Strengths Work in Social Work Education at HAWK, Germany

Corinna Ehlers

INTRODUCTION

Professions in human services are committed to supporting the personal development of the people they work with. According to the international definition of social work[1], empowerment and enhancing the wellbeing of people is a central mission of social workers. However, in times of budget cuts, austerity programs and an increasing caseload this mission proves to be an enormous challenge for social workers or other practitioners as well for clients. For the last 30 years, neoliberal management strategies have been implemented in many countries with the goal to make care systems more efficient. The management strategies put a focus on output rather than outcome. With these changes in place, the clients' interests often cannot be focused on intensely anymore. Instead of empowering people, professionals in human services are held back and constrained.

In Germany, the research findings of Beckmann, Ehlting and Klaes (2018) and Poulsen (2012) in the field of youth welfare show that the workload is high and social workers have become responsible for a greater number of tasks over the last years. A little over half the questioned social workers in Poulsen's survey answered that the workload was "very high" (Poulsen 2012: 49). In her research project, Poulsen interviewed about 100 social workers from 2010 to 2011 using a questionnaire. The interviewees named the following as stress factors: work intensification, excessive bureaucracy and time pressure. Furthermore, their own handling of over-

whelming work situations was mentioned. Poulsen (2012: 56) cites one of the interviewed persons: "The greatest challenge is not to lose oneself in work."

In these conditions, the strengths perspective can be helpful in that it returns the focus to the clients and their needs as well as supporting social workers themselves. The strengths perspective offers possibilities to face these challenging work situations by supporting self-management abilities. Good self-management, for example, can be helpful in dealing with the balancing act of being there for the clients as well as incorporating the interests of the organizations and one's own needs. The strengths perspective also provides ways to strengthen social workers in their challenging working conditions. Because strengths work is such an essential part of human services, it should start with exploring the strengths of the professionals, and this should start during education. Before other people can be supported, it is important to be aware of one's own strengths and how they can be used to empower others. For social workers in this current working environment, it is crucial to develop good self-management skills, which are also closely connected to their strengths.

Therefore, strengths work should be a fundamental element in social work education. At the faculty of Social Work and Health at the HAWK in Hildesheim (university of applied sciences), within the study program of social work, we established a strengths lab and developed a workshop called Stärken-Parcours to improve our students' awareness of their strengths. The workshop aims at enabling the participants to explore their strengths and figure out how they can use them within their study program as well as in their professional work.

This article will describe the theoretical framework of the workshop Stärken-Parcours and will briefly introduce the five-step process of discovering an individual's strengths sweet spot. In conclusion, the first impressions from the evaluation of the workshops held in 2018 and 2019 will be presented.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE WORKSHOP

The strengths-based practice models of Saleebey (2013 109 et seq.) and Niemiec (2018: 58 et seq.) can be summarized in the following strengths model (see figure 1). It combines three elements:

1. Adopting a strengths perspective
2. Discovering and developing strengths
3. Focusing, setting goals and taking action with an emphasis on strengths

First of all, it is necessary to be aware and to put on the "strengths glasses". Not only social workers, therapists, counselors and educators but also the people they work with have to be ready to adopt a strengths perspective and change their view on things. Saleebey (2013:109 et seq.) points out that it is important to listen to the

story of the clients and value their stories. Already through listening and observing without judgement it is possible to learn about other people's strengths.

The second element combines exploring and evolving strengths. Current strengths and resources are reflected on with the clients. Furthermore, it is helpful to find out which strengths and resources were available in the past. Apart from that, clients' aspirations should also be considered. Finding out more about the significant personal meaning of strengths helps to develop and enhance them. It is part of the strengths evolution to talk about the meaning of strengths, how strengths interact with one another and how they can be used. The third element is about setting a focus and designing a change process. Meaningful goals are a key element in personal development. They should be linked with strengths because character strengths and needs are a driving force in activating resources.

The strengths workshop is based on the principles and methods of the strengths perspective and includes elements of positive psychology. During the 1980s, the first approaches of the strengths work started at the KU School of Social Welfare. Saleebey (2013) and his colleagues established the strengths perspective in social work based on human psychology, system theories, solution focus work. According to Saleebey (1996, 2013b: 102 et seq.), strengths are an interplay of individual experiences, capabilities and hopes. In the mid-1990s, within the field of psychology, Martin Seligman as the chairman of the American Psychological Association announced the age of Positive Psychology. In contrast to conventional approaches in psychology, positive psychology focuses on health and wellbeing. Both the strengths perspective and positive psychology pay attention to strengths and resources rather than to problems and deficits. Looking at literature in both areas, one notices a large number of publications that approach the issue of what strengths are and why it is important to focus on them. Building on this foundation, it is possible to find a common ground for what strengths are: according to the context, strengths are a personal power source, while resources are accessories, social contacts or possibilities in the environment. Personal strengths can help to activate resources.

Strengths assessments consider strengths and resources through the three dimensions of time: present, past and future (Rapp & Goscha 2012, Biswas-Diener 2010). In form and content, strengths assessments can be versatile because the term 'strengths' is so broad. In the scientific community values and character, strengths seem to be an important element as well as talents and skills. Furthermore, the sense of meaningfulness or joy while doing certain things is considered to be a strength. These activities can be a hint of which particular strengths are meaningful to a person. From motivational psychology, it is known that conscious and unconscious needs play an important role in our action control, which is also crucial for defining goals.

Various authors (Cf.,e.g., Peterson & Seligmann 2004; Linley 2010, Saleebey 1996, 2012, Rapp and Goscha 2012, Clifton and Nelson, 2010) have defined strengths, and

there are many established and scientific strengths assessments, for instance, the tools VIA IS, Realise2 or Strengthfinder, available. In these assessments, single elements of strengths are well described and explored, but these different pieces were not thoroughly connected. For a better understanding of what strengths are, it seems helpful to link the different areas within a spectrum. This also allows a classification of the range of the three strengths areas. Especially in the field of social work, it is indispensable to consider the strengths spectrum in the environment of the clients. The following figure illustrates the strengths spectrum with the sweet spot in the middle.
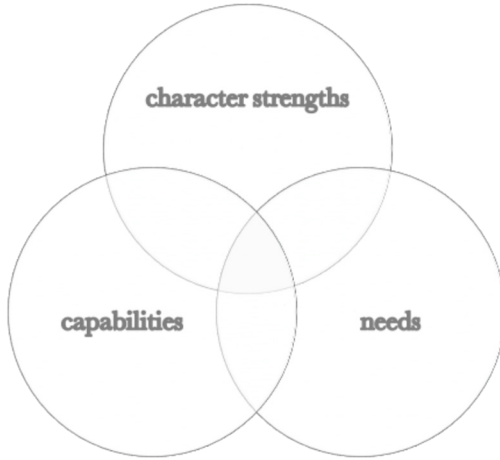
Figure 1: Strengths spectrum (Ehlers 2019)

The three areas will be briefly exemplified starting with the character strengths. Values are our beliefs and attitudes that are important to us. Closely linked to our values are our character strengths. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), character strengths are positive parts of our personality that influence our thinking, our feelings and our actions.

Based on their research, the authors identified 6 virtues and classified 24 character strengths that were related to the virtues. For example, creativity, curiosity, judgement, love of learning and perspective are assigned to virtue, wisdom and knowledge. All people have all 24 character strengths, but the composition and intensity are unique for each person. Character strengths are considered to be important because they influence the way other strengths areas evolve (Niemiec 2014: 26). The VIA classification offers a general vocabulary for identifying strengths as well.

Besides character strengths, the area of capabilities, talents and skills is important. Whereas talents are inborn and have to be discovered to become improved, skills or capabilities can be learnt and trained. Everyone has diverse talents and capabilities, but often enough they are not recognized because they seem to be normal to the person in question. Both talents and skills can be improved throughout life. Gardner

(2008) developed a chart of multiple types of intelligence. What is significant is a differentiated reflection of these intelligence types, not the question of which intelligence type is more important. The following chart gives an overview of the different types with some examples.

Table: Multiple Types of Intelligence from Gardner (2008)

Linguistic-verbal intelligence debating reading writing poetry learning other languages	**Logical-mathematical intelligence** calculating finding solutions organising understanding formulas
Bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence playing and dancing physical activity dexterity	**Musical- rhythmic intelligence** making music singing and humming listening to music recognizing rhythms
Visual-spatial intelligence drawing and doing handcrafts having spatial sense recognizing patterns and shapes having a sense of orientation	**Interpersonal intelligence** being an attentive listener being tolerant mediating and connecting being a leader
Intrapersonal intelligence enjoying solitude developing one's own opinion having high moral standards reflecting on one's own thoughts	**Naturalist intelligence** loving and taking care of animals being outside gardening

The third area is about needs. All humans have diverse needs. Besides basic needs, like food and sleep, there are universal needs, like autonomy, relatedness, competence and freedom (Deci & Rayn 1993, Kuhl 2001). According to Maslow (2014), higher needs, like self-fulfillment, are sensitive. Thus, the context has to be right before people can work on their self-reflection or self-management. Until basic needs, like food and shelter, are guaranteed, it is often hard to focus on personal development. Being aware of one's own needs can help to find out what is essential for wellbeing. Awareness of needs is important to learn about motivation and also helps to enhance the wellbeing of people.

The concept of non-violent communication introduced by Marshall Rosenberg (2016) comprises a range of needs. Within seven main categories, there are differ-

ent variations of needs, like sleep, recovery and rest or self-acceptance. Within the strengths work it is important not only to find out about the different areas but also explore how the strengths play together.

THE STRENGTHS SWEET SPOT AND GOAL SETTING

In tennis, the so-called sweet spot marks a point on the racquet. When the player hits the ball with that certain point and at the right angle, the hit will be more powerful and precise, the serve will have more impact and will land more powerfully in the opponent's part of the court. Thus, in order to act more effectively, the interplay of different elements is important.

It is similar to mental strength when it comes to a long-term commitment to changes like finding a new job, getting out of an unhealthy relationship, coping with a chronic health condition. In such situations, strengths and motivation are needed for a journey of change and/or recovery. Short-term activities can often be regulated through the mind. For long-term changes, it is necessary that personal values, character strengths and needs be aligned. When this is accomplished, we can act out of our power zone more effectively. Activities that come from the sweet spot seem to be easier to handle and feel energizing rather than exhausting. Working out of the strengths power zone is often connected with the so-called 'flow': people are fully involved in their tasks, they enjoy what they are doing to an extent where they may become oblivious to their surroundings, to time and space.

To identify the sweet spot, it might be helpful to ask the following questions: How do your strengths areas interplay? How do your strengths have a positive impact on one another? What is the characteristic of your strengths area (x)?
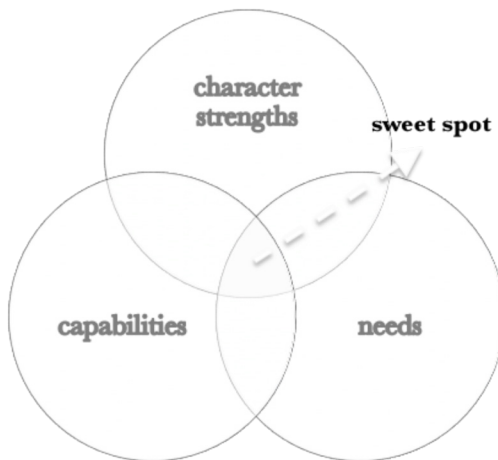

Figure 2: Strengths spectrum with sweet-spot

Strengths-focused goal work means prioritizing and concentrating on the relevant areas. A strengths focus means being clear what kinds of goals are motivational, important and inspiring to a person. This could be having a private space for recovery or being able to take care of a pet before the paperwork can be done.

Knowing one's own needs is conducive to good self-management. According to Martens and Kuhl (2013: 120 et seq.), self-motivation is an impulse from the inside to do something. The strengths-focused goal work aims at identifying self-motivation. The Zurcher Resource Model (ZRM®) by Storch and Krause, which is used as a tool in this goal-setting work, is rooted in motivational psychology and neuroscience. The model offers different methods that help to develop self-management and considers cognitive and emotional aspects in order to find individual meaningful goals. The so-called motto-goals have a highly motivational character because they take into account motives and subconscious needs and describe an attitude of what a person would want to be like. Motto-goals can integrate strengths and are helpful as a passion statement.

HAWK STRENGTHS WORKSHOP "STÄRKEN-PARCOURS"

The University of Applied Sciences Hildesheim (Hochschule für Angewandte Kunst und Wissenschaft - HAWK) offers a variety of study programs in three different locations. The Faculty of Social Work and Health with study programs in the fields of Social Work, Early Childhood Education and Health is based in Hildesheim. The bachelor and master social work programs are generalist-oriented with a focus on theories and concepts of social work. A critical reflection on professional practice and personal experiences in social work are a fundamental part of our education. In our study programs, we strive to give our students a broad theoretical knowledge as well as practical expertise. Due to changes in society, it is not only clients who are faced with challenges; professionals must also deal with challenging work situations, as mentioned in the beginning of the article. Therefore, we decided to support our students at the HAWK in their personal development. As part of our social work-study program, we established a strengths lab (in German "Stärkenlabor") to promote strengths work in our study programs[2]. Strengths work during education offers possibilities for learning and developing a professional identity. The strengths lab provides a place where students can learn about the strengths perspective and explore their own strengths.

Often, when I introduce strengths work in seminars, participants say "Yes, I know..." Most people assume that strengths work is about the things that you are good at. For example, in Germany, a typical question at job interviews is: "What are you good at?" So, a lot of people have an answer at the ready. They say general things like "I am well organized, I am creative..." Strengths work, however, goes much deeper and is much more precise. As I have described in my previous explanations, it is not only about which capabilities people have but about the interplay of their character strengths, the things they like doing and the things that are meaningful to them.

This is an ongoing process with a continuous reflection on strengths and consideration of how strengths can be used in daily life and work. "What are my strengths (character strengths, skills & needs)? And how do I use them?" are important questions for professional development. Therefore, this self-reflecting process should start early in education as an ongoing process. As part of this work, we developed a workshop for students to discover strengths. The main tenets of the workshop are:

- Promote strengths work within the study programs social work
- Teach about the strengths perspective
- Enable social work students to discover strengths and plan how to use their strengths
- Promote a strengths language
- Provide a space for students (and staff) to work on their strengths together in groups

In a five-step process, the students can discover different strengths areas based on a strengths spectrum that includes character strengths, capabilities and needs (Ehlers 2019). Upon completion of this task, the participants consider how their different signature strengths play together and identify an individual strengths sweet spot, which reflects their personal signature strengths in each area. The last step in the workshop includes thinking about how the participants can use their strengths in their daily life.

Here are the 5 steps at a glance:

1. Discover which character strengths you have. Which are the most meaningful to you?
2. Think about the activities you like and which capabilities/skills you have.
3. Reflect on what kind of needs you have. What do you need to feel well?
4. Think about how your strengths from the different areas come together.
5. Consider how you can use your strengths in your daily life. Which of the insights are important to you? What goal would you like to achieve with your strengths?

The workshop lasts about 1.5-2 hours. In a welcoming unit, the students and tutors introduce themselves. After a short input about the Stärkenlabor and the strengths perspective students have time to work through a set of questions and tasks. We provide a workbook with questions and exercises. Additional information and illustrations are placed on moveable boards around the room. The students from the strengths lab walk around and answer questions. Toward the end of the workshop, the group comes together and reflects on the process. The students also exchange their thoughts and ideas about their strengths with one another in the process. Within the self-reflection, it is also necessary to check if strengths are overhyped or

if they have downsides. When a positive trait or character strength is used too much it can be irritating for other people. A question should also be asked if excessive use can be disturbing for the person himself/herself. For example, for helping professionals, kindness is often a character strength. Altruism and compassion as a form of showing kindness are good. But social workers who overdose on their strength kindness can lose their professional distance, might not be able to set boundaries or do too much for their clients instead of empowering them.

This workshop was held in November 2018, May 2019 and November 2019 during a special project week that is placed in the middle of a semester. The workshop was offered as an additional training course. In January 2019 it was also held with a group of exchange students from Finland and our students. Each workshop counted around twenty participants. The training materials and the workshop concept were developed together with students, and the workshops were carried out by the students from the strengths lab. On the one hand, this peer-based approach enables the students who take the workshop to open up in a context where the regular teaching staff is not in charge. On the other hand, students from the strength lab who carry out the workshops can improve their skills, like working with groups, organizing and teaching.

EXPERIENCES AND OUTLOOK

The HAWK strengths lab and its strengths workshop are quite new. So far, we do not have broad research data. Since we developed tools for self-reflective strengths-work together with the students, we continuously elicited and selected feedback and adapted the self-reflection tools.

At the end of a workshop session, the participants were asked to give feedback. Students mentioned about all workshops that:

- it was a surprising change of perspective
- it was a broadening of our view of ourselves and our clients
- the workshop helped to enhance the awareness of different strengths
- it allowed for interesting and exhilarating self-reflection
- it provided a useful instrument for working with the clients/practical work and benefited all parties involved
- it was good to investigate closely each strengths area and then look at how the elements play together

For the workshop, in May 2019 we developed an online questionnaire that had a character of a pre-test. The questionnaire is comprised of 17 questions. Four of them are open questions with the option to leave a comment, and 13 questions could be answered with a five-point Likert scale. The link was sent to the students who left their e-mail address after the workshop and offered to evaluate the

workshop. Six participants answered the questionnaire. For all of them, the topic strengths orientation was important. Five said it was important for them, one said it was rather important. To the question "How important do you think is an orientation toward strengths for your work?" five participants also said it was important, one said it was rather important. Most participants were satisfied with the workshop (5 said they were satisfied, i.e. it was important, one said it was rather important). By way of improvement, one participant recommended more time at the end of the workshop for the collective reflection. Altogether, the small survey was helpful for the further development of the questionnaire as well as for the workshop. Based on the experience with this first survey we will adapt a few questions and rethink the scaling. In the future, we will repeat the survey after each workshop to find out how the students can benefit from the strengths workshop.

From all our feedback we can summarize that students find the change of perspective toward strength interesting and they point out the importance of the topic for social work in general. Moana, who works as a tutor in the strengths lab, describes her learning experience:

> "For me working in the strengths lab is not only a good opportunity to upgrade on my studies to get a deeper understanding about one particular topic, as it is the strengths orientation in this case, but also to get to know my own values and strengths better and learn about different perspectives. This has a big impact on my professional attitude as well. For me living the attitude of the strengths orientation is deeply connected to values like empathy, helpfulness, making decisions, being open towards and patient regarding other people, empowering and self-determination. And I think those values (and many more) are important in Social Work.
> So ultimately working in the strengths lab is a process of personal reflection that also shapes my professional attitude and my ability to reflect on that. Both empowers me to work with other students on this topic.
> I work with the strengths lab for almost two years now and it is an ongoing process, a cycle that never stops, of learning and reflecting that especially in correspondence with other people leads to new interesting insights over and over again."

In addition to the strengths workshop, we are currently developing a second workshop with a focus on goal setting. This workshop should enable the students to clarify their thoughts about which goals are important for them concerning their studies, personal development or their transition to work practice. Furthermore, we are planning to develop an online course so our students can explore their strengths in their own time whenever they want to. Also, we are considering implementing the strengths workshop in our welcoming program for our first semester.

Based on our experiences I would like to recommend to other study programs including (self-reflecting) strengths work in their curriculum. This could be a small exercise to put on the strengths glasses and view a situation from a different angle or it could be a reflection on what works well in classrooms. In order to establish strengths-based behavior, it is helpful to repeat mindful exercises over and over again. Furthermore, I would like to encourage educators to offer workshops on a voluntary basis where students can explore their strengths and reflect on them. In our experience, it was helpful that the workshops were carried out by tutors. This way we could realize a peer-to-peer approach. Somehow or other in order to strengthen the profession of social work it is important to offer social work students opportunities to explore and reflect on their strengths in an ongoing process throughout their education.

END NOTES

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[2] Many thanks to Moana Neumann, Katharina Krüger und David Zimmer for their support and engagement in the strengths lab.

[3] The workbook is available for download: https://www.hawk.de/sites/default/files/2019-10/staerken_parcour_heft_15_2019_002.pdf

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