

As Professors Emeritus, Charles Rapp and Alice Lieberman were members of the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare community during the emergence of the strengths perspective within the field. Below are their recollections of how the Strengths Perspective became a foundational value within the School of Social Welfare.

Reflections

Charles A. Rapp & Alice Lieberman

As we write this 30 years from the publication of *“A Strengths Perspective for Social Work Practice”*, the strengths perspective has been utilized and applied worldwide across populations. Less than 10 years ago, an international conference was held in Nepal on strengths-based practice that brought presenters from Uganda, the Philippines, Kenya, Lapland, India, Australia, Slovenia and Nepal. A book detailing the strengths-based innovations developed in these countries was subsequently produced (Pulla, Chenowith, Francis & Bjakaj, 2012). In mental health alone, there are strengths model case management projects in Australia, New Zealand, Netherlands, several provinces in Canada and a large controlled trial is currently being conducted in Hong Kong. In the United States, similar efforts are being undertaken in California, Kansas, Iowa, and Texas. Beyond mental health, applications have been established or proposed in substance abuse (Rapp, 2006), with older adults (Nelson-Becker, Chapin & Fast, 2009), and families (Bernard, 2006). Additionally, the strengths perspective has informed community development (Saleebey, 2006) and social policy approaches (Chapin, 2017; Rapp, Pettus & Goscha, 2006).

Contributing to the reach of the strengths perspective across populations and geographic locales has been deeply gratifying to the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare community. And despite decades of collaboration with colleagues worldwide to refine it and expand its applications, the core of the strengths perspective remains both deceptively simple and unchanged: the strengths perspective reflects a universal philosophical truth that change efforts, whether at the person-

al, organizational, or community level, will not be successful until we harness our positive attributes—our talents, skills, collective histories, environmental resources, etc.—and use those to move forward. What follows is our recollection of the paths we took that contributed to the strengths perspective solidifying as a foundational principle within the social work profession.

A Strengths Approach to Mental Health

The term “Strengths Perspective” was widely introduced in the article “A Strengths Perspective for Social Work Practice,” published in the journal *Social Work* in 1989. However, strengths-based practice work in the KU School of Social Welfare began in 1982 when the state mental health authority, responding to a federal initiative, requested that the School develop a model of case management for work with people with serious mental illness. Ronna Chamberlain, a new doctoral student with a rich background in adult mental health and first author Charles Rapp took a teleological approach by first identifying the desired core outcomes (independent living, employment, avoiding psychiatric hospitalization and social support) that clients, families, and providers desired. Then, based on our ideas of individual client strengths and environment/community strengths, we developed a set of principles, tools and a brief training program; recruited four social work practicum students; and received sanction to implement the approach within the local mental health center’s community support program. After one year, we examined the data collected, and the results revealed a reduction in psychiatric hospitalization and gains in social support and other indicators of well-being (Rapp & Chamberlain, 1985).

The 1989 Social Work Article

The next six years, from 1984 to 1990, witnessed a continued increase in demonstrations of what we called the Developmental-Acquisition Model of case management. The bulk of these projects occurred in Kansas and from them came additional research reports and conceptual articles. Studies by KU doctoral students and faculty on the strengths model of case management demonstrated a consistent pattern of positive results (Modrcin, Rapp & Poertner, 1988; Rapp & Wintersteen, 1989; Kisthardt, 1993).

Interest from other state mental health authorities grew steadily and resulted in requests for training, consultation, and keynote speeches. In these early days, an audience would be variously split among those who claimed they were already doing the strengths approach and those who thought it was not possible and that we were foolish for suggesting it. Those of us involved in these activities, with only occasional consideration of possible broader relevancy, largely thought that at best we were in the process of developing some ideas, tools, and methods that would better help people struggling with a serious mental illness.

As the scope of this work broadened, others in the School began to consider how it applied more broadly to social work practice. Ann Weick, who held a longstanding interest in philosophical frameworks in social work practice, foresaw implications for

how the approach could be applied beyond serious mental illness, and exploration of these ideas with others led to the article that appeared in the journal *Social Work* entitled, “A strengths perspective for social work practice” (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989).

The article served as a published statement of what is now known as the Strengths Perspective. It also helped identify people who thought similarly, whose practice was at least partly consonant with the ideas in the paper, and it provided words for otherwise unarticulated thoughts. It also provoked ideas for possible applications in areas other than adult mental health.

The Forums

Based in part on the success of the adult mental health case management projects and the publication of the article, our KU colleague Professor Dennis Saleebey identified six people from around the country who had similar or at least compatible interests, and asked them to join 5 KU faculty and PH.D. students to share their ideas. Each was asked to put ideas in a paper and attend a small forum where these ideas could be exchanged and discussed. The papers were distributed to each of the participants prior to the forum. At the forum, each author was given about 15 minutes to summarize their paper highlighting the key ideas. Most of the day was devoted to a discussion of the ideas by these 11 people. A small audience of KU faculty and students were able to view the proceedings. The papers were subsequently edited and Dr. Saleebey added introductions and concluding essays. Ten years after the first KU mental health project, this collection became the first book devoted to the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1992).

The forum and the book stimulated considerable interest within the School and in the profession. Much of it was supportive of the ideas but it was not without a sizeable segment of people expressing doubts or even hostility. The on-going debate was necessary and healthy for the further development of the perspective. It forced many of us to consider issues previously ignored, to be increasingly precise about our ideas and practice applications, and to spur further research into the results of the strengths perspective applications. The book also helped us identify other strengths-oriented scholars and practice innovators around the country. Some years later, Saleebey held a second forum at KU. New practice applications in substance abuse, older adults, public social services, protective services for children and youth, and community development practice were identified. Subsequent editions of the *Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* were significantly longer, mirroring the growth of the strengths perspective in thought and activity, and each had a larger readership than the first edition. The book eventually went to six editions, ending in 2012. At the time of Dr. Saleebey’s death in 2014, he was working on the seventh.

Synergy within the KU School of Social Welfare

From the early 1990s onward, the strengths perspective became a major topic of discussion in the KU School of Social Welfare whether in formal curriculum or

research meetings, or in hallways, offices, or by the coffee pot. These conversations ranged from the amicable to the pleasantly contentious as our faculty searched for understanding, applications, and evidence that the strengths perspective was more than just the current fad. This high level of activity created a palpable synergy within the Twente Hall community. And yet, this shared occupation of our intelligence on a single topic should not be viewed as universal agreement. Part of the synergy was in fact due to skepticism and differences as we struggled along. Almost half of the faculty and several Ph.D. students published at least one article related to the strengths perspective during this period with most of those publishing multiple articles. A quarter of the faculty published books devoted to the strengths perspective or had substantial content related to it Petr (2004), Lieberman (1998), Chapin (2007), Canda (1999).

As we prepared for CSWE accreditation in the early 1990s, the faculty formally voted to make the strengths perspective one of the four themes of our BSW and MSW curricula. This then instigated even more dialogue. As many of us have come to know, in order to effectively teach something, one needs a rather full understanding of the particular topic. How to integrate the strengths perspective into each of our courses was a significant challenge that enriched our understanding of it as we proceeded.

Historically, it has been rare that an entire school of social work is seemingly defined by a particular thinking or model. In the late '40s and early '50s, the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work was intrinsically linked to "functionalism" as a model of casework. It seemed to hold sway for about a decade. The strengths perspective has been similarly linked to the KU School of Social Welfare for over 30 years.

Prompting Other Innovation

While the strengths perspective enjoyed increasing intellectual activity and application in a wider range of practice areas, KU scholars continued to apply the perspective in ever more innovative ways. One stream of intellectual development that was quite important focused on explicating a strengths perspective on the environment. Two members of the KU family were particularly influential in this regard. Professor James Taylor's article "Niches and Practice: Extending the Ecological Perspective" (p 217-228) in Saleebey's second edition of the *Strengths Perspective in Social Work* (1997) described how the strengths perspective approach to environmental processes and impacts propelled us to reconsider and extend our views of both the ecological and strengths perspective. W. Patrick Sullivan, now on the faculty at Indiana University, became the principal author who over the years enriched the conceptual understanding of a strengths-focused view of the environment and described specific methods that grow from it. His first article, written as a Ph.D. student at the School, described how rural areas needed to develop community support programs "without walls" that employed natural community resources on behalf of people with serious mental illness if they were to be effective (Sullivan, 1989).

Building upon the early work with the state mental health authority, a wider range of supportive strengths-based innovations were also developed within the School. This included the status method of client outcome monitoring (Rapp et al., 1988), scales for monitoring the fidelity of implementation to strengths model principles and methods (Fukui et al., 2012), technologies for field mentoring as an improved way for direct service staff to be taught discrete practice skills (Carlson, Goscha, & Rapp, 2016), and strengths-based group supervision (Fukui et al., 2014). Rick Goscha was instrumental in the development of most of these supportive innovations and deserves much credit as the disseminator of the strengths model within mental health programs in the U.S. and abroad.

Moving Forward

The years of achievement in building, refining, and extending the strengths perspective pale in the face of what still remains to be done. There are simply too few reports of the effectiveness of strengths perspective interventions and fewer still using rigorous research designs. Given the growing number of applications, the opportunities should be present. For example, beginning studies by Mendenhall, Grube and associates on the strengths approach with youth with psychiatric disabilities are promising, but demand further studies testing the effects on client outcomes (Mendenhall, Grube & Jung, 2019; Mendenhall & Grube, 2017; Grube & Mendenhall, 2016; Grube & Mendenhall, 2016; Scheutz, Mendenhall & Grube, 2019).

Secondly, the development and testing of fidelity measures for strengths perspective interventions are critically important. The strengths perspective continues to be subject to multiple interpretations of exactly what it is in practice. We need to be able to separate those who claim allegiance to a strengths perspective approach but where there is a minor reference to strengths, but little or no fidelity to the principles (e.g. merely having a small space for strengths in an otherwise deficit-based assessment). Such an effort would force us to be specific about the salient methods and allow our research to more powerfully link results to the actual interventions. In practice, fidelity measures could act as an influential tool for supervisors and those working in quality improvement. This recommendation is buoyed by the study by Fukui, et.al (2012) that found that client outcomes varied by the level of fidelity with strengths model case management implementation.

A third area of needed attention concerns skills in translating strengths into more powerful individual goal plans (case plans) and accessing the strengths of the natural community on behalf of our clients. In many situations, we continue to use formal, often segregated, social services thereby restricting opportunities, reducing community integration and access to resources, and ultimately decreasing achievement. Priority should rather be placed on the rich strengths and possibilities offered by the natural communities.

Prior to his death, Dennis Saleebey wrote a series of notable essays sketching the conceptual roots of the strengths perspective. The best attempt was perhaps his

introduction to his book entitled “Power in the People” (2009). The development of the strengths perspective could benefit from additional efforts to trace its intellectual history and to more precisely describe the links with affiliated approaches such as restorative justice, empowerment, positive psychology, capability theory and resilience.

Concluding Thoughts

For those of us involved in the early strengths work, nothing on our 30-plus year journey with the strengths perspective was anticipated. It was one surprise after another: from that first study which yielded surprisingly positive findings to the aforementioned article being accepted by *Social Work* (Weick et al, 1989) to the worldwide attention it has ultimately gained. These recollections are just a small glimpse into the strengths-based work done within the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare over the last 30 years. We have always been, and continue to be, proud of the School and its achievements. To be a part of such a collective effort was among the proudest moments of our careers.

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