to work on developing one strength and one weakness. However, no significant difference was found between these two groups. Students' life satisfaction is equal regardless of whether they are working on established strengths or on their strengths and relative weaknesses.

Life satisfaction increased when assigned to work on character strengths and weaknesses, compared to the comparison group which did not develop any parts of their character. However, this cannot automatically be attributed to the

parts of their character. However, this cannot automatically be attributed to the result of working on the strengths and weaknesses as it could be due to a Hawthorne effect of the intervention group receiving more attention. For future studies, a placebo group should be included involving writing something that is not about strengths and getting warm comments from a professor, to see if simply writing and receiving encouragement increases life satisfaction as much as working on character strengths (cf. Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, about simply writing childhood memories as the comparison condition). Another group should be included who just focus on their weaknesses to see whether this affects self-satisfaction (Diessner, Rust & Reade, 2009).

These findings demonstrate that regarding the teaching of positive psychology a mixture of exercises can be given that focus only on strengths or on strengths and weaknesses without life satisfaction being affected. Philosophically there may be some benefit to addressing both strengths and weaknesses (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Lopez, Snyder, & Rasmussen, 2003; Peterson, 2006a; Peterson & Park, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), even though empirically there appears to be no advantage (Diessner, Rust & Reade, under review).

Created by the VIA Institute, this 8 minute documentary depicts character strengths in action in an elementary school classroom. Includes interviews with students who actively learn about and use their strengths, and interviews with teachers and parents. Embodies an approach to the classroom of creating a culture of learning -- a learning environment based in strengths for each child to realize the fullest potential and be at their best.

Features Dr. Neal Mayerson, Chairman of the VIA Institute, who discusses the value of creating a culture of learning based in character strengths. Also integrates interview clips with Jay Sharp, a 4th grade teacher at Bella Vista Elementary School in Salt Lake City, Utah. He discusses his child-centered approach to the classroom based firmly in the VIA character strengths.

Social Care

Youth

Different character strengths are associated with different developmental stages. Youth strengths include hope, teamwork, and zest, while adult strengths include appreciation of beauty, authenticity, leadership, and open-mindedness (Park & Peterson, 2006). This reflects cognitive and social maturation influences and different developmental needs across the lifespan.

For youths, development of their strengths is important for their social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and moral abilities (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). The building and enhancement of competence and character strengths can prevent negative outcomes (Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Botvin, & Diaz, 1995) and are also important outcomes in their own right, suggestive of positive development and thriving (Kornberg & Caplan, 1980; Park, 2004; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1997).

Although competence and strength often refer to the achievement of socially valued goals, it does not necessarily have moral or ethical constraints (Park & Peterson, 2006). Recently, morality among youths has received increasing attention from the general public, policy makers, educators, and parents (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Developing strengths (kind-heartedness, honesty, fairness courage, and wisdom) is a goal of all parents and societies (Park & Peterson, 2006). Despite societal enthusiasm in promoting character and virtues through character education programmes in schools and various after-school youth development programmes, concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of these programmes. There needs to be an underlying theoretical framework for character development (one led by developmental theory and research) to guide the design of programmes (Kohn, 1997).



The VIA-Youth has been developed to help youths identify their “signature strengths” relative to their own other strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Helping youth to use their signature strengths may provide them a route to a psychologically fulfilling life (Seligman, 2002; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Eventually, this information can provide a concrete basis for designing effective youth development programmes which build on their existing strengths and educate them in lessons of morality.

Alcoholism

The Strengths Approach in substance abuse treatment has been formed on the basis of The Challenge model (Wolin and Wolin 1993) and Motivational Interviewing (Miller and Rollnick 2002) which has brought an important Strengths perspective into substance abuse treatment. It has been referred to as one of the latest ‘trends’ in the field of substance abuse therapy as well as in

psychotherapy in general.

The Strengths Approach particularly offers help to the work of substance abuse programming for several reasons. It focuses on the beginning of new behaviours i.e. What will the client do instead of getting drunk? Rather than the end of unwanted behaviours i.e. 'Don't drink!' In 2005 the Center for Strength-based Strategies engaged in qualitative research of video-taping substance-involved clients in short counselling sessions with staff. They then completed word counts for each session. They found that staff was out-talking clients by a 3:1 margin. For example, in a brief 20 minute session, 2,768 words were spoken between the staff and the client. The staff spoke a hefty 2,087 words out of this total while the client was only allowed 681 words. Therefore the Center is stressing the need to implement 'The Strengths-based approach', which focuses on clients becoming the prominent speakers; allowing for a more effective treatment outcome.

The Strengths-Based Approach falls under the 'Problem-Solving Approach' in which the therapist serves as the expert and a thorough understanding of the problem is necessary before beginning treatment. McMahon (1990) described it as a way for the client to learn a new skill or method to resolve a problem. However, because identifying the problem and its root lies at the core of problem solving, this can pose a challenge when working with substance abusing clients who don't view their use of substances as problematic. Therefore, a more motivational approach such as motivational interviewing is the treatment of choice when problem solving with substance abusers. This approach particularly aids clients in increasing motivation to produce change while focusing on clients' strengths instead of their deficiencies.

Some have been found to mistakenly confuse the strength-based approaches as falling under the solution-building philosophy which focuses on having the clients identify how they would like their lives to be despite the current presence of their problems. Although the strength-based approaches highly value the clients and what they bring to the treatment, the overall guiding philosophy in strength-based approaches remains on first understanding the problem at hand and then determining how to best solve it.

Wild Uncritical Claims

- The strengths approach yields long-term success. The studies performed on students, employees and managers have so far shown that using the strengths approach results in a short-term increase in productivity, lecture/work attendance and satisfaction levels but it is still questionable whether this has long-term benefits (Arakawa & Greenberg, 2007; Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master, 2006). It is a possibility that the effects are significant but short-lived. There is a need for longer follow-up studies, perhaps even ones that will span a lifetime.
- The strengths approach works because individuals learn to first find positive traits within themselves and then excel at them. Although there is evidence that individuals exposed to the strengths theory show a significant increase in subjective well-being and in the case of students, better lecture attendance, it is not necessarily as a result of the approach itself (Park, Peter & Seligman, 2002). It could also be a result of the Pygmalion effect – a self-fulfilling prophecy in which people perform better merely because greater expectations are placed on them.

- The strengths approach is a separate practice from other fields in positive psychology. The boundaries of the strengths approach are quite blurred and inconsistent. Some psychologists take a more “pure” approach to the subject by focusing only on the strengths of an individual and not the weaknesses whilst others maintain that it is impossible to develop one's strengths without taking not and reducing one's weaknesses. It is also not entirely clear how the strengths approach is different in matters other than vocabulary from a general positive thinking approach.
- The strengths approach helps an individual not only realise one's strengths but actually increase them. However, certain strengths are difficult to measure empirically and can be limited to self-evaluation which is by no means objective. It is possible that the strengths approach merely inflates narcissistic qualities in the individual falsely leading him/her to ignore important weaknesses. Just because an individual believes he is compassionate, and rates it as a major strength does not mean this is true. And even if it were it would be very difficult to measure changes in his/her compassion levels over time.

Conclusion

In a world that seems naturally predisposed to telling us in which areas we are weak, there is clearly a need to educate the world about positive psychology in practice and the importance of understanding and focusing on strengths. When people become aware of their talents through measurement and feedback, they have a strong position from which to view their potential. Strengths based development stands at the forefront of positive psychology in practice and offers much to professional psychologists, educators, managers and others who wish to work from a positive psychological perspective.

Patricia Deegan whilst writing in the forward to Rapp (2006) states that strengths based practice is “a powerful antidote to the high cost of the deficits approach”. In this model strength is not constructed as some super-heroic state of invulnerability, but rather we learn that even when people are present with obvious vulnerabilities, they also have strengths. Their strengths lie in their passions, skills, and interest in their relationships and environment. Solution-focused strength based practice is not just about asking new interesting questions or recording a service users skills during assessment, it is also a mind-set - a lens through which everything is viewed and everything is changed. It helps the patient to see the world as a world of possibilities, curiosity and new expectations in which he/she is an active, as opposed to passive, participant. It reveals perspectives that were previously invisible.

Contrary to popular belief, the goal of the strengths-based approach is not to eliminate the need to address barriers such as poverty, abuse, neglect, and other hardships that are very real and devastating for too many people (Benson, 1997). It does not simply focus on the positives whilst ignoring concerns or fabricating strengths that do not exist. Rather, it helps an individual to figure out ways to recognise and utilise genuine strengths while at the same time building on existing competencies and effectively addressing concerns (Smith, 2006). What communities may need is a paradigm balance in which deficit reduction efforts are matched in intensity and power with asset-building efforts (Benson, 1997). Strength-based interventions recognise that problems need to be addressed but as Duchowski and Koutch (1996) show

problems need to be addressed but, as Duchowski and Kuitash (1990) show, emphasise that “strengths and capacities are the building blocks for change and should receive primary emphasis.”

Ultimately, the strengths-based philosophy seeks to promote self-efficacy and help nurture an individual's belief in their own abilities and competencies. Thus, the client is helped to first begin and then undertake a transformative journey from service user to service director.

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Introduction

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