Strengths Perspective Policy Practice: Conceptual Underpinnings, Development, and Next Steps

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Even before there was a formal name for the concept of rooting social policy in a recognition of people's strengths and goals, there were efforts to do just that. Early social workers and their allies who campaigned for women's suffrage, did so from an understanding of the tremendous contributions women make to public life—and to increase their legal capacity to contribute even more. Native American leaders who fought for land rights and cultural sovereignty understood well that only policy that honored their strengths could help them meet their challenges (Leeds & Gunsaulis, 2012). African-American social work pioneers who fostered mutual aid and sought to dismantle institutional barriers (Carlton-LaNey, 1999) were pursuing capacity-building grounded in community strengths, even if there was seldom academic documentation or professional legitimation of this impact. Today, then, as social workers celebrate the 30th anniversary of the formal naming of the strengths perspective and its application to policy practice, this commemoration begins from historical and cultural humility.

Acknowledging the great debt today's strengths-based social policy practitioners owe to those who laid this earlier foundation, this chapter focuses primarily on conceptual developments, research, and implementation initiatives from the past three decades. During this time, scholars and practitioners have catalyzed more systematic, extensive, and better-resourced attention to the importance of centering policy change in people's own strengths and to the difference a shift in emphasis, from deficits to strengths, can make in the process and products of policymaking and,

then, in people's lives. The 2019 Proclamation by the Governor of Kansas, *Recognizing the 30th Anniversary of the Strengths Perspective for Social Work Practice,* speaks to this transformative impact, highlighting the strengths perspective's contributions to state policy changes designed to support people in the community instead of institutions.

Elaborating on the work that facilitated this progress and the development of strengths-based policy practice, this chapter discusses strategies practitioners, scholars, and social work students, in collaboration with their clients, have used to (1) build connections between the conceptual underpinnings of the strengths perspective and policy practice and (2) support more widespread use of strengths-based approaches in policy practice. After some background on the strengths perspective, the chapter examines initiatives in the areas of conceptual development, social work education, research, practical implementation, and evaluation. The piece concludes with a consideration of ways these efforts have laid the foundation for further investigation and application and suggests potential approaches that may help to propel future work in this arena, increase use of a strengths approach in policymaking, and improve clients' lives.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

The strengths perspective is a philosophical approach to social work that centers the goals, strengths, and resources of people and their environment, rather than their problems and pathologies, in the helping process (Saleebey, 1992). While initially discussed primarily in the context of more clinically-oriented social work practice, the strengths perspective's demonstrated power to reframe and renew micro social work practice captured the attention of social policy scholars and practitioners who had long believed that many needed social policy reforms stemmed from an unproductive emphasis on perceived personal failings, rather than people's inherent capacity and evident resilience. They believed that focusing on people's goals and actively assisting them in acquiring resources are keys to effective policymaking, and they were drawn to the approach as an embodiment of core social work values of self-determination and social justice. Consistent with these aims, strengths-based policy practice differs in-process and intended product from that which is deficit-centered. Specifically, the process of strengths-based policy development privileges input from a much wider array of people affected by the policy. Strengths-based policy practice is more than mere solicitation of ideas, however; its utilization demands that clients be involved throughout policy development, implementation, and evaluation. This process promotes hope and a positive perception of the environment. It has the potential to profoundly shape the product—the policies that are ultimately implemented.

As has been recognized in other eras, the economic and political contexts prevalent during the ascendance of the strengths perspective shaped practice and influenced conceptual development, in a symbiotic fashion (Chapin, 1999). For example, the

political and economic drivers that propelled the movement to serve clients outside of expensive institutional settings influenced the work of scholars involved in the conceptual development of the strengths perspective in the 1980s. In turn, the appeal of the strengths perspective helped to facilitate policy changes that might otherwise have been less likely. Practitioners were challenged to help integrate people who had been institutionalized back into their communities. Policy and practice approaches that emphasized strengths were key to this effort. They built on clients' goals and visions for their lives, leveraged informal resources and supports, and sought to remove barriers. Case managers trained in the strengths perspective who worked with clients being served in the community provided real-world insights to help root policy development in clients' lived experiences. They incorporated peer support and collective action into treatment plans and reoriented organizational imperatives to privilege client outcomes. They fought for the resources necessary for deinstitutionalization initiatives to succeed, and they centered the struggles in clients' needs and goals. Today, as financing required to fully realize the aims of strengths-based deinstitutionalization has failed to materialize, strengths-based policy practitioners continue to press for these resources and assert this framing.

Alongside the scholars whose publications were among the first to formally name a strengths perspective, state agency staff, social work practitioners, and client advocates collaborated to improve policies that supported the growth of home- and community-based services. The goal was to create a rebalanced long-term care system that allowed clients to receive services in the community rather than in an institution. A series of policy fora at the University of Kansas brought together client advocates, state bureaucrats, legislators, researchers, and practitioners to hear about best practices and policy changes implemented in other states (Fast & Chapin, 1992; Rapp & Chamberlain, 1990; Rapp & Topp, 1991). This provided the opportunity for these stakeholders to put their heads together to formulate the next steps in transforming state policy and practice. These fora and statewide committees that grew out of them developed strategies to implement policies that reflected clients' preference for home and community-based services and supported their right to self-determination while building on client and community strengths and resources.

Informed by these experiences, the scholars active in this work began to chart the conceptual underpinnings for strengths-based policy practice. In 1995, Chapin published the first article reformulating strengths perspective tenets to guide policy practice (Chapin, 1995). Shaped by lessons from the field, this seminal publication advanced the strengths perspective as a valuable lens for reexamining social policy and reworking the policy change process. Consistent with other applications of the strengths perspective, the strengths-based approach to social policy does not deny the existence of social problems. Instead, it reconsiders their social construction. Rather than defining problems in ways that emphasize people's individual challenges, structural and environmental barriers are positioned as the problems demanding the public response of social policy. Further, strengths-based policy development centers on clients' stories of how they have coped with these barriers and cele-

brates their utility in the policy process (Chapin, 1995, p. 511). Perhaps the most crucial distinction in policy practice from a strengths-based lens is the difference in roles of policy practitioners and those the policy is intended to help. As this foundational piece explains:

> Under the strengths approach, there is no longer the implication that an expert policymaker will inform the public and develop policy goals. Rather, the helper gives voice to clients' perspectives, helps negotiate definitions and goals that include these perspectives, and continues the focus on the client as collaborator (Chapin, 1995, p. 510)

That initial article on strengths-based policy practice was the foundation for a text, now in its fifth edition, that fleshes out the concepts, highlights policymaking that reflects these tenets, and provides exemplars of how strengths principles could guide policy practice in arenas including civil rights, health and mental health, child welfare and aging (Chapin & Lewis, 2020). Between the publication of the initial article in 1995 and the 2020 text, conceptual underpinnings for strengths-based policy practice have been further synthesized, based on input from clients and from faculty, students, policymakers, and practitioners working to develop and implement strengths-based policy in a variety of fields. For example, Perkins and Tice (2001) developed a historical lens for considering whether policies built on strengths and how they might be improved. In 2006, Rapp, Pettus, and Goscha helped to delineate strengths-based policy practice principles. Illustrating the applicability of strengths-based scholarship to policy, their work continues to inform thinking about strengths-based policy practice. Indeed, the principles presented in this chapter build on that work. In 2008, Hill examined barriers to implementing a strengths approach to policy practice, illustrated how a strengths-based framework could be used to evaluate youth policy and suggested ways the barriers to more widespread implementation might be addressed. Many other scholars also contributed to the development of strengths-based policy practice. However, at its core, the drive to develop strengths-based policy practice has been fueled by social work clients and other most-affected populations, whose views of their own lives have always had room to acknowledge both their power and their struggles. A value base that privileges their perspectives is at the heart of the strengths approach, and indeed, of all social work. This value-based foundation is reflected in the outline of the reformulated strengths perspective policy practice principles presented below, to more fully illuminate the current conceptual underpinnings of strengths-based policy practice.

Strengths Perspective Policy Practice Principles (Chapin & Lewis, 2020)

- Client strengths and goals are legitimate starting points for developing social policy. Problems and deficits are not given center stage.
- Clients' perspectives concerning their problems, strengths, and goals should inform the social construction of needs.

- Social policies and programs should build on individual and community strengths and resources and remove structural barriers that disadvantage the target group. When making claims for benefits and services, social workers should emphasize the structural barriers that create unequal opportunities and impair clients' abilities to meet their needs.
- Claims for benefits and services that allow people to overcome these barriers are made based on the right to equal access to resources and opportunities to meet their needs and reach their goals, regardless of gender, race, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other characteristics.
- The role of the social worker is not that of the expert, but of collaborator and resource person who helps draw attention to the perspectives of the target group and supports clients in advocating for policies to improve their lives.
- Social policy goals and design should focus on access, choice, and opportunities that can help empower the target group to meet their needs and goals.
- The target group should be involved in all phases of policy development. The process as well as the product, or outcome, of policy development, will be enhanced by their involvement.
- Evaluation should center on the assessment of client outcomes.

When attempting to craft new policy or evaluate existing policy based on these principles, each principle should be considered and consistency between principles assessed (Rapp, Pettus, & Goscha, 2006). However, it is unlikely that a given policy will exemplify all these principles. The policy process is messy, and compromises are typically necessary. Strengths-based policy practitioners collaborate closely with clients to navigate these currents, with the aim of producing policies that more closely adhere to these principles and promote social justice and self-determination.

DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Given this background, in the following segment, we will examine initiatives in social work education, research, implementation, and evaluation that have been advanced to help create the foundation for further development of the strengths approach to policy practice and its use to alter policy and improve well-being. They reflect a variety of approaches to concept building and dissemination. Many of these initiatives are ongoing.

The Role of Education

Introducing students to strengths-based policy practice tenets at the BSW, MSW, and Ph.D. levels is a crucial step in promoting the use of these principles in policy analysis, development, implementation, and evaluation. Moreover, student feedback can help faculty scholars further develop the conceptual base, as when stu-

dents' strengths-based policy practice illuminates different aspects of the policy process and, then, reveals opportunities for clients' experiences and preferences to be centered in those moments. In the classroom, faculty can model a strengths-based approach by encouraging students to assess their own strengths, goals and resources. Such an assessment often helps students to see themselves with strengths sufficient to take action in the policy arena and to press for strengths-based policies and programs that support social work values. Distinct from foundation social work policy courses that focus primarily on policy analysis, many strengths-based policy instructors facilitate opportunities for students to engage in strengths-based policy practice. Students are also challenged to experiment with implementing strengths-based policy practice concepts in their field placements, which often involves collaboration with clients and policymakers. For example, in one of the author's policy classes, students in small groups were tasked with developing a policy practice action plan and chose to focus their work on policies and programs in the high school where some of the students were placed. These policy students had noted a rise in teen pregnancies and heard public concerns about this issue. To explore this trend and possible policy responses, they began by considering the issue from the perspective of those most-affected—teenagers. The policy students examined high school students' concerns about their sex education classes, particularly what they perceived as insufficient content on LGBTQ+ experiences and on birth control options. The policy students developed and executed a plan designed to change school policy so that a more comprehensive sex education policy could be developed. They met with students at the high school and college levels, including groups representing LGBTQ+ students, to get their ideas about needed changes and options for pursuing them. Drawing on the clients' voices and on the strengths of their student team, they framed the issue of teen pregnancy as the teens themselves saw it, and they positioned adolescents as the central stakeholders in this often-contentious issue. The policy students developed informational programs to increase public support for changes to sex education programming. They met with their school board members and state legislators to advocate for more comprehensive sex education. After being involved in this project, one policy student successfully ran for the school board and was instrumental in developing additional policies that gave voice to the concerns of students and parents. Students involved in such strengths-based policy practice initiatives shared insights with other students and with faculty working to advance a strengths-based approach to policy practice. This input helped ground conceptual development and flesh out more complete principles. For example, their experiences pointed to the need to emphasize the importance of an effective feedback loop so that client input and outcomes will be continually gathered as part of policy evaluation and improvement.

This iterative process paralleled advances in strengths-based direct services. There, growing recognition of the transformative potential of services rooted in the strengths approach sparked state investment in case manager education via state-wide strengths-based training. When KU faculty and staff conducted such training, they had ample opportunity to gather practitioner feedback on their challenges and

successes, as well as the strengths-based policy changes needed to support their work. These insights, combined with practitioner feedback gathered in regular interaction in other settings, were used to build more robust conceptual underpinnings. Similarly, when students placed in Area Agencies on Aging developed training for their coworkers in the strengths perspective and its application to policy practice to supplement other strengths-based training, practitioners' experiences—informed by their advocacy alongside clients—strengthened the foundation of strengths-based policy practice, as well.

As is often the case, other developments supported the incorporation of these concepts into social work education. A strengths-based policy practice text was first published in 2007 and has been used by instructors around the country to introduce students to strengths perspective policy principles. In addition to examples of how social work students and practitioners have engaged in strengths-based policy practice, the text also includes tangible resources to steep students in a strengths-based approach to policy study and practice, such as an action plan template and a framework for examining historical social policies through the strengths perspective. The text is accompanied by interactive case studies that help students think through how strengths perspective principles may be implemented in policy practice and to reconsider the aims of a policymaking endeavor. Instructors can use these resources to provide a chance for students to experiment with the principles in a virtual environment.

At the Ph.D. level, students bring a level of sophistication to their critique of the use of the strengths perspective in policy analysis and development that can be especially potent for identifying gaps and potential areas for further work. Of course, a lack of sufficient research that builds on the strengths approach is chief among gaps identified. Some doctoral students have incorporated strengths perspective concepts into their dissertations and pointed to needed policy and program changes, particularly in services for older adults, informed by the strengths perspective (Macmillan, 2005; Leedahl, 2013; Sellon, Chapin, & Leedahl, 2017).

Research, Implementation, and Evaluation

Research into the needs and strengths of the target population is often a preliminary step in developing strengths-based policies (Hutchinson, 2019). Such research is critical in developing strengths-based policy practice options. As Hutchinson, who researched coping strategies of women in Mozambique, points out, understanding the resources utilized by marginalized individuals and communities to cope with a particular challenge creates a foundation for determining the responsibilities of governments and organizations to provide crucial social policy investments. In turn, this can inform the next steps in policy practice. This approach ensures that policy changes address systemic challenges, rather than assuming an individual or community's strengths are independent of outside forces and solely adequate for equitable change (Hutchinson, 2019).

Research has also focused on the efficacy of strengths-based policies and practices (Chapin et al., 2013). However, research to test the efficacy of the application of a strength-based approach to policy practice is a greater challenge. Each strengths-based policy principle requires translation into identifiable actions in the policymaking process, an often elusive and potentially contested process. The first two principles, "client strengths and goals are legitimate starting points for developing social policy. Problems and deficits are not given center stage," and "clients' perspectives concerning their problems, strengths, and goals should inform the social construction of needs," have been operationalized to some extent in the requirements for patient participation that have been set for PCORI (Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute) grant recipients. However, until there is a stronger literature base examining each element of the principles, different researchers could reasonably differ in their evaluation of the extent a policy reflects strengths-based principles.

Scholars attempting to engage in this type of research face challenges of funding and time constraints. For example, when strengths-based policies were implemented to support a peer support program for older adults, the research imperative was to do program evaluation that would help to get this initiative recognized as an evidence-based practice (Chapin et al., 2013). Even though the strengths-based process that supported policies leading to statewide implementation was briefly discussed in research publications evaluating this initiative, the reality was that neither funding nor time was made available to undertake in-depth research on the effects of a strengths-based policy process. To satisfy ethical mandates for responsible scholarship and realize the substantial promise of strengths-centered inquiry, the field needs research funding that prioritizes policy practice research centered on clients' needs and assets and is sufficient to facilitate the assessment of fidelity to strengths perspective principles, as well as the client outcomes produced by the policy change.

While such well-funded in-depth future research is sorely needed, social workers today can readily implement less complex policy evaluation by focusing on key criteria reflected in strengths-based policy practice principles. Though each principle is important and can be used to develop criteria for analyzing initiatives' focus on strengths, three are particularly critical:

- Extent to which target group is involved in each stage of research, policy development, implementation and evaluation;
- Extent to which social policy goals and design focus on access, choice, and opportunities that can help empower the target group to meet their needs and goals;
- Were client outcomes assessed and used to drive policy and program changes?

These criteria are relatively easily evaluated, and such evaluation can help social workers determine whether they should support the policy. Again, demonstrating

the iterative nature of theory refinement, such research can also inform strengths-based policy practice, by pointing to elements of the policy where practitioners can target initiatives to improve it.

CRITIQUE OF THE STRENGTH APPROACH TO POLICY PRACTICE

An examination of strengths-based policy practice must include a discussion of limitations. Continued critical inquiry is indispensable to further development and consistent with the motivations underlying the conceptual development of the strengths perspective itself, which centered on elevating clients' needs and perspectives, rather than advancing any particular academic interest. Although the strengths-based approach to policy practice has many benefits, its emphasis on including diverse voices and reworking processes can take extra time and may produce an unwieldy array of options. While the examples provided here suggest that novel ideas can result in more effective policy, some client groups and circumstances may prioritize expediency. Certainly, those considerations should enter the practitioners' calculus.

Additionally, there is scant empirical research into the efficacy of strengths-based policy practice. At times, this is because strengths-based policy approaches have such intuitive appeal that rigorous examination comparing their outcomes has been deemed unnecessary. In other cases, economic, political, or social imperatives have precluded empirical investigation. However, research to determine the impact of a strengths-based approach on client outcomes is particularly needed. This research should incorporate clients' perspectives on 'success'.

Some have critiqued the strengths perspective as derivative. While celebrating the unique contributions of many aspects of the strengths approach, strengths-based policy practitioners should consider connections between the strengths perspective and other approaches to social policy practice. This recognizes the assets others have brought to the field and ensures that practitioners bring the fullest complement of promising perspectives to their crucial work. Notably, here, the strengths approach has been critiqued for failure to sufficiently acknowledge its historical roots, including those emanating from a variety of empowerment approaches. Work to examine commonalities with and divergence from the empowerment approach has been undertaken, and more work in this arena is needed (Cox & Chapin, 2002).

Finally, some may argue that the strengths approach to policy practice may simply not be muscular enough to be relevant in the current, polarized, and often paralyzed, age. A pathology focus seems to be the order of the day. However, policy practice approaches built on the values of social justice and self-determination are needed now more than ever. Recent policymaking history illustrates vividly the truth that has made the strengths perspective such an indispensable tool for other aspects of social work practice: while focusing singularly on our problems does not

bring us closer to solutions, building on and leveraging people's authentic assets often can.

NEXT STEPS

The conceptual work of developing specific steps to operationalize strengths-based policy practice principles has begun. This work needs further attention from scholars studying strengths-based policy practices and their effects (Chapin, 2017). It is likely that most progress will be made by taking one principle, devising ways to measure the extent of its use, and then examining its impact on the final product. For example, researchers could examine PCORI grant-funded initiatives where robust patient participation is a mandate to determine if the research contributed to policy and program change, and then, how patient involvement influenced the policymaking process. Such research could provide insight into the efficacy of the principle, "The target group should be involved in all phases of policy development. The process as well as the product, or outcome, of policy development, will be enhanced by their involvement." Methods of research on other principles also need to be devised and then used to examine impact as well as interaction between principles, despite continuing time and funding limitations.

Another critical step in advancing the use of a strengths approach in policy practice is to help individuals, groups, and communities most affected by policies increase their capacity to participate in policymaking. Social workers who have been educated to work with groups and communities and are conversant with the policymaking process can make this knowledge available to community members. This is in keeping with the principle, "The role of the social worker is not that of expert but of collaborator and resource person who helps draw attention to the perspectives of the target group and supports clients in advocating for policies to improve their lives." Social workers can provide leadership training, orient people to policymaking timelines and procedures, support groups in refining their messages and communications channels, and leverage organizational resources to complement grassroots strategies.

Further, since research is often an initial stage of the policy process, social workers can help client groups understand how research can aid them in documenting their experiences, how they can assist in that work, and how such research can be used to shape policy. Methods should be implemented to help traditionally marginalized communities partner in research and policymaking. Social workers should assertively encourage policymakers to create space for this involvement and should ensure that their own scholarship can be a tool for client groups' policy engagement.

The disability community provides a compelling example of how involvement in the policymaking process can result in policy transformation. Their rallying cry is, "Nothing about us without us". Many practitioners and policymakers working in the disability field now fully expect and often depend on disability community

participation in policymaking to make the initial passage more likely and to improve implementation. Among other milestones, the transformative power of this group's involvement is clear in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Historically, people with disabilities had been marginalized, and their opportunities to contribute to their communities were minimized. However, people with disabilities changed public discourse. Claims for policy changes were no longer permeated by a deficits view; instead, they persuasively asserted that many people with disabilities could make significant contributions if accommodations to facilitate full participation were made. Needs were recast, a new positive view was constructed, and claims for assistance focused more on their strengths.

In attempting to take lessons from this powerful movement, there are additional challenges for some groups social workers seek to help. Although people with disabilities continue to suffer high rates of discrimination, they have traditionally been seen as more "worthy" of help than groups such as people who are homeless, individuals with mental illness, and immigrants. For these clients, social workers need to continue to reframe the negative views propagated in the media and ensconced in many policies, to instead emphasize strengths, the ways structural barriers have impeded clients, and how strengths-based policies could help. Crucially, this work can be done most effectively in accordance with strengths-based policy practice principles, as partnering with affected populations will, itself, help to counter a deficit view of their lives. Among the most potent examples of this work, today is the 'Dreamer' movement, led by immigrant youth and supported by social workers and other allies. Immigrant youth chose to employ language that explicitly connects their aspirations to the policies that would make them more possible. They also led efforts to change how media outlets talk about immigrants, took control of the strategies used to advance their aims, and selected policy targets that build on a presumption of capacity and promise. Similarly, social workers can join with clients and colleagues to change public conversations, reject deficit-centric language, and publicize stories that create a fuller understanding of the strengths as well as the needs of these groups.

Helping the public and policymakers see our clients as people capable of contributing to policymaking begins with social workers committing to practicing in a way that demonstrates that truth, every day. Social service agencies can be laboratories for experimenting with how best to integrate client perspectives into agency policies; in the process, this work can highlight the advantages of doing so. Some social work agencies have made tremendous strides in rethinking governance bodies so that clients are more equitably included in shaping policies. Community mental health centers and others have been leaders in innovating and resourcing peer models that position clients to not only provide direct services but also inform and help revise agency procedures. Many advocacy organizations have developed creative channels to help clients participate more fully in the policymaking process. For example, practitioners are experimenting with ways to use online fora, social media, and crowdsourcing approaches to increase the involvement of the groups

most impacted by proposed policies. When they incorporate clients' perspectives into shaping both the process by which policies are developed and changed and the intended aim of a given policy effort, these activities evidence the strengths perspective in policy practice. Scholars interested in the fuller conceptual development of strengths-based policy practice need to encourage this experimentation and collaborate closely with agencies so that lessons learned can be incorporated into the conceptual base and disseminated to those interested in implementing a more strengths-based policy practice approach.

Practice that incorporates a growing understanding of Trauma-Informed Care also holds promise in improving policies and programs to help our clients. This understanding has helped policymakers move from a characterological lens of human behavior to one that recognizes the impact of early and traumatic experiences. This has strengthened recognition of the importance of early childhood prevention programs and family support. However, as Leitch has pointed out, incorporating trauma-informed perspectives can result in overemphasis on negative events and neglect of positive protective factors (Leitch, 2017). Although not intentional, centering on trauma can foster a single-point focus that allows problems to again take center stage. However, no matter how vulnerable a person, family, or community is, they also have strengths and goals. It is crucial that individual and community assets receive adequate attention as policies and programs to address trauma are developed. To depathologize problematic behaviors and provide strengths-based supports for people who have experienced trauma, we must reassert the importance of a values-committed approach to policies, practices, and programs.

Our critique of a trauma orientation finds that insights it offers are important and necessary, but insufficient. An additional strengths lens is needed. Similarly, in many cases, the most positive benefits may accrue when the strengths approach is used along with other approaches such as empowerment, and with other lenses such as those designed to focus on issues of diversity. Indeed, cultural differences can influence the very definition of strengths, ways they can be supported, and how to best help groups participate in policymaking. Analysis of these influences can help social work policy practitioners attend to how a policy can be strengths-based for one group but not for another. A stark historical example is the Homestead Act, which was strengths-based for predominantly white settlers but decimated the resources of Native Americans and further fueled the wide racial wealth gap. Finally, combining strengths approach tenets with theoretical approaches such as conflict theory may help us to better prepare our clients for more effective involvement in today's policymaking arena.

Research needs to be designed to test the efficacy of a strengths-based approach to policy practice, in comparison to other approaches. Further, critical elements present in successful policies but not in unsuccessful ones should be identified to determine if the successful ones are more likely to reflect strengths-based principles. However, it may be that the best option for social work policy practitioners

is to view the strengths-based framework as a critical means of analysis that centers on values foundational to social work, rather than as the sole measure of a policy's success or failure.

CONCLUSION

Robust conceptual underpinnings can be used to foster more widespread adoption of the strengths approach to policy practice—in pursuit of better outcomes for clients. Today, when whole communities are pathologized and marginalized, there is great need for a values-committed policy orientation that emphasizes social justice and respect for all people. Social workers must insist that understanding the strengths and goals of our clients is integral to crafting effective policy. Problems must not be allowed to crowd out the indispensable focus on resilience, strengths, and goals. By centering the experiences of those often overlooked and underrecognized, policy practice rooted in the strengths perspective can contribute to changing the political landscape. As was true at the naming of the strengths perspective 30 years ago, in a year that also saw the Exxon-Valdez oil spill, the height of the HIV epidemic, and historic realignment in Europe, we should not allow turbulent times to slow our work.

In our view, shaped by our own values and biases, the promotion of strengths-based policy practice offers a potential antidote to the emphasis on deficits permeating many current policy debates. As posited in relation to the strengths approach more generally, the growth and development of this approach to policy practice depend on many factors (Rapp, Saleebey, & Sullivan, 2005). There must be further conceptual development informed by the experiences of clients and practitioners who are attempting to implement strengths-based policy principles. There needs to be research into the comparative effectiveness of policy initiatives rooted in the strengths approach and wider dissemination and acceptance of strengths principles in pedagogical and policymaking circles. These elements are interdependent; progress in each will be shaped in large part by progress in the others. We have seen the positive impact that strengths-based policies can have on clients, communities, and practitioners. Initiatives to increase the use of the strength approach in policy practice are well worth the effort.

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