

Preface

In the late 1980s, a group of University of Kansas School of Social Welfare (KUSSW) faculty and doctoral students began to talk about reframing our view of clients' capacities relative to their own course of treatment. Despite the emergence of social work as a helping profession, a strengths-based approach to work with clients and communities has not always been understood as critical to practice. Historically, clients, particularly highly vulnerable clients, were seen in terms of their deficits. This deficit approach to working with individuals led to a culture of "fixing" clients with the task of doing so implicitly placed on the social worker, practitioner, etc. Flipping that view to recognize that each individual had innate strengths and abilities to offer in their own change process and the importance of recognizing and valuing the client perspective in that process was forming at KUSSW.

What emerged at KUSSW was a way of thinking and a practice model that represented the shifting perspectives from deficit to strengths when working with people. In 1989, "A Strengths Perspective for Social Work Practice" (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989), a seminal article calling for and defining a strengths perspective for social work practice, was published by a group of University of Kansas School of Social Welfare faculty and students in the journal *Social Work*.

The Strengths Perspective emphasizes the human capacity for resilience and resourcefulness and recognizes the need for individuals and communities to form and achieve their own goals and aspirations. While acknowledging the difficulties

that clients experience, the Strengths Perspective reframes obstacles as challenges, opportunities, and motivators for change, and places social workers as collaborators with clients, their families, and communities in the change process. The article and related work completed at the time set the foundation for the Strengths Perspective to become a guiding principle for academic and scholarly activity at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare for the next 30 years.

However, the notion of identifying strengths was not a new one. Various movements had long challenged conventional deficit thinking in social work. Additionally, numerous theories and perspectives including empowerment, social constructionism, feminism, and critical theories emphasize concepts that emerge as key principals of strengths-based practice. In this volume, authors Tanya Smith Brice and Denise McLane-Davison provide a historical view of strengths-based work with Black families based on the writings of Dubois and Billingsley to illustrate the long-held understanding of the importance of recognizing strengths.

Today the Strengths Perspective has become pervasive in social work, viewed as foundational to social work practice in the USA and several other countries. Practical applications, critical reviews, and innovative extensions of the perspective have emerged in social work education, policy development and analysis, organizational practice, and direct practice with clients. Strengths as a starting point are ubiquitous in our field. Current social work students and early career social workers would have little understanding of a deficit approach to working with people. The purpose of this special volume is to highlight the journey, catalog the paradigm shift, and document the historical roots of recognizing individuals' strengths in their own ability to change. Our call to authors was intentionally abstract. Contributors were asked to share their application of the Strengths Perspective in practice, research/scholarship, or teaching, but given no parameters beyond that. It was our hope that we would hear the "story" of strengths work in social work from the unique perspective of the authors. What resulted is a wide-ranging collection of chapters that speaks to the power of strengths in the authors' own words. From traditional research articles to personal narratives, the chapters illustrate how the Strengths Perspective has been applied in the United States and internationally.

The book opens with a reprint of the 1989 article by Weick and colleagues and a chronological reflection by two University of Kansas emeritus faculty including an author from that article. The following chapters are divided into four sections: (1) Strengths Perspective and Education, (2) Strengths Perspective and Macro Practice, (3) Strengths Perspective and Micro Practice, and (4) Strengths Perspective and Practice with Various Populations.

Not only do the chapters in this volume highlight past and current applications of the Strengths Perspective but they also provide a guide for moving forward. Teri Kennedy suggests a strengths-based approach to interprofessional practice and education (SB-IPE), and Megan E. Gandy-Guedes and Megan S. Pacey highlight the

need to shift from a focus on risks among LGBTQ+ youth, which fails to fully recognize their resilience, to an approach that identifies and assesses strengths. Melinda Lewis, Rosemary Chapin, and Hayden Rand look to history to link the strengths approach to strengths-based policy practice/reform to address the pathologizing of entire communities and shift the deficit thinking that prevails in political discourse. Jason Sawyer and D. Crystal Coles encourage us to address critical macro practice through the lens of the Strength Perspective. This focus on macro applications of the Strengths Perspective is an extension of the original thinking and offers exciting direction for large system practitioners. And finally, Amy Mendenhall, Whitney Grube, Nikolaus Schuetz and Elizabeth A. Schoenfeld, Brooke A. White, Amy J. Youngbloom, and Rick Goscha in their work with youth and adults remind us of the challenges of adaptation, the importance of fidelity to the Strengths-based Model of Case Management and our imperative to measure its success in practice.

For this volume, we wanted to mark the importance of the Strengths Perspective in social work practice. In the end, I believe we have created something meaningful that will mark this significant shift in thinking and practice. What follows tells the story of the roots of the strengths approach and the many Strengths Perspective applications in the last 30 years.

Michelle Mohr Carney
Dean
University of Kansas
School of Social Welfare

Amy N. Mendenhall
Associate Dean
University of Kansas
School of Social Welfare