

What are Strengths based Practices all About?

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When people used to offer to join Mother Teresa in her work with the needy of Calcutta, she would often respond: "Find your own Calcutta."

Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road; the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path.....

—Antonio Machado (1979)

ABSTRACT

Strengths Based Practices (SBPs) concentrates on the inherent strengths of individuals, families groups and organisations deploying peoples' personal strengths to aid their recovery and empowerment. SBPs are empowering alternatives to traditional methods with individuals, group or organizational work. SBPs refrain from allowing crippling, labeling and stigmatized language. Descriptions and pathology owned by persons groups and organizations that suggest acceptance of their condition as hopeless or helpless to change are constructively challenged through SBPs. Strengths based strategies build and foster hope from within by focusing and working with precedent successes. SBPs strategies facilitate change by assisting to look at/what has worked? What does not work? And what might work presently making it important for facilitators and those desiring change to be integral to this process of change. This introductory paper provides a bird's eye view of the assumptions, and discusses its core elements

Keywords: Resilience, Strengths Based Practice, Strengths Approach, Social Work.

INTRODUCTION

In tune with the *'Positivity Wave'(s)* that are currently sweeping the planet, several exciting and new approaches are being forwarded in all practices that involve human interactions. *'Strength based practice* in simple terms present approaches that promote resilience as opposed to dealing with deficits' (Pulla V., 2006). Strength based practices are gaining impetus globally in diverse fields of human services management, health

care, education and training reminding that all environments have resources and that in every society individuals, and institutions are willing to assist each other to cause human wellbeing. The principles of caring and caretaking, nurturing and ensuring that members of our society and our organisations in turn become resilient and hopeful is clearly within the scope of strengths approaches.

There is something very inward looking about this practice. Teachers in the schools are seriously considering how best to make their students understand what they really want them to understand. HRD Managers have started thinking about strength based performance appraisal while dealing with their employees. Community groups in Asia and the Pacific region have been dealing with self-reliance and indigenous development for several decades. Some of these self reliance experiences can be tweaked to reflect in strength based practice' (Pulla V., 2006).

Strengths Based Practices (SBPs) concentrates on the inherent strengths of individuals, families groups and organisations deploying peoples' personal strengths to aid their recovery and empowerment. SBPs are empowering alternatives to traditional methods with individuals, group or organizational work. SBPs refrain from allowing crippling, labeling and stigmatized language. Descriptions and pathology owned by persons groups and organizations that suggest acceptance of their condition as hopeless or helpless to change are constructively challenged through SBPs. Strengths based strategies build and foster hope from within by focusing and working with precedent successes. SBPs strategies facilitate change by assisting to look at/what has worked? What does not work? And what might work presently making it important for facilitators and those desiring change to be integral to this process of change.

In 2006, the author of this paper launched the first international conference on strengths based practice in India, the land of Gandhi (Pulla, V, 2006, pp. 120–126). The core values of Gandhian way of development have been being fair and respectful to all, focusing on strengths, assisting a self directed transformation to bring forward changes that are meaningful and significant to people and to reflect on how they want their situation to be (Pulla, V., 2006). Gandhian mantra may sound a shade simplistic description of what is being canvassed as strengths approach today, but the core elements that he deployed in the context of communities and ensuring sea change in the fabric of Indian society undoubtedly provides the fundamental context for community engagement practice in the western world today.

It is a tribute to Gandhi that he applied only positive thoughts and positive strategies across a wide range of social institutions including the British raj that had India and several other colonies in its grip. Resonating constitutes the basis of strengths based practice everyone has strengths. We have experiences, abilities and knowledge that assist us in our lives. If we are lucky, we also have a variety of people around us who act as a support network for us. A Strengths based Approach allows people to identify

and build on their strengths so that they can reach their goals, and retain or regain independence in their daily lives. Why work in this way? Long-term studies in strength-based care have proven that the approach improves self-care abilities, confidence, and self-esteem of clients allowing them to independently carry out daily living activities.

The Strengths Approach

A strengths based approach operates on the assumption that people have strengths and resources for their own empowerment. Traditional teaching and professional development models concentrate on deficit based approaches, ignoring the strengths and experiences of the participants. In strengths based approach the focus is on the individual not the content. Drawing on appreciative inquiry, strengths based methodologies do not ignore problems. Instead they shift the frame of reference to define the issues. By focusing on what is working well, informed successful strategies support the adaptive growth of organisations and individuals. A belief and an approach that every individual, group, organisation and community has strengths allows us to focus on identifying, mobilizing, and honouring the resources, assets, wisdom, and knowledge that every person, family, group, or community has. This processes of re-discovery with the community or individuals helps, assists in healing and ensuring that their full potential is brought out for creating meaningful patterns that can see as being useful. An opportunity there fore is offered to fathom their inner strengths. The Strengths Perspective recognises that for the most part of life, people face adversity, become resilient and resourceful and learn new strategies to overcome adversity. It would be pertinent to consider resilience in the context of strengths perspective ‘as the opportunity and capacity of individuals to navigate their way to psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that may pull together during crisis and provide them an opportunity and capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for life following adversity in appropriate and culturally meaningful ways’ (Pulla, V., 2012). Thus using client’s personal strengths and in discovering resources in the environments to fulfil the client’s needs and to enhance the client’s resilience (Norman, 2000). In fact the environment is conceptualises as “the helping environment”, in a strengths based practice (Early and GlenMaye, 2004, p. 113).

As a practitioner and facilitator of strengths approach, people told me that at times their negative experiences bring them down, at the same time I saw as the process work commences people recognise that even in their most adverse situation they have displayed their strengths.

The emphasis is certainly on ‘getting up’ to see opportunities to growth and development. It would be naïve to think that a strengths perspective allows social workers to casually taciturn the real pains and troubles that affect our clients and our societies. It is widely acknowledged that poverty, child sexual abuse, and violence

towards elderly, torture and racism all these are 'real problems' and they exist. Saleebey articulated the central belief systems that strengths perspective entails in his first published article on 'Power in the People: Strengths and Hope, in the year 2000 as follows:

'The strengths perspective does not require one to discount the grip and thrall of addictions or the humiliating, frightening anguish of child abuse, or the unbidden disorganization and confusion of psychosis. But from the vantage point of a strengths perspective, *it is as wrong to deny the possible just as it is to deny the problem*. And the strengths perspective does decry the intemperate reign of psychopathology and illness as the central civic, moral, and medical categorical imperative. Adherents of the strengths perspective *do not* believe, with good reason, that most people who are the victims of abuse or their own rampant appetites, or that all people who have been traumatized inevitably become damaged goods' (Saleebey, 2000).

Clearly we are unaware of the upper limits of human capacity to grow and change, therefore the message is to take the individual, group, and community aspirations seriously. Strengths Approach allows us as human service workers to go beyond the assessment, diagnosis, or profiling and presenting verdicts on people's lives. If we aim social work to be a profession that work with people to build their hopes, values, aspirations, and visions, then strengths approach obviously lets us deal with all those possibilities through a collaborative pathway. For this to happen we need to be open to the idea that our clients do have the wisdom, knowledge, and experience that they bring with them and that in combination with the specialized skills and experience that the facilitator may have a valuable outcome can be created. This could not happen if the end user voice is not heard and valued at all levels of management of change.

Some Common Myths about Strengths-Based Practice

- It is just a glorified version of positive thinking.
- It's really about reframing people's perception to find good even in the worst situation.
- It basically re-labels weaknesses as strengths.
- It ignores the reality that serious symptoms and problems do exist and continue to persist.
- Strengths-Based Practice assesses the inherent strengths of a client's people employees or family, and then builds on them.

Why Use It?

It is an empowering alternative to traditional human resource development methodologies that tend towards describing or diagnosing human motivation and human competencies functioning in terms of deficits and may offer un-related alternatives. Strengths approach avoids the use of stigmatising terminology, which people in need may have gotten used to and eventually accept, and feel helpless to change and contribute their future. It fosters hope within people by focusing on what is or has been historically successful for them in their personal, professional and or even career contexts, thereby exposing precedent successes as the groundwork for realistic expectations. It inventories the positive building blocks that already exist in the environment of the changer seeker which can serve as the foundation for future growth and change for him or her self and it reduces the power and authority barriers in number of situations such as employees and their managers or the clients and their therapists, the communities and the social worker by,

- Promoting the client to the level of expert in regards to what has worked, what does not work, and what might work in their personal, professional and work group situation.
- Placing anyone in power or expertise in the role of facilitator, partner or guide.
- **And lastly—it works (Pulla, V., 2006).**

Empowerment, Ecosystem, and the Strengths Based Practices

The strengths perspective originated in response to criticism of the deficit-oriented psychotherapeutic model that dominated social work practice (Guo and Tsui, 2010; Saleebey, 1992). Different strengths based approaches to practice emerged in late 1980s as alternatives to the dominant models. The impetus for strengths based social work practice arrived at a time in US when helping professions were saturated with psychosocial approaches based on individual, family, and community pathology, deficits, problems, abnormality, victimization, and disorder (Saleebey, 1996, p.296). The strengths perspective is rooted in ecosystem and empowerment theories with underpinnings of humanistic philosophy. According to Johnson (1998), ecosystem theory provided a foundation for the integrated, generalist social work practice model and revived the core concept of ‘person-in-environment’ or “how people and their environments fit” (Miley, O’Melia, and DuBois, 2004, p. 33). In fact, Weick and colleagues (1989), in a seminal article about the strengths perspective, stated that “the personal history and unique composite of personality characteristics of individuals interacts constantly with the political, economic, social, and natural forces in society (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kisthardt, 1989, p. 353). Because of their affinities, the combination of strengths based practices and new ecosystem approaches is increasingly being used in social work practice. Therefore, Guo and Tsui (2010) advocate for the adoption of a reflective practice model that creates “a

strengths based social work practice model that promotes not only the strengths of service users but also the capacities of the social work profession” (p. 234).

Empowerment as a proactive process in which individuals and groups gain power, access to resources, and control over their own lives is central to strengths approach (Robbins, Chatterjee, and Canda, 2006, p. 94). Personal empowerment and social empowerment are two interdependent and interactive dynamics achieved simultaneously which characterize client empowerment. Personal empowerment recognizes the client’s uniqueness and it is analogous to self-determination; that is, clients provide direction to the process, take control of their lives, while client social empowerment provides him or her resources and opportunity to play an important role in his or her environment and in the shaping of that environment” (p. 263).

Empowerment theories identify and help individuals and communities to recognize barriers and dynamics that allow oppression to persist as well as circumstances and actions that promote change, human empowerment, and liberation. Considering that the Strengths Perspective is used to build on people’s aspirations, strengths, resources, and resiliency and to engage in actions pursuing social justice and personal well-being (Robbins *et al.*, 2006), it can be considered a theory of empowerment. The strengths perspective is committed to promoting social and economic justice considering that social work practice deals with transactions between person and environment in which the dynamics of power and power are embedded. Client empowerment is central to a strengths based practice and the discovery of client’s strengths nurtures that empowerment (Cowger, 1994).

In addition, the Strengths Perspective has an emphasis on positive qualities and attributes, including talents, knowledge, abilities, and aspirations to reclaim personal power in their lives (C.A. Rapp and Goscha, 2006; Saleebey, 1997, Weick *et al.*, 1989).

Strengths based practices such as solution-focused therapy (Berg and De Jong, 1996), the individual placement and support model of supported employment (Becker and Drake, 2003), positive youth development and resilience approaches (Benard, 2004), and asset-building model of community development (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993), and several writings from the Kansas School of Social Work, ((Chamberlain, 1991; Chamberlain and Rapp, 1991; C.A. Rapp, 1993; Saleebey, 1992; Weick *et al.*, 1989) field studies in areas such as *people in poverty* (Jones and Bricker-Jenkins, 2002), *physical and sexual abuse* (Anderson, 2001, 2010), *older adults* (Fast and Chapin, 2002), *family violence* (Postmus, 2000), *secondary trauma* (Bell, 2003), *spirituality* (Canda and Furman, 2010), and *substance abuse* (R.C. Rapp, 2006) have contributed to the development of strengths approach in social work.

The strengths perspective is impacted by a variety of concepts and perspectives. According to Saleebey (2001a), “the ideas about healing, wholeness, and wellness that challenge the medical model; the empowerment and liberation movements within and outside of social work; the evolving resilience research and practice; the assets-based community building approaches; the power of mind and health organization approaches to individual and community change; solution focused and narrative approaches to therapy; the research on hope, positive expectations and possibility; all of these extend links to, and embolden the strengths perspective” (p. 221).

However, the strengths perspective does not consist of “only a positive reframing” of a problem, “being nice”, or compiling a list of strengths (Early and GlenMaye, 2004; Saleebey, 1996). It refers to a “consistent focus on identifying client strengths and resources and mobilizing resources that directly or indirectly improve the situation” (Early and GlenMaye, 2004, p. 123).

With the purpose of clarifying what constitutes a strengths based practice, Rapp, Saleebey, and Sullivan (2005) identified six hallmarks that characterize strengths based practices:

1. It is goal oriented: Social workers invite clients to define goals for their lives. Client-set goal attainment is the indicator social workers can use for evaluation purposes.
2. Systematic assessment of strengths: Strengths based practice uses a systematic set of protocols for assessing and documenting strengths, with an emphasis on the present (although past resources and strategies can also be useful).
3. The environment is seen as rich in resources: the natural community is the main source of opportunities, supports, resources, and people. “a central notion is that the path to goal attainment is the matching of client desires, strengths, and environment resources” (C.A. Rapp *et al.*, 2005, p. 82).
4. Explicit methods are used for using client and environmental strengths for goal attainment. For instance, in strengths case management, the strengths assessment is used to help clients set goals, elicit resources, set short-term goals and tasks, and guide role and responsibility assignments (C.A. Rapp and Goscha, 2006).
5. The relationship is hope-inducing: the relationship is clearly focused on increasing the hopefulness of the client through an empowering relationship.
6. The provision of meaningful choices is central and clients have the authority to choose: The social worker’s role is to extend the list of choices, clarifying them, and supporting the clients to become confident and to take the authority to direct the process.

While the strengths perspective encourages the exploration of possibilities and resources, it does not overlook the problems that clients bring. Yet, a strengths based practitioner will spend little time trying to understand the causes of the problem or

labeling it (Early and GlenMaye, 2004). This perspective acknowledges and takes problems, needs, and challenges in consideration. Often, these problems, situation, and challenges are where clients begin, what is most urgent, what they are compelled to talk about. However, the strength based practitioner goes beyond the challenges ahead and does not make them the priority or sole focus of intervention. Indeed, the strengths perspective believes in a resilient and self-righting capacity, opening the possibility of a fulfilling life:

“The strengths perspective does not deny the grip and thrall of addictions and how they can morally and physically sink the spirit and possibility of any individual. But it does deny the overweening reign of psychopathology as civic, moral, and medical categorical imperative. It does deny that most people are victims of abuse or of their own rampant appetites. It denies that all people who face trauma and pain in their lives inevitably are wounded or incapacitated or become less than they might” (Saleebey, 1996, p. 297). In consequence, the strengths model allows us to see possibilities rather than problems, options rather than constraints, wellness rather than sickness, which, once seen, can be achieved.

Underlying Assumptions

Given its humanistic roots, at the core of the Strengths Perspective is the belief that humans have the capacity for growth and change (Early and GlenMaye, 2004). In addition, believing that people are capable of making their own choices and taking charge of their own lives promotes empowerment. It means that human beings have the potential to use their strengths and overcome adversity as well as to contribute to society (Cowger, 1994). It implies a belief that people are doing the best they can (Weick *et al.*, 1989), as is reflected in the following underlying assumptions:

- Every individual and every environment have strengths and resources, i.e. Knowledge, talents, capacities, skills, and resources to mobilize in order to pursue their aspirations (Saleebey, 2009).
- People who face adversity typically develop ideas, capacities, and strategies that eventually serve them well (Saleebey, 2009). In other words, every individual is resilient.
- All human beings have an innate capacity for health and self-righting, which is a drive, a life force (Weick, 1992), that heals and transforms.
- Almost always, people know what is right for them. This requires a nonjudgmental attitude; “instead, the principles of knowing what is best and doing what is best places the power of decision where it should be—with the person whose life is being lived” (Weick *et al.*, 1989, p. 353).
- A personal, friendly, empathic, and accepting relationship provides the atmosphere for healing, transformation, regeneration, and resilience.

- A positive orientation to the future is more useful for healing and helping than the preoccupation with the past.
- It is possible to find the seeds for health and self-righting, even in maladaptive responses or patterns of behavior, since individuals may be trying to satisfy some need for respect, connection, affection, or control.

How to Find Strengths?

The strengths perspective provides content and structure for the assessment of achievable alternatives, the mobilization of competencies to promote change, and the building of self-confidence to promote hope (Kirst-Ashman and Hull, 2002). According to Saleebey (2006), almost anything can be considered as strength under certain conditions (p. 82). Central to this finding is where they do emerge from? For instance, a person who is agreeable may be engaging and attractive to play a role in building relationships. Certainly if he or she is disposed to being always agreeable and does not have any boundaries to the others it could be due to their fear of losing them. Facilitation in those situations requires that the individual is made aware that he or she needs to work toward his or her own goals or aspirations as well.

A strengths based practice working tool is its assessment with no rigid boundaries. It is constantly updated through the partnership and collaboration between client and social worker or the organisations and the facilitator, thus a strengths based assessment is both, a process and a product. It is a process because through an assessment, strengths based facilitator help clients define their *situations*, evaluate, and give meaning to those factors that impact their *situations*. The assessment process helps clients to tell their stories, according to their unique socially constructed reality and thus, this process is multicausal, interactive, and constantly changing (Cowger, 1994).

Strengths based practitioners need to explore the client's experiences in order to find:

- What people have learned and know about themselves, others, and their world (Early and GlenMaye, 2004; Saleebey, 2006, 2009).
- Personal qualities, traits, talents, and virtues that reside in people; display of some of them during crises and after trauma, survivors discover inner strengths, utilize the ones that they know, and also develop new ones (Early and GlenMaye, 2004; Saleebey, 1997; Weick *et al.*
- Cultural and personal stories and lore, which have been a deep source of strength for human kind providing guidance, stability, heritage, belonging, or transformation.
- People's sense of pride, defined by Wolin and Wolin (1993) as the "survivor's pride" in overcoming the odds.
- Personal and familial narratives of survival and redemption can provide strategies, tools, symbols, and metaphors for rebound.

- Researching and re-discovering the community and its different resources, which are frequently overlooked during presenting crisis.
- Family traditions, rituals, and the combination of the strengths of the nuclear and extended family members (Early and GlenMaye, 2004).
- Spiritual and world views that provide with clues around essential holistic quality of being.
- Personal hopes and dreams, which, with help, can be recovered and revitalized.

For this perspective, social workers have an opportunity to create enabling niches, as they assist people transform their lives by individually tailoring case management to each person's unique needs and by "identifying, securing, and sustaining" the personal and environmental resources needed (C. A. Rapp and Goscha, 2006, p. 54). Evidently, this perspective underscores the human capacity for resilience (Robbins *et al.*, 2006). Indeed, a strengths based assessment should follow these guidelines (Cowger, 1994; Saleebey, 1997, 2009):

- Give preeminence to the client's understanding of the facts: The central focus of the assessment is the client's view of the situation as well as the client's feelings and meanings about it. Cognitive, mental or intrapersonal assessments of the client are only relevant if they clarify the current situation or if they can help us identify strengths to use with the situation. Indeed, the process of empowerment begins by who defines the situation:

"Many alienated people have been named by others—labeled and diagnosed—in a kind of total discourse. The power to name oneself and one's situation and condition is the beginning of real empowerment" (Saleebey, 1996, p. 303).

- *Believe the client:* The belief that clients are trustworthy is central to the Strengths perspective. (Early and GlenMaye, 2004). Social workers need to re-view their attitude; that is they need to suspend their initial disbelief in clients. Thus, it takes courage and diligence on the part of social workers to regard professional work through this different lens (Saleebey, 2009).
 - Discover what the client wants.
 - Move the assessment toward personal and environmental strengths: solutions to difficult situations typically lie in strengths. This is not as easy as it would seem, as the proposition is that client strengths are central to the helping relationship is simple enough and seems uncontroversial as an important component of practice. Yet much of the social work literature suggests otherwise" (Cowger, 1994, p. 262).
 - make assessment of strengths multidimensional: both internal and external strengths are necessary to solve a situation, as well as the examination of power relationships in person-environment transactions.

- discover the client's uniqueness: assessment must be individualized to understand the client's unique situation.
- use the client's language: the product of the assessment should use a language that the client can understand (Weick *et al.*, 1989, p. 354). The feeling of "ownership" is only feasible when the assessment is open, transparent, and shared.
- avoid blame and blaming: blaming typically leads nowhere; it only deters motivation to solve the situation and increases learned helplessness.
- avoid cause and effect thinking because they are usually based on simplistic cause-effect relationships that do not consider the multiple dimensions and complexity of the client's realities.
- avoid diagnosing: "diagnosis is understood in the context of pathology, deviance, and deficits".

Saleebey (2006, p. 87) identified several questions that may be useful to identify strengths: *survival questions* (e.g., "How have you managed to survive this far given all the challenges you have had to contend with?"); *support questions* (e.g., "Who are the special people on whom you can depend?"); *exemption questions* (e.g., "When things were going well in life, what was different?"); *possibility questions* (e.g., "What are your special talents and abilities?"); *esteem questions* (e.g., "When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say?"); *perspective questions* (e.g., "What are your ideas about your current situation?"); *change questions* (e.g., "What has worked in the past to bring a better life for yourself?"); among others. These questions are not presented as a protocol and are intended to direct the helpers' attention during conversations with clients (Saleebey, 2009).

What Makes Change Possible?

A strengths based practitioner attempts to understand a client in terms of her or his strengths. This involves a systematical examination of the client's knowledge, resources, skills, and aspirations (Early and GlenMaye, 2004; Saleebey, 2009). By actively listening to the client's stories and narratives, a helper can discover the client's assets, abilities, and resources, as well as his or her concerns and challenges (Saleebey, 2006). Strupp (cited by Saleebey, 2006), who has been researching psychotherapies and positive change for decades, has repeatedly found that the most important factor across schools of psychotherapy is the quality of the helping relationship.

If we take into consideration that human beings build themselves into the world only by creating meaning, which is embedded in culture and environment, then we can understand the relevance of understanding the situation from the client's perspective. Indeed, oppressed peoples typically have their stories buried under the stereotypes.

Removing oppression and emancipating the visions and hopes of the oppressed involves a process of reconstruction, which ultimately is our role as social workers. Thus, “it is a part of the work toward liberation to collaborate in the projection of peoples’ stories, narratives, and myths outward to the institutions that have ignored or marginalized them” (Saleebey, 1996, p. 301).

When clients seek help, they are usually in a vulnerable position; they have relatively little power which is often associated with the reason why they seek help. The strengths perspective provides for a balanced power relationship between social workers and clients, by reinforcing client competence and thereby mitigating the significance of unequal power. To minimize the power imbalance between worker and client, it is also important to make assessment a joint activity in which the worker inquires, listens, and assists client in discovering, articulating, and clarifying whereas the client provides direction to the content of the assessment.

A positive relationship between the social worker and the client is a key factor in the process of recovery. The most important features of an effective helping relationship, according to Rogers (1961), are empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. These attitudes have been found essential for the healing process since it involves a nonjudgmental approach and a strong belief in the positive nature of human beings. Saleebey (2001b) includes expectancy, hope, and the placebo effect, as they are associated with positive expectations (the helper believes in the client’s inner power to transform his/her reality). This expectation mobilizes hope and the possibility of a different future (Saleebey, 2001b).

For strengths based practitioners, collaborating and partnering to achieve the client’s dreams and aspirations is crucial. A personal, empathic, and accepting relationship provides the atmosphere for healing, transformation, regeneration, and resiliency (Saleebey, 2006). Rapp (cited in Saleebey, 2006), considers an effective helping relationship “as purposeful, reciprocal, friendly, trusting, and empowering” (p. 80), and with positive expectations. Indeed, as Saleebey (1997) states, the role of the social worker is to help to create a dialogue of strength, in which the strengths based practitioner “becomes a translator who helps people see that they already possess much of what they need to proceed on their chosen path” (Weick *et al.*, 1989, p. 354).

A growing body of literature shows that the client is actually the responsible for the changes that take place in this process (Blundo, 2001). What changes and how it changes depend on what the client brings; in other words, what has been called the “extra therapeutic change” accounts for 40% of the change in the client’s outcomes. The collaborative and empathetic relationship (warm, accepting, understanding, and encouraging worker as perceived by the client) accounts for 30% of this change. The placebo effect accounts for 15% of this change; this means that the belief in the possibility of change, the increase in hope for a different situation is change-inducing.

Repeatedly, studies have shown that our techniques or clinical interventions only account for 15% of the change in client's outcomes (Blundo, 2001). Consequently, our focus should move to understanding how clients make these changes and supporting them in their unique circumstances (Blundo, 2001), with their unique resources and strategies, working toward their unique dreams, hopes, and aspirations.

Evidently, language matters in social work practice. The kind of rhetoric social workers use preserves or annuls the possibility and promise of their clients. Certain words are central to the strengths perspective: Empowerment, resilience, membership, health and wellness, and the like (Saleebey, 1996). People are competent, resilient, and responsible and valued members of a group or community. Strengths based practitioners appreciate believe in the restorative powers intrinsic to human beings and their bodies; emotions can have a profound impact on the overall health and wellness of individuals. Thus, believing in the hardiness and wisdom of the human body implies the belief in the possibility of overcoming adversity inherent to all individuals (Saleebey, 1996).

The strengths perspective demands social workers to change from a pathology-focused paradigm to a possibility-focused paradigm. This shift is more than theoretical; it demands a deep inner transformation. As Saleebey (2001b) insists, "to embrace a resilience/strengths model is not just a matter of acquiring some new techniques or a different vocabulary... it is a matter of changing one's heart and mind- a personal paradigm shift" (p. 13). The real belief in the client's capacity for change is what makes the difference. Indeed, the strengths perspective demands practitioners to adopt a different way of looking at individuals, families, and communities:

"All must be seen in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression, and trauma. The strengths approach requires an accounting of what people know and what they can do, however inchoate that may sometimes seem" (Saleebey, 1996, p. 297).

Discussion

As the literature reports, as clients recognize and develop new strengths, they continue to gain power and growth. An emphasis on the individual and environmental strengths seem to act as a stimulus for further growth and development, leading individuals to contribute, not only to their personal goals and dreams, but also to the development and growth of their families and communities (Early and GlenMaye, 2004; C.A. Rapp and Goscha, 2006; Saleebey, 1996, 2006, 2009; Weick *et al.*, 1989). Indeed, "the interplay between being and becoming and between what a person is in totality and what may develop into greater fullness mark the essential dynamic of growth" (Weick *et al.*, 1989, p. 352), which characterizes the helping process from a strengths perspective.

The quality of the helping relationship is essential for the strengths perspective. This empathetic, empowering relationship, characterized by the collaboration and partnership between two human beings, transforms the realities of both participants in the process. One discovers, uses, and transforms her or his strengths in pursuit of her or his vision, dreams, and hopes, and, thus, becomes increasingly empowered to make his or her own choices, to lead his or her life, and to contribute. The other person is also transformed; her and his attitudes and expectations change regarding the person who is guiding the process, the person who facilitates the discovery of resources, the relationship between them, and the relationship with oneself. This process takes courage, commitment, and generosity. A strengths based practitioner is required to change his or her heart and mind. It is a “personal paradigm shift” (Saleebey, 1997, p. 13).

While the Strengths Perspective has reached most, if not all, areas of social work practice, an emphasis on deficit, disease, and dysfunction still persists in the field (Cowger, 1994; C.A. Rapp *et al.*, 2005). However, As Blundo (2001) asserts, “what is most problematic with the inclusion of strengths talk in social work conversations is that the insertion of strengths and empowerment language into a traditional frame gives a false sense of understanding to those learning and engaging in practice.” (p. 301). Many social workers may not be ready to shift from a traditional social work practice to a strengths framework because it challenges our cultural and professional traditions; it questions our “truths” and hidden meanings (Blundo, 2006). In fact,

“to learn the strengths perspective one must seriously challenge the basic foundations of practice knowledge, the 80 years of variations on a basic theme of disease and expertise as it is taught and practiced today. Anything less is a distortion of the meanings employed in a practice from a strengths/empowerment perspective” (Blundo, 2001, p. 301).

How can we expect to find the assets, the strengths, the protective factors among the damage if we only see the damage? We, as social workers, need to look beyond the client’s damage and wounds. Sometimes we feel more “competent” or “empowered” when seeing the damage since we were trained to find it. To see beyond the damage it is necessary to fight against ourselves, our biases, our training, and even our own culture. We need to have positive expectations for our clients and truly believe in them.

A related question is: How can we find strengths in our clients if we cannot find strengths within ourselves? Affirming our inner strengths is challenging, because it requires personal exploration, which many social workers are not willing to do. Because many social workers have been trained in the damage model, this negative perspective is applied to themselves and is much too painful to bear. However, the main tool of a social worker is his or herself (verbal and non verbal communication, intuition, capacity for relationship, attitudes, life experience, and self-concept, among

others). Without self-exploration, the most important tool of the social worker (self) may be misused and is potentially destructive. Moreover, the belief in a client's strengths and positive expectations cannot be faked. So, it is crucial to truly believe in a client and his or her potential. This can only be achieved by shifting our internal perspective and becoming aware of our own strengths and resilience. Any helper must develop a deep self-awareness to effectively promote this change.

How can we help someone discover hope in the future if we do not have hope in our own lives? The importance of hope in resilience promotion and recovery has been previously discussed. We need to discover our own hope and positive expectations for our own lives. Again, it is a challenging process of self-recovery, which involves a positive attitude towards one's life in general. Considering that hope is also related to spirituality, it is necessary to reexamine our belief system, the meaning of our lives, and our sense as a whole person in connection to humankind. It is not a daunting task, but it is definitely rewarding.

How can we provide opportunities for creating turning point effects if we do not believe in change? There is no possibility for creating any opportunity without a fundamental belief in change, first. A human being always has the possibility of change. Despite damaging experiences, what we learned about resilience shows that human beings have the capacity to construct new narratives for their lives. Benard (2004) insists on the importance of changing the life trajectories of children from risk to resilience, beginning with changing the beliefs of the adults in their environment.

How can we expect ordinary magic to happen if we do not believe in it? We must believe in the magic of resilience and we have to believe that the capacity for resilience is ordinary and universal. With these beliefs in place, it becomes obvious that everybody has the ability to bounce back from adversity; we can truly have positive expectations. If we believe these things, in the helping encounter, magic is likely to happen. Social workers are like alchemists because they have the possibility of changing lead into gold, by discovering the clients' strengths and resilience and encouraging this magical transformation by the power of the word and a deep relationship.

Social workers interested in the strengths perspective need to engage in a personal process of analysis and transformation, recognizing that this will be a continuous process, recognizing signs of the traditional framework in their practice, becoming aware of themselves and their attitudes, biases, and limitations, and defining a new position for themselves in the helping relationship; that is, removing their "expert" hats and acknowledging the client's expertise, knowledge, and capabilities. When we have "emptied our cups", we can have them ready to receive what the client brings, in an open, curious, encouraging, empathetic, and empowering way. As Blundo (2001) affirms:

“Challenging this cultural and linguistic tradition, as well as a process that has become synonymous with the social work profession, is a serious task that needs to be undertaken if social work is to embrace a belief in human resilience and strengths” (p. 304).

Strengths based practices challenge us, our professional traditions, our cultural influences, our beliefs and biases. As the client gains power and growth, the social worker grows as well. This process takes us away from our comfort zone, our habits, and hidden meanings in a process of discovery of our own strengths, resources, capabilities; our own resilience; our own hopes and capacity for transformation. In other words, without the “expert” hats, we are only, and truly, human beings, who care and believe in the human being sitting across the room, and thus, a partnership, emerges more easily and empowers our partner in this endeavor.

This paper had referred to Gandhian approaches to self reliance and inner strengths development in the beginning. It is appropriate that I end this paper with another Gandhi quote “Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.” This quote illustrates the kind of paradigm shift that strengths based practitioners are required. Without our own labels, we, social workers, engage in the collaboration with another human being by using our own strengths, capabilities, skills, and internal and external resources; we tap into our own resilience with the ups and downs of work and life; we discover and gain our own power within the environments and transactions in which we participate; we come to work in pursuit of our own dreams, hopes, and aspirations; we use our own inspiration to keep moving forward, to set a vision... and when our thoughts, words, and practice are in harmony; we also inspire others. Strengths based practices assists us to build hope, in fact active hope in our society.

“Be the change you want to see in the world.” Gandhi

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