

The Client-Centered Integrative Strengths-Based Approach:

Ending Longstanding Conflict between Social Work Values and Practice

L'APPROCHE BASÉE SUR LES FORCES INTÉGRATIVE CLIENT-CENTRÉE:

TERMINAISON DU CONFLIT DE LONGUE DATE ENTRE LES VALEURS DE TRAVAIL SOCIAL ET LA PRATIQUE

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Abstract: The 1980s saw the rising of strengths-based approach, which is now coming to be one of the most influential perspectives in the field of both social work theories and practice. It is an attempt in response to the demand for ending the longstanding conflict between social work values and practice caused by the traditional deficit-focused approach, and also for the search for the essence of social work. As the concept of strength is technically vague and contradictory, it makes the current strengths-based perspective impossible to address simultaneously humanity caring and service efficacy as the two fundamental demands of social work practice. Therefore, grounded on literature review of the strengths perspective and reflecting of our social work practice, a new strengths-based approach, the client-centered integrative strengths-based approach, is proposed to fulfill the two fundamental demands of social work, which is to assist clients to make full use of their strengths and resources, and to cope better with and exceed the “problems”, and to enrich their life through the process of transition and reduction of “problems” with the help of social workers.

Key words: Strengths-based Approach; Strength; Problem; Nature of Social Work

Résumé: Les années 1980 ont vu la montée de l'approche basée sur forces, qui vient maintenant pour être l'une des perspectives les plus influentes dans le domaine des deux théories et pratique en matière de travail social. C'est une tentative en réponse à la demande en finir le conflit de longue date entre les valeurs de travail social et la pratique provoquées par l'approche déficit-focalisée traditionnelle, et également de la recherche de l'essence du travail social. Car le concept de la force est techniquement vague et contradictoire, il rend la perspective basée sur les forces actuelle impossible d'adresser simultanément l'humanité s'inquiétant et d'entretenir l'efficacité comme deux exigences fondamentales de pratique en matière de travail social. Par conséquent, fondé sur l'examen de littérature de la perspective de forces et de se refléter de notre pratique en matière de travail social, on propose une nouvelle approche basée sur forces, l'approche basée sur forces intégrative client-centrée, pour accomplir les deux exigences fondamentales du travail social, qui est d'aider des clients pour utiliser pleinement leurs forces et ressources, et pour faire face mieux à et pour dépasser les «problèmes», et pour enrichir leur vie par le processus de la transition et la réduction de «problèmes» avec l'aide des assistants sociaux.

Mots clés: Approche basée sur forces; Force; Problème; Nature de travail social

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Unsatisfied with the traditional deficit-focused perspective in mental health services, a group of scholars at Welfare College of Kansas University in the United States, began to make the earliest exploration to reform social work perspectives in 1980s. As a result, they created a new model, the strengths-based case management, to deal with the main problems faced in the social work practice when applying the traditional deficit-focused perspective. The strengths-based approach soon drew great attention and became a significant perspective for social work theories and practice as it was presented publicly in 1980s. Since then, its applied fields extend from the earliest mental health services (Rapp & Chamberlain, 1985) to the elderly services (Lewis, 1996; Perkins & Tice, 1994; 1995; 1999), women services (Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995), teenagers services (Yip, 2003; 2005), family (Bell, 2003; Carter, 1997; Erera & Fredriksen), poverty (Sousa, Ribeiro & Rodrigues, 2006), multi-culture (Chazin, Kaplan & Terio, 2000; Lee, 2003; Voss et al., 1999), the social work education (Cox, 2001), the social policy (Chapin, 1995) and etc. In light of the service methods, the strengths-based approach develops from the first form of case management to a variety of integrated models, such as uncovering survival abilities in sexually abused children with combination of the strengths perspective and resilience (Anderson, 1997), treating juvenile offenders and domestic violence offenders with blending of the strengths perspective and the solution-focused brief therapy (Clark, 1999; Lee, Uken & Sebold, 2004), addressing youth obesity with incorporating the strengths perspective into a biopsychosocial model (Goetz & Caron: 1999), organizing delivery of interventions for rural substance abuse clients with combination of the strengths perspective and behavioral contracting (Clark, Leukefeld & Godlaski, 1999), arresting the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder with integration of strengths perspective and constructive perspective (Norman, 2000), working with battered women with implementing the feminist and strengths perspective (Black, 2003; Mary & Katherine, 1997), counseling with the elderly with consideration of resiliency and spirituality in the strengths perspective (Langer, 2004). Furthermore, it also brings about a heated debate over the nature of social work (Sullivan & Rapp, 1994; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthard, 1989). The definition of strengths in the strengths perspective, however, is still vague and inconsistent, and it causes much confusion in social work practice. In attempt to sharpen this perspective and end the conflict between the social work values and practice, this article will focus on reflecting the literature debates over the strengths perspective and putting forward a new strengths-based approach grounded in social work practice.

The literature talks of the strengths perspective can be divided into three different levels. The first is to regard the strengths perspective as a new intervening approach, opposite to the deficit-focused approach; the second is to see the strengths perspective as a basic view of social work practice, balanced over client's strengths and problems; the third is to perceive the strengths perspective as a philosophical principle, addressing the basic demand of social work. The following discussion will be unfolded by the clue of the above mentioned three different levels.

1. THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE AS A NEW INTERVENING APPROACH

In a report on the treatment of chronic mental illness, Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt from Welfare College of Kansas University criticized the fundamental theoretic assumption of the traditional deficit-focused perspective which takes clients as help-seekers for granted (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989: 351). They summarized the basic principles of the framework of the deficit-focused perspective, which include: a) problem is the lack of a certain capacity of client; b) the nature of the problem is defined by the professional; and c) the aim of treatment is to overcome problems (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989: 352). Based on the analysis of limitations to the deficit-focused perspective, they proposed a strengths-based approach, assuming that everyone has a wide range of gifts, capacities, skills, resources, and aspirations, and can make use of them for growth if his/her positive personality and abilities are highly concerned (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989: 352). Accordingly, social workers should stick to three significant principles when they apply the strengths-based approach to practice. They are the following assumptions: a) clients have the capacity to decide on what is best for them; b) clients are able to act in the best way; and c) clients' personal history and individuality are the outcomes of constant transaction between individual and social environment (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989: 353). Obviously, in their point of view the strengths perspective is a new intervening approach aiming at uncovering the client's strengths and hope and putting them into action, opposite to the traditional deficit-focused approach (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989: 353-354).

Assessment is one of the key phases for social work practice, and also a crucial stage on which the strengths perspective can be realized. For example, if assessment is focused on the client's problems, the social work intervening approach weighs much on the treatment of the client's deficits (Cowger, 1994: 264). Conversely, from the strengths perspective, the social work assessment is focused on the utilization of the client's strengths and resources. Cowger (1994: 265-267) specified the social work practice principles into 12 guidelines on doing strengths assessment. They are: a) to give preeminence to the client's understanding of the facts; b) to believe the client; c) to discover what the client wants; d) to move the assessment toward personal and environmental strengths; e) to make assessment of strengths multidimensional; f) to use the assessment to discover uniqueness; g) to use the language the client can understand; h) to

make assessment a joint activity between worker and client; i) to reach a mutual agreement on the assessment; j) to avoid blame and blaming; k) to avoid cause-and-effect thinking; and l) to assess, not diagnose.

Researchers may define the client's strengths from different angles. Rapp & Goscha (2006: 40-52) believed that the client's strengths are consisted of the personal and environmental strengths; Saleebey (2006a: 10) emphasized that the client's strengths include three interlinked aspects as "CPR". C represents competence, capacities and courage; P stands for promise, possibility, and positive expectations; and R means resilience, reserves, and resources. In addition, the cultural strengths were also highlighted in the strengths perspective (Mo, 2003: 386-387). To clarify the definition of strengths in the social work practice field, Morley D. Glicken (2004; 21-28) set up a list of 45 criteria for better operation of the strengths perspective which involve the client's attributions, coping skills and abilities in adversity, prior and current successful life experiences, environmental resources, related cultural and social capacities, and willingness and determination to overcome difficulties and so on. He insisted that the strengths perspective takes client as an active change agent, and places high weigh on discovering and utilizing the client's strengths, particularly the cultural and religious strengths by motivating his/her potential positive and healthy behavior, as well as intensifying his supportive network (Glicken, 2004; 6).

The focus of the debates at this level of the strengths perspective is to define strengths by directly comparing the strengths-based approach to the deficit-focused approach, and to consider strengths as the opposite of problems. Therefore, the strengths perspective would face a critique that overemphasizing the client's strengths means overlooking the client's problems (Glicken, 2004; 206). McMillen, Morris & Sherraden (2004: 323-324) posited that the best social work practice always needs a double focus on both problems and strengths as a conclusion in their literature review of social work over one hundred years history.

2. THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE AS A BASIC VIEW OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

As a renowned American strengths perspective researcher, Saleebey (1996: 297) argued that the strengths perspective is intended to correct the mistake of overemphasizing problems made by the traditional deficit-focused perspective, and to value the client's strengths and opportunity as the good stimulus for his growth instead of simply denying the existence of the client's problems. He further noted that it is essential in the strengths perspective to assess the client's problems, pains, trouble, and illness in order to build up a more balanced, effective intervening approach (Saleebey, 2006b: 284). Weick & Chamberlain (1997: 45) jointly made a significant exploration on how to combine the client's problems with strengths. Whatever problems the client faces, they believed, the problems are only a part of the client's life, not his whole life. If the social worker simply focuses his/her attention on the client's problems, he/she may neglect the client's strengths and the success in struggling against problems (Weick & Chamberlain, 1997: 46). Having problems is not the real problem. What really matters is how to face, cope with, and exceed problems. This is what the strengths perspective wants to do by utilizing the resources of client, family, and community (Weick & Chamberlain, 1997: 47).

It should be noted that, to explain what the strengths perspective was about, Saleebey (1996: 297) listed the possibility versus the problems, instead of the strengths versus the problems, taking the making of possibility as the core element to shape the strengths perspective. The 10 significant principles outlined by him are respectively : a) person is defined as unique, and traits, talents, resources add up to strengths; b) therapy is possibility focused; c) personal accounts are the essential route to knowing and appreciating the person; d) practitioner knows the person from the inside out; e) childhood trauma is not predictive, and it may weaken or strengthen the individual; f) centerpiece of work is the aspirations of family, individual, or community; g) individuals, family, or community are the experts; h) possibilities for choice, control, commitment, and personal development are open; i) resources for work are the strengths, capacities, and adaptive skills of the individual, family, or community; and j) help is centered on getting on with one's life, affirming and developing values and commitments, and making and finding membership in or as a community (Saleebey, 1996: 298).

Actually, following this view, the disputes of the strengths perspective are not over strengths versus problems, but over social worker versus client, that is, who is centered on in the delivery of the social work services. The deficit-focused perspective is concerned much about the client's problems, assuming that social worker has the professional power to name the client's problems and to design and organize the intervening plan, while the client does not have such abilities (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthard, 1989: 351). Apparently, the deficit-focused perspective overlooks the client's inner strengths and motivation, and represses the client's opportunity, courage and determination in overcoming problems (Saleebey, 2006b: 280). Therefore, the deficit-focused perspective would primarily serve the social worker, not the client (Weick & Chamberlain, 1997: 46). As the significant shift of the paradigm of the social work perspective, the strengths perspective focuses on the client's strengths, let the client decide what he/she wants (Rapp, 2007: 185).

Saleebey (2006a) put it well:

The central proposition of social work practice, as I see it, is to exploit the best in all of us; to work together to surmount adversity and trouble; to confront the appalling with all the tools available within and around us; to wrestle distress and disillusionment to the ground with determination and grit; to grab the hands of others and march unwaveringly, even heroically, in the direction of hopes, dreams and possibilities. (p.22)

Therefore, the talks of the strengths perspective at this level are intended to go beyond the phase of strengths versus problems, and to build strengths and problems into the new client-centered view of social work practice. But such discussions would eventually lead to the dispute over who has the right to define the client's strengths or problems. This would require social workers to deal with the ethical problems in social work practice (Carver & Scheier, 2003: 88).

3. THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

In fact, the strengths perspective comes partly out of the exploration related to social work values and ethics. Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt (1989: 352) argued that the strengths perspective is an attempt in response to the need of better coping with the problems in social work practice, as well as the demand on social work philosophical principles in order to manifest social work fundamental values in social work practice such as respect for human dignity and worth. Unfortunately, these important social work values can not be fulfilled under the context of the deficit-focused perspective because it considers the client as the help-seeker who is not able to cope with his/her own problems without assistance (Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989: 351). Conversely, the strengths perspective, as Weick & Chamberlain (1997: 47) emphasized, can assist social workers to regain the power of social work fundamental values and exploit individual and societal strengths and resources.

Sullivan & Rapp (1994) made a further research to explore how the strengths perspective can fully meet the demand of social work fundamental values. It includes the following four cardinal values: a) affirming problem-solving capacities and self-determination. The strengths perspective encourages the social worker to establish a collaborative partnership with the client, try not to control the social work processes, and to assist the client to utilize his strengths and resources. To this end, social workers can apply the client's problem-solving capacities and self-determination into social work practice; b) affirming uniqueness and individuality. It seems that focusing on the client's strengths is intended to see the client as the uniqueness and arrangement of the service program is to meet the individual need. Moreover, the strengths perspective also adopts a set of conventional, positive language and easily embodies the client's uniqueness and individuality; c) utilizing and developing social resources. The strengths perspective first emerged in the form of the case management with the aim to help mental patients to discover and develop their strengths and resources, especially the community resources to maintain and strengthen their social support and enhance their participation; and d) affirming worth and dignity. The strengths perspective adopts the client-centered self-help strategy to secure the fulfillment of the client's strengths. This manifests the respect for the client's worth and dignity in social work practice (Sullivan & Rapp, 1994: 85-97).

To narrow the gap between the social work fundamental values and the concrete practice, Saleebey (2006a: 16-20) summarized the basic strengths perspective principles and made the following assumptions: a) every person, family, group, and community has strengths; b) trauma and abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious but this may also be sources for challenge and opportunity; c) assuming that you do not know the upper limits of the capacities to grow and change and take individual, group, and community considerations seriously; d) we best serve clients by collaborating with them; e) every environment is full of resources; and f) caring, caretaking, and context. In one sense, social work is about care and caretaking (Saleebey, 2006a: 20).

Undoubtedly, the purpose of the discussions at the social work philosophical level is to incorporate social work fundamental values into social work practice in an effort to overcome the dilemma caused by the traditional social work deficit-focused perspective: the split between social work values and practice. But such ethical discussions tend to draw critics and lead to suspicion that the strengths perspective is more likely a value stance, not a clear and effective intervening approach (Staudt, Howard & Drake, 2001: 21).

4. A NEW STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

As the strengths perspective may be interpreted as an intervening approach, or as a basic view of social work practice, or as a philosophical principle of social work practice, it inevitably gets confusing and largely depends on the researchers for its definition. It is no doubt that social work practitioners should consider the strengths perspective at these three levels respectively if they want to clarify its definition. Actually, no matter what level the strengths perspective focuses on, it has the same goal, namely, overcoming the ethical problem of lack of respect for the client's worth and dignity and the practical shortage of lack of confidence for the client's strengths and resources caused by the deficit-focused perspective

(Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989: 352). In other words, the strengths perspective should be intended to respond simultaneously to the social work two fundamental requests: caring for the client and efficacy of service. These two requests, however, have been long separated by the positivistic view of science underpinning social work practice, which brings about being estranged and unequal between social worker and client, control and manipulation of social work service (Saleebey, 2006a: 2).

To overcome the problem of being vague and inconsistent in conceptual discussion of the strengths perspective, it is necessary to put forward a new strengths-based approach, with the aim to meet these two requests simultaneously and to end the longstanding conflict between social work values and practice.

In the process of establishing professional relationship between social worker and client, this new strengths-based approach considers client as the director, and social worker as a partner or facilitator. What social worker needs to do is to place himself/herself into the context where client lives, keep open to client's different way of life, understand client's feelings and thoughts from his/her own point of view, and take client's accounts as the essential route to know the person (Saleebey, 1996b: 298). Meanwhile, the social worker should encourage client to discover and utilize his/her own strengths and let himself/herself decide what to do (Rapp, 2007: 185).

As for the concrete intervening procedure, this new strengths-based approach consists of three basic steps. First, discover problematic strengths. That is to transfer the client's problems into challenge and stress, and to understand the impact of problems on the client's daily life in the client's eyes, and to uncover the client's strengths in his/her struggle against problems. Second, find out current life strengths. It includes the client's advantage strengths and daily life arrangement strengths which are not directly related to problems. Third, broaden daily life strengths. This involves disclosing the client's prior successful experience, future arrangement, others' support, as well as the client's behavioral and cultural strengths. Following these above mentioned three steps, social worker can assist client to work on the problematic strengths within "problems", and go on to utilize the client's current life strengths, and then to broaden the client's daily life strengths.

For the purpose of social work practice, this new strengths-based approach concentrate not only on reducing the client's problems, but also on assisting the client to discover and utilize his/her own strengths and resources, and to cope with and exceed problems for life richness through the process of reducing problems.

In summary, this new strengths-based approach is a client-centered process through which the social worker assists the client to transform problems into challenge, and to discover and utilize the client's strengths and resources, and then to cope with and exceed the client's problems to enrich his/her life. It is a client-centered integrative strengths-based approach illustrated as following.

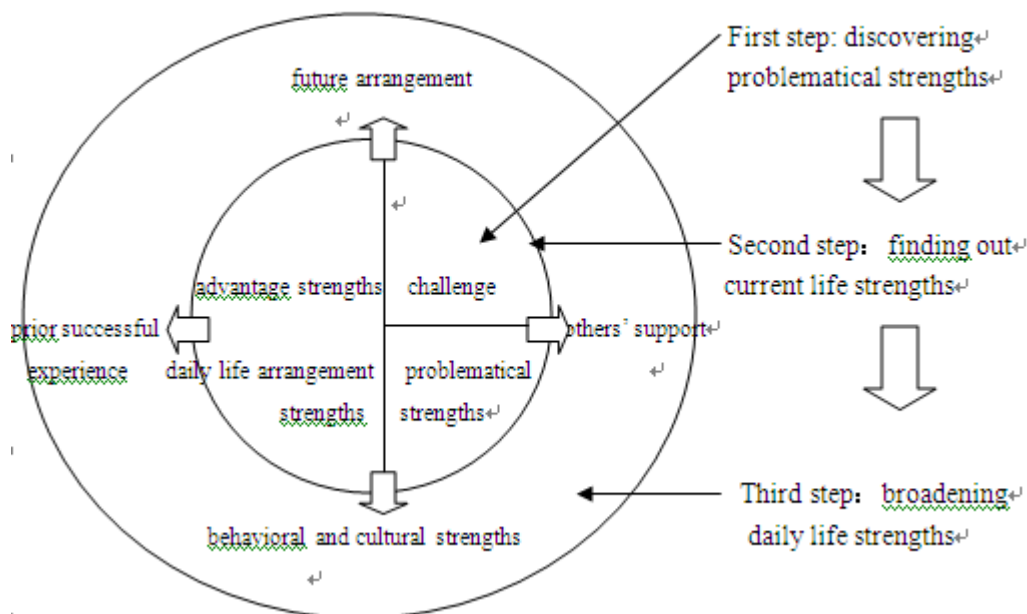


Figure 1: the client-centered integrative strengths-based approach

5. CASE

From 2006, we, a team formed by university teachers and students majoring in social work, began the program at a privately owned elementary school for immigrants' children in Xiamen, a city on the southeast coast of the mainland China, starting with the intervening program to help those immigrants' children to improve their academic achievement and related performance such as behavior modification and emotion control. The total number of students from Grade One to Grade Six was nearly 600, whose parents were all from the underprivileged remote rural areas in western and central China and seeking for employment in Ximen. Because of their parents' weaker status in education, income, and the cultural conformation to the urban ways, those children face a lot of challenge once they begin schooling in the city.

Our client was a physically weak 10-year-old girl who was in Grade Three. Two years ago she immigrated to Xiamen with her divorced mother from Shichuan, a relatively poor province in inland China. As she hardly learned any English before, she often found herself frustrated in the English class and gradually lost her self-esteem and got depressed. Although she wanted to catch up, she had no way to make it, and her mother was of little help for her work load and poor education. Social workers contacted the family and offered to tutor the girl English. They found that the girl had learned the alphabet and a few words. Making it an encouraging starting point, they managed to reason the girl to face the challenge of English and helped her develop her own learning style. This is the client's problematical strengths. When tutoring her English, social workers also helped the client to sharpen her capacities on Chinese and maths, and encouraged the client to apply her reading ability to her English learning as the application of the client's advantage strengths. Meanwhile, social workers worked together with her mother to regulate the client's daily life in an effort to discover the client's daily life arrangement strengths. On this basis, social workers took a further step to help the client exploit her prior successful learning experience, and offered more space for the client to decide her future arrangement on her own. To gain more support for the client's growth, social workers visited the client's teachers and motivated her and her classmates to help each other as the utilization of the behavioral and cultural strengths.

Actually, as illustrated above, the utilization of the client's strengths and resources functions as a package, instead of set routine. But this new strengths-based approach provides a practical conventional framework for social workers to assist client to discover and utilize his/her own strengths and resources more fully and to demonstrate social work fundamental values in the concrete social work practice.

6. CONCLUSION

To settle the longstanding conflict between social work values and practice caused by the traditional deficit-focused perspective, the 1980s saw the rising of strengths perspective in social work in the Western society. After two decades, it comes to be one of the most significant social work intervening approaches and theories. However, the discussions of strengths perspective nowadays are on themes at three different levels: one is to take the strengths perspective as a new intervening approach based on the idea of strengths versus problems; the second, as a basic view of social work practice with consideration of strengths and problems together; the third, as a philosophical principle of social work practice with the aim to explore the nature of social work. These different points eventually cause the ambiguity in the conceptual logics and can not realize the goal that it was originally set up.

Grounded on the concrete social work practice experiences, the author put forward a new model, the client-centered integrative strengths-based approach for ending the longstanding conflict between social work values and practice. It is to transform the client's problems into challenges, and to encourage client to discover and utilize his/her own strengths and resources, and to learn to cope with and exceed problems through the process of reducing problems for life richness with the assistance of social workers.

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