



# Strengths-Based Approach in Social Work: A distinct ethical advantage

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The author believes that social work and human services professionals can see great outcomes when they work with the inherent strengths of individuals, family groups and organisations. Whenever we assist people in their recovery and their empowerment, our commitment to build on these inherent strengths goes a long way. In all humility this is about a way of asking the client three simple but pertinent questions: ‘What has worked for you before? What does not work for you? And what might work in the present situation for you?’ These three questions will allow facilitators and clients to make important changes in the processes and goals of engagement that will see through a variety of changes; as workers we are often wonderstruck as, with every change, clients seem to blossom. People pick up their bits and pieces and reconstruct hope for the future. In this paper the author will describe this approach in social work and expand on its assumptions and its core elements.

Key words: Resilience, Strengths-based Practice, Strengths approach, Social Work, Empowerment



## Introduction

It is important at the outset to discuss the scope and objectives of this paper. In this paper, I intend focusing on the inherent strengths of individuals, families groups and organisations and how social work and human services professionals can utilise them to aid people's recovery and empowerment (Pulla, 2013). In my previous work I have explained strengths based practices as empowering alternatives to traditional methods with individuals, group or organizational work (Pulla, 2014a, Pulla, 2014b, Pulla & Kay, 2016). This introductory paper provides a bird's eye view of the assumptions, and describes the core elements of this practice.

I want to highlight that all individuals want to recover, gain power over their problems and have a laugh when things become smooth and activities that they began finally end well. Why would we as social workers desire to steal the thunder of people's own joy of making mistakes; of people seeing their lives sometimes torn, at times broken into pieces? They get up, pick up the pieces, reconstruct their lives and move on. Why would social workers want to steer them away from this crucial element in their lives and invite them into dependencies? In my view, it is our mindset as social worker that requires a change. We may surely have expertise, theory, and practice skill and backing from the organisation or the agency where we are employed. We may be utilising the agency or organisational resources and wherewithal to assist our clients – but all of this is just one side of the coin. The other side is the client and his or her participation with his or her inherent strengths as an individual. This applies to families as well as groups.

I believe that fundamental to social work practice is empowerment, but I also realise that empowerment takes several forms. The easiest empowerment strategies come when social workers use their expertise to meet client needs, play an active role in case management either on behalf of the client or with some involvement of the client. Similarly, rescuing comes easily and rescuing without determining the efficacy of the role that a client can play in his or her own recovery is highly detrimental to the very practice of empowerment.

Let me take the analogy further. People have been using hats and umbrellas for centuries. That ability to shield themselves from heat or pouring rain is the simplest yet critical task- basic to all human living, an instinctive reaction to protect oneself from a downpour of rain or scorching heat. As social workers we do not want to be adjusting their hats nor adjusting or carrying an umbrella for them. Yet we notice that spoon feeding is not uncommon. Often social work takes pride in its work with people in their recovery and their empowerment through crises. We might have even suggested how others in similar situations came out with reasonable success. But if our commitment is to build on the inherent strengths of the people that we serve, our practice needs a slight change in our approach. We need to let our clients discover their own strengths, remain there for them if there is a critical moment that they require support. That extra mile we travel creates more self-respecting people that will eventually appreciate our interventions.

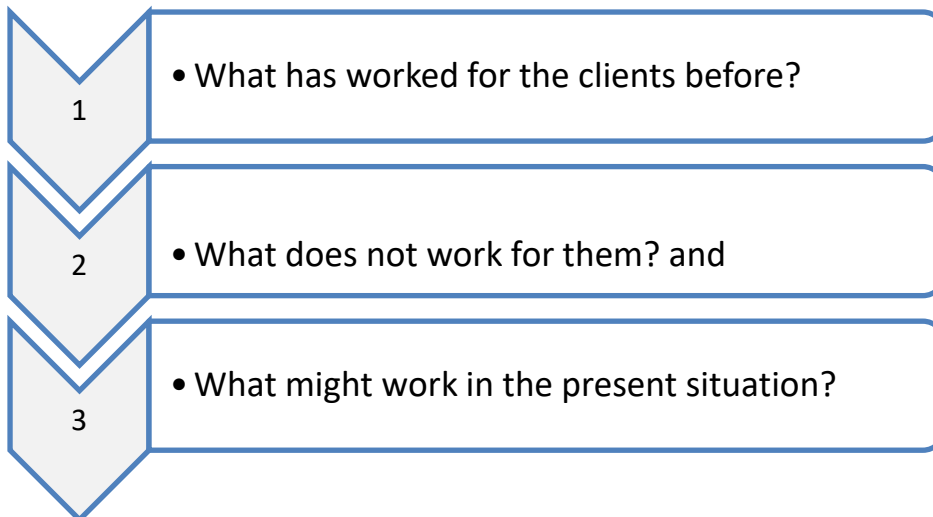
Such an approach would take us away from categorising people. We would not see them as a hopeless, deranged, mental wreck, disabled, or lazy larrikin. Instead we see them as

people having challenges, some long-term and some short-term – some that could use help or assistance from us as social workers and some that merely seek an endorsement, a nod or a pat on their back for surviving, for thriving and feeding their potential flourish inside.

Many times I noticed that people in need get into the habit of adding a descriptive to themselves. An eight-year-old child ran into me in one of my previous offices in child safety and announced,

‘Hey, I have ADHD!’ I asked him what that was, and where he had learnt about it. He explained that he heard when his mother was being told by the medical practitioner and was writing a memo to help out the school teachers about his deficit

There is no denying that the child needs help and professional assistance, but I am more concerned with the tag or ascribed pathology that he owns and announces himself to receive some attention? Deficits exist. We don’t deny them. But those deficits are widely described in exaggerated terms and often presented as unsurmountable, requiring a super specialist’s attention. Strengths exist too. But they receive less or no mention at all. Strengths-based practice is all about deliberate planned and sustained use of strengths and mentioning them and counting them and working with them. Persons’ groups and organisations that suggest acceptance of their condition as being hopeless or helpless to change are constructively challenged through this practice. We have a great opportunity here to foster hope from within and by constantly focusing and working with precedent successes, we could see change by asking small questions:



The above three questions allow facilitators and clients to make important changes in the processes and goals of engagement that allow the desired changes to blossom. In this paper I intend explaining the strengths-based approach in social work and expand on its assumptions and its core elements that:

- All people have strengths and capacities
- People can change
- People change and grow through their strengths and capacities
- Problems can blind people from noticing their strengths

- People do have expertise to solve the problem

In 2006, I launched the inaugural international conference on strengths-based practice in India, the land of Gandhi (Pulla, 2006). The core values of the 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 reflecting on how they want their situation to be. Today in the western model of social work which to a large extent has pervaded the globe and has even returned to India with more formalized frameworks, the core values of Gandhi are quite evident. To call strengths-based practice a Gandhian mantra may sound a shade simplistic; nonetheless the core elements that he deployed in the context of communities and groups ensured personal and social reform and social change in the fabric of Indian society. Certainly Gandhi's work in India provided much to the critical frameworks in western social work such as the anti-oppressive framework and the human rights engagement much in vogue 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 such as family, religious bodies, schools, and finally he utilised such approaches even in his petitions and advocacy for the independence of India from British Governance.

Let us begin with ourselves as facilitators. It would be easier if we begin by accepting that everyone has strengths. As people we have experiences, abilities and knowledge that make us move on in life. 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 us to identify and build on our strengths so that we can reach our goals, and retain or regain independence in our daily lives. Why work in this way? As a practitioner I have seen that the approach improves self-care abilities, builds one's confidence and self-esteem of and allows our clients to carry out daily living activities quite independently.

Strength based practice in simple terms present approaches that promote resilience as opposed to dealing with deficits (Pulla, 2006, p. 120).

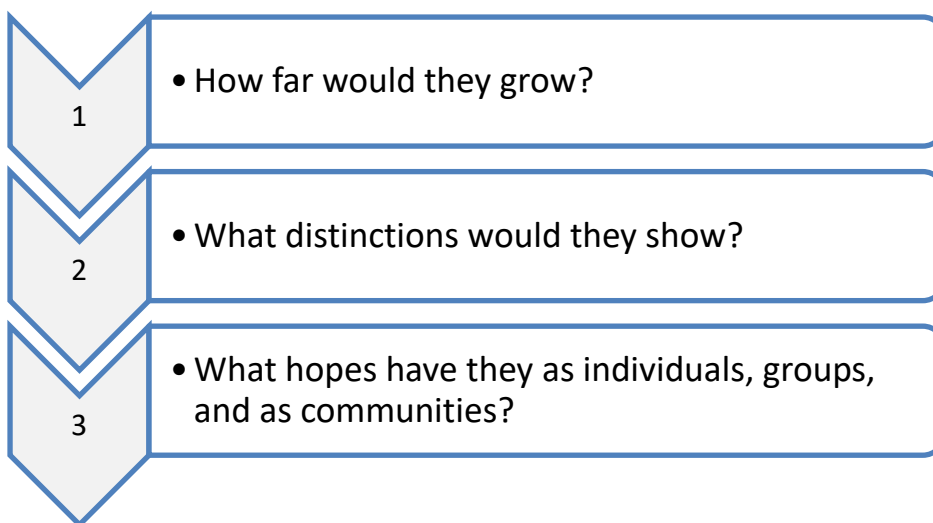
Strength-based practices are gaining impetus globally in diverse fields of human services management, health care, education and training, reminding us that all environments have resources and that in every society individuals and institutions are willing to assist each other to bring about human wellbeing. 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 (Pulla, 2013, Pulla, 2014b). Community groups in Asia and the Pacific region have been dealing with self-reliance and indigenous development for several decades. In fact, these self-reliance experiences can reflect the inherent facets of a strengths approach in social work.

The main notion that we carry home in the strengths-based approach is that people do have strengths and resources and that they are able to put them to use. Social work, similar to psychology, for a long time premised itself to work with deficit-based approaches, ignoring the strengths and experiences of the participants and to a large extent social workers that identify

themselves as working in the field of mental health predominantly under the medical model continue to work with deficits and identifications of deficits. In a strengths-based approach the focus is on the individual not on the content. Strengths-based methodologies do not ignore problems. Instead they define issues differently. Our focus here is on what is working well. This belief in inherent strengths focuses on identifying and mobilizing the resources and assets, respecting the inherent wisdom, and knowledge that every person has, and leads to a re-discovery of these resources within the environment in which they live.

An opportunity is created to recall one's inner strengths (Early & GlenMaye, 2004). The Strengths Perspective recognises that for the most part of life, people face adversity, become resilient and resourceful and learn new strategies to overcome attending adversities. It would be appropriate to consider the processes of coping and resilience in the context of a strengths perspective as the processes of coping and resilience provide the opportunity and capacity for individuals to navigate their way towards psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources available to them. Such resources during crisis will provide them culturally meaningful ways to enhance their resilience (Pulla, 2013, Pulla, 2014a, Pulla, 2014b).

The accent is certainly on waking up to see prospects for growth and development. The strengths perspective does not do away with the real pains and troubles that affect our clients and our societies. There are a number of problems in developed nations as well as countries that are classified as developing countries. Poverty is one that cannot be escaped. Child sexual abuse and violence towards women and the elderly seems to be on the increase. Displacement across the world of people moving from one habitat to another as a result of civil war, strife and or religious differences seems to be engulfing the world like a plague. Torture and trauma and racism all seem to be pervasive problems. Youth suicide seems to be increasing. These are not mythical problems – they exist. From a problems perspective there are many children from war-torn areas entering countries as refugees; some come with families and some as orphans, but all of them are forced to flee, contributing to just one side of the picture. Yet from another side, despite their trauma, their little lives are also potentials for recovery. Many of our social problems compel us as facilitators to think about the upper limits of human capacity.



The above questions will define our methodology to go beyond the assessment, diagnosis, or profiling and presenting a ruling on our clients' lives. If we aim for social work



and human services to be professions that work with people to build their hopes, values, aspirations, and visions, then a strengths approach perceptibly offers all possibilities through collaborative work with our clients. For this to happen we need to be open to the idea that our clients do have wisdom, knowledge, and experience. When we blend this with our professional skills and experience we could see a valuable outcome that a client appreciates and owns. This could not happen if the client or the end user is not heard and not asked in the first place to speak.

### **Usefulness of this approach**

Delving into the cultural obsession with pathology, Wolin and Wolin (1993) and Saleebey (1996) reflected that problems exist, and people are wounded or incapacitated or become less performing in their own outlook and therefore may be wanting to dig into weaknesses. It would be important to clarify and equally challenge a common question relating to the way we avoid weaknesses in this practice. Do we avoid weaknesses totally? Adopting a strengths-based approach does not necessitate dropping weaknesses from a list (Early & GlenMaye, 2004; Saleebey, 1996); it only means that we do not begin with weaknesses. Strengths-Based Practice assesses the inherent strengths of a client, and in doing that the practitioner is not enumerating strengths. It has been established as an empowering alternative to traditional human resource development methodologies that steer towards describing or diagnosing human motivation and human competencies surfacing in terms of deficits and may offer dissimilar alternatives. A strengths approach avoids the use of stigmatising terminology, which people in need may have been accustomed to and eventually accept, and then develop a sense of helplessness to change. Certainly that language of deficit affects their future (Pulla, 2014b). On the other hand, the strengths approach encourages hope within people by focusing on what has been currently or historically successful for them in their personal, professional and career contexts, thereby exposing precedent successes, and sets the groundwork for realistic expectations. It arranges the positive building blocks that previously exist in the environment of the transformed seeker which then can serve as the foundation for future growth and change for the self. Ultimately, it reduces the power and authoritative barriers in a number of situations such as employees with their managers or between clients and their therapists, the communities interacting with the social worker by promoting the client to the level of being the expert in regard to what has worked, what does not work, and what might work in their personal life (Pulla, 2006).

### **Ecological and strengths perspectives**

Diverse strengths-based approaches to practice emerged in the late 1980s as alternatives to the previous dominant models. In the United States (US), the strengths perspective was developed in response to criticism of the deficit-oriented psychotherapeutic medical model that dominated social work practice (Guo & Tsui, 2010). The impetus for strengths-based social work practice arrived at a time in the US when the helping professions were saturated with psychosocial approaches based on individual, family, and community pathology, deficits, problems, abnormality, victimization, and disorder (Saleebey, 1996). The groundwork of the strengths perspective has been the cumulative foundations of humanistic philosophy, the ecosystem and the empowerment theories. Some authors were inspired by the ecosystem theory that provided the 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 (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989; Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2004). In fact, Weick

and colleagues stated that the elements in personal history and personality characteristics of individuals interact with the political, economic, social, and natural forces in society (Weick et.al., 1989). Implementation of a reflective practice model not only promotes the strengths of the service users but also the capacities of the social work profession and assists in advocacy (Guo & Tsui, 2010). Empowerment, to me, is an activity or a process in which people exert their confidence, existing skills, acquired skills and the resources available to them. Gaining control of these resources will assist them eventually in gaining control over their problems and their lives. Personal empowerment and social empowerment are interdependent and also are interactive phenomena. Personal empowerment recognizes the client's uniqueness and remains analogous to self-determination; that is, clients provide direction to the process and it offers control of their lives. Social empowerment provides their resources and opportunity to partake in important roles in their environment and in deciding what sort of environment they would like to be in or work with. In fact, a part of this occurs as the client strives on his or her journey of coping and becoming resilient.

### **SBP an empowerment practice**

Empowerment theories identify and assist individuals and communities to recognise barriers and dynamics that permit oppression to persist including circumstances and actions that promote change, human empowerment, and liberation (Cowger, 1994). Several American authors opine that the Strengths Perspectives method assists people's own aspirations, strengths, resources, and resiliency and supports engaging actions that pursue social justice and personal well-being (Robbins, Chatterjea, & Canda, 2006; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; Saleebey, 1997; Weick et al., 1989). The strengths perspective is committed to promoting social and economic justice considering that social work practice deals with transactions between persons and their environment in which the dynamics of power and power are entrenched.

As client empowerment is central to strengths-based practice it is the discovery of the client's strengths that nurtures that process of empowerment through emphasising positive qualities and assists in development of attributes, including talents, knowledge, abilities, and aspirations to reclaim personal power in their lives. As previously mentioned, it would be inaccurate to construe that the strengths perspective is solely a positive reframing of a problem that involves interacting pleasantly with clients or sitting with them and merely compiling a list of their strengths. The practice of strengths refers to a consistent process of identifying client strengths and resources and mobilizing those resources that directly or indirectly improve the client situations. Rapp, Saleebey, and Sullivan (2005) identified promising characteristics of strengths-based practices. According to them the strengths-based practices ought to be goal-oriented wherein social workers invite clients to define goals for their lives. It is important therefore to consider that client-set goal attainment as the indicator social workers can use for identifying successes of the interventions. Secondly, strengths approaches in social work begin with a systematic assessment of strengths, beginning with the most current resources that are on display and possibly moving to some of the resources deployed in the past by the clients. Thirdly, strengths-based practices view the environment as being rich in resources, with the natural community in which the client resides as the main source of opportunities, supports, resources, and people. For effective goal attainment a good fit between what client desires, what his or her strengths are and what resources are available within his or her environment, is imperative. For instance, in case management, with strengths approach the assessment is used to help clients set goals, elicit resources, set short-term goals and tasks, and guide role and



responsibility assignments (Rapp & Goscha, 2006). Clearly the emphasis in such a relationship is to induce hope. Finally in this model the provision of meaningful choices from which clients can select is central. Thus 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.

Does the strengths perspective overlook the problems that the client brings? The answer is No. However, as a social worker I always sit with the client to encourage him or her to explore myriad possibilities and resources that might be there to reach that goal. I do not overlook the problems that clients bring. One thing I wouldn't do is to waste my time trying to understand the causes of the problem or labelling them. Through such a stance I acknowledge and take problems, needs, and challenges that the client brings to the scene. Often, these problems, situations, and challenges are so compelling that our clients would like to enumerate them straight away. However, as a strengths-based practitioner I would like to see them go beyond the immediate priority. The sole focus of intervention for me is to build a resilient person inherently capable of self-righting and one who wishes to see the possibility of treating life as a great journey.

### **Humanistic roots with generic 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 & GlenMaye, 2004, Pulla, 2014b). 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 a number of underlying assumptions as discussed further. An important aspect of this practice is to begin with an understanding that every individual and every environment has strengths and resources, i.e. knowledge, talents, capacities, skills, and resources to mobilize in order to pursue their aspirations (Saleebey, 2009). We also suggest that people that face adversity typically do not lose their capabilities to develop ideas, and rebuild their capacities. They are quite capable of bringing out strategies that eventually serve them well (Saleebey, 2009). In other words, every individual is endowed with the ability to cope and become resilient and that all human beings have an innate capacity for health and self-righting, which is a drive, a life force that heals and transforms.

Most of us are aware that almost always, people know what is right for them. What is required in this situation is a nonjudgmental attitude. The tendency to fumble under the lanyards of expertise and the belief that we know what is best for our clients unfortunately lurks behind us and often pops out. The best thing to do is to understand that the client knows when enough is enough and our aim is to promote and uphold that level of client autonomy.

If my communication style is one that evokes personal, friendly, and is able to strike an empathic chord then long lasting and accepting relationship can be built. Such communication nurtures resilience, healing, transformation and flourish. As facilitators our own 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. We need to believe that stressors can be reversed and some level of resolution can be found in them.

### **How do we find Strengths in adversity?**

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. 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 with 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 facilitators 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 multi-causal, interactive, and constantly changing (Cowger, 1994).

### **Exploratory Questions**

Based on previous research I have categorized a number of questions that strengths-based practitioners would need to ask in order to obtain the best outcomes for the clients. The following is not necessarily an exhaustive list of questions; nevertheless these questions assist an astute beginner as well as a seasoned practitioner to refresh their practice while deploying a strengths framework.

### **Knowledge about themselves including traits**

What do clients know about themselves about others, and their world? (Early & GlenMaye, 2004; Saleebey, 2006, 2009). What are some of their personal qualities, traits, talents, and virtues that reside in people? What personal qualities, traits, talents, and virtues do they display during crises and after trauma or crisis (Early & GlenMaye, 2004; Saleebey, 1997; Weick et al., 1989)

### **Coping and Resilience**

As survivors how do they discover their inner strengths? How do they utilise the ones that they know, and also develop new ones? What cultural and personal stories and lore has been a deep source of strength for them? How do those narratives, stories provide guidance, stability, heritage, belonging, or transformation? Is pride described or identified by them as ‘survivor’s pride’ in overcoming the odds? What are the personal and familial narratives of survival and redemption that can provide strategies, tools, symbols, and metaphors for rebound? Is there a resilience factor? (Pulla, 2013). How do they define their sense of pride? (Wolin & Wolin,

1993). What spiritual and world views do they provide with clues around essential holistic quality of being? (Pulla, 2014a).

### Researching, designing and constructing hope

How do they research and discover the community and its different resources, which are frequently overlooked during any presenting crisis? (Bhadra & Pulla, 2014). What are the family traditions, rituals, and the combination of the strengths of the nuclear and extended family members? (Early & GlenMaye, 2004). What are their personal hopes and dreams, which, with help, can be recovered and revitalised?

Indeed, a strengths-based assessment should follow the above questions and guidelines. This is to give preeminence to the client's understanding of the facts, which is the central focus of the assessment as it draws on the rich texture of the client's feelings and meanings about it. Cognitive, mental or intrapersonal assessments of the client are relevant only if they clarify the current situation or if they can help 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)

### Some further beliefs



The belief that clients are trustworthy is central to the strengths perspective (Early & 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).



Clients must be left to discover what their needs are. When we move the assessment toward personal and environmental strengths and from solutions to difficult situations the clients will further draw on their strengths. This is not as easy as it would seem, as the proposition 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). Following this, we need to make assessment of strengths multidimensional: both internal and external strengths are to be considered necessary to solve a situation. It is equally important to consider examination of power relationships in person-environment transactions.

Each client is unique. This is easily said but harder to practice if we had notions of ‘one size fits all’ program drawn on comparative need. This principle requires that the assessment is individualised to the client’s unique situation.

Making conversations that are in client’s language is the next important principle. Use the client’s language. By the above principle we mean that the product of the assessment should use a language that the client can understand and is closer to everyday language and culture. One can expect the client to have ownership when the assessment is open, transparent, and shared.

Blaming anyone does not lead us anywhere. It is rather a bureaucratic route when something fails and can dissuade the client motivation to solve his or her situation and will increase his or her learned helplessness.

It is equally important to arrest cause and effect thinking in these conversations. This binary thinking is too simplistic. It is important to consider that cause–effect relationships do have several dimensions and complexities.

And finally avoid diagnosing. In the language of the practitioner of strengths a diagnosis has no place and must be understood in the context of pathology, deviance, and deficits. We do not need that. I have tabulated for this paper a number of questions to identify strengths based on the format offered by Saleebey (2006). These questions are not presented as a protocol but are intended to direct social workers’ attention during conversations with the clients.

### **Classification of questions for finding strengths**

Survival questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How have you managed to survive this far given all the challenges you have had to contend with?</li></ul>
Support questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Who are the special people on whom you can depend?</li></ul>
Exemption questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When things were going well in life, what was different?</li></ul>
Possibility questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are your special talents and abilities?</li></ul>
Esteem questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say?</li></ul>
Perspective questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are your ideas about your current situation?</li></ul>
Change questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What has worked in the past to bring a better life for you?</li></ul>

### **Strengths based Practice and structural oppression**

Strength-based practice focuses on an individual's strengths, using active listening to explore their life story and narratives and identifying influences that have shaped the creation of their identity. All human beings strive to make meaning out of their lives, to work out where they fit in the world that they live in. The creation of meaning results in self-actualisation or the creation of values and beliefs that the individual holds about their culture and environment. Interpretation of an individual's place or fit is not only determined by the individual, but shaped by the opinions of others, stereotypes and social norms. This can result in an individual's identity being obscured by stereotypes and expectations of adhering to social norms. For example, in India the caste system has been used to oppress individuals by hijacking their narratives and using stereotypes and societal beliefs to oppress them. The caste system has been a part of Indian society for so long that many individuals find it difficult to liberate themselves from this oppressive system and continue to allow atrocities to be committed against them. Although Gandhi attempted to bring reform to Indian society, unfortunately, even today Indian news reports everyday incidents of victimisation. To assist an individual to liberate themselves from oppression involves exploring their life story, and using a reconstruction process not only assists the individual but also breaks down institutional barriers, something which is, ultimately, part of the social work role.

Oppression is an everyday experience and is generated by social structures and social norms. It can deprive an individual of being able to actively participate in work, social life or experience basic human rights. Oppression may not only be external but also internal when individuals believe that the dominant belief system is the only reality, resulting in self-hate, censorship and shame (Baines, 2011). The role of the social worker is to not only assist the individual with their concerns but also "help clients, communities, and themselves to



understand that their problems are linked to social inequality; to understand why they are oppressed and how to fight for change” (Baines, 2011, p. 4). To do this the social worker highlights the client’s strengths while being aware of the ways that their experiences and life chances have been limited or shaped by larger, inequitable social forces (Baines, 2011). Oppression is the result of inappropriate use of power. Power and vulnerability exists within all human relationships in different forms; it is multifaceted and fluid, as there are many points of choice and resistance. Power can increase security and social equity for the individual who may need assistance to take it for themselves (Wendt & Seymour, 2010). Power imbalances are usually the reason individuals seek assistance. Using a strength perspective allows the individual to start to recognise the power they have.

The use of strength-based practice requires the social worker to minimise the power imbalance between themselves and the individual seeking assistance. To do this, the assessment should be done as a joint activity to reinforce the individual’s competence. The social worker inquires, listens, and assists the individual in discovering and articulating ideas, and clarifying understanding. The individual provides direction to the assessment and is allowed to be the expert on their own experiences. To create an atmosphere for healing, transformation, regeneration and resilience in the individual, the social worker should be committed to creating a personal, empathic, and accepting relationship. Saleebey also believes that it is important that the social worker believes that the individual has the inner power to transform their reality. This belief can support hope and create a placebo effect that can be transferred to the individual, mobilizing hope that there is a possibility of a different future (Saleebey, 2001b).

### **The Language we speak and use**

To create the right atmosphere for change the social worker should be aware that the language that they use can influence the hope for change. Strength-based practice uses certain words and concepts to support the individual’s journey. A strengths perspective recognizes people as being competent, resilient, and responsible and valued members of a group or a community. It is important that the social worker resists the urge to use a deficiency framework and embrace a possibility framework. This may require the social worker to spend time on personal reflection to discover what they bring to the process and how they can transform, allowing them to embrace a strengths perspective. The success of the strengths perspective is underpinned by the belief in the restorative powers intrinsic to all human beings and their bodies and that emotions have a profound impact on the overall health and wellness of individuals. The strength perspective works on the assumption that the hardiness and wisdom of the human body implies that the belief in the possibility of overcoming adversity is inherent in all individuals.

### **Discussion**

When an individual recognizes and develops new strengths this acts as a stimulus for further growth and development. Individuals will then not only become empowered to make their own choices and contribute to their own goals and dreams but also those of their family and community (Early & GlenMaye, 2004; C. A. Rapp & 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 following diagram revisits the - principles of strengths practice.



The collaborative approach of the strength-based process transforms not only the individual but the practitioner. To build an empathetic and empowering relationship involves creating a partnership in which both participants discover, use and transform their own strengths to pursue their visions, dreams and hopes. The individual may enter the relationship feeling that they are powerless, but as the process progresses they will recognize that the facilitator is assisting them to become increasingly empowered to make choices and lead their own life. This process takes courage, commitment, and generosity.

Social work has a history of relying on deficit-based practices and while the strength perspective is routinely presented as a credible framework for engaging with individuals, many social workers have found it difficult to make the shift from traditional social work practices (Cowger, 1994; Rapp et al., 2005). The challenge for the social worker is not only navigating the shift in social work practices but also how the process of strength-based practice confronts their own personal values and beliefs. It is important for the social worker to understand that a strength perspective involves a totally different mindset from their previous practice; it is not



just a matter of inserting strength and empowerment language into traditional frameworks (Blundo, 2006).

Strength-based practice involves minimizing the power balance between the individual and the practitioner, while creating a relationship in which the individual can grow. Within this relationship the practitioner must have hope that the individual can transform but this will be hindered if there is no attempt to look beyond the individual's damage and wounds. It is difficult to identify assets, strengths and protective factors when the focus is only on the negative factors. Resorting to traditional social work practices can give the practitioner feelings of competency, empowerment and control over the process but this will not create an environment where a strength perspective can be facilitated. One of the most important practices a social worker can have when using a strengths perspective is reflection. Reflection allows the social worker to explore their personal values, beliefs, biases, training, practice framework and culture allowing them to identify practice that does not fit the strengths perspective.

Social workers are trained to use themselves during their interventions with individuals; this includes verbal and non-verbal communication, intuition, and capacity for relationship, attitudes, life experience and self-concept. It would be difficult to identify strengths in others if you cannot identify your own strengths. For this reason, it is important that the practitioner is able to explore and acknowledge their own strengths to assist them with understanding the process the individual is going through. This can often be a confronting and difficult process for the practitioner, but without insight into one's own values and beliefs the use of self in a therapeutic environment could be misused or even potentially destructive. The strength perspective will be effective only if the practitioner truly believes that change is possible; it cannot be faked. Through experiencing a personal discovery of their strengths and resilience the practitioner can develop a deep self-awareness and use this experience to promote change with greater understanding as they have been through the process.

Hope is the basis for the strengths perspective, but these days it can be a rare commodity. There is so much negative news and horrible events happening in our world that hope can sometimes become lost in a sea of misfortune. Hope is often linked to a person's spirituality, and so it is a good idea for practitioners to explore this area of their lives to support their own process of personal discovery. Again it is important that practitioners are able to experience some hope in their own lives to be able to support others in their journey. When working with individuals, practitioners must have hope and believe that change is possible. They must have faith in the magic of resilience and believe that everybody has the ability to bounce back from adversity. Human beings are capable of incredible changes in their lives if the right conditions and opportunities are presented to them. An individual's mind and body have a tremendous capacity to heal and grow from any negative experience, it is this ability that the strengths perspective takes advantage of.

The strengths perspective requires the social worker to enter a confronting and unknown experience of not knowing and removing their expert hat. It requires the practitioner to be brave and focused on the expertise of the individual they are working with. Practitioners need to have transformed themselves through a continuous process of self-discovery resulting in the ability to allow the individual to gain power and growth within the relationship. This can move the practitioner out of their comfort zone, but if they have been working toward their



own personal transformation then any discomfort will be balanced by their personal resilience, hopes and goals.

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