

# Intervention and Supervision in Strengths-Based Social Work Practice\*

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## Abstract

Building social work practice on a foundation of client strengths is a classic theme that is currently the subject of renewed attention within the profession. Through the years, the literature on social work supervision has periodically proposed building supervision on a foundation of practitioners' achievements. This article will explore the commonality of these two themes: intervention based on strengths (rather than pathology) and supervision based on achievements (rather than problems). The pursuit of an integrative strengths-based intervention/supervision paradigm can contribute to the development of a positive, innovative vision of direct practice, a vision congruent with historic social work values, relevant to working with social work's clientele, and distinct from the other helping professions. This article will develop this theme and explore its implications for the profession.

THE PAST DECADE HAS WITNESSED a spirited revival and reformulation of a classic tenet of social work thought. The leadership and prime movers of this revival are centered at the School of Social Work at the University of Kansas, but social workers throughout the world are examining these new-old ideas, finding them compatible with their own beliefs and feelings and embracing them with great enthusiasm. The name most often used for this set of ideas is "the strengths perspective."

This article will explore the message of the strengths perspective and its implications for social work principles and practices. It will then look at one area to which the strengths perspective seems particularly relevant: social work supervision. Then, some ways will be suggested in which the strengths perspective might be applied to supervision. Finally, we will discuss how these applications might impact the development of the profession.

## The Message of the Strengths Perspective

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Although the strengths perspective has clear roots in

classic social work thought, the humanistic current version, seen against the backdrop of the contemporary medico-scientific paradigms of the helping professions, carries a message of rebellion. Understanding and appreciating that message requires a brief look at the object of the rebellion.

The helping professions may have abandoned the notion that human failings are a result of moral defect, but they seem to have retained some of the baggage that came along with that notion, particularly the idea that human failure and human problems need be the major focus of helping professionals' work. That idea may now be articulated in a sophisticated professional language with phrases derived from differential diagnosis and complex theory-driven taxonomies of pathological states, but weaknesses, limitations, problems, and failures remain the filters through which the majority of helping professionals see their clients. They are also constructed by the professionals as the subject matter of the discourse between them and their clients, thus becoming the building blocks of the helping relationship. This centrality of problems and pathology is the reality against which the strengths perspective is rebelling.

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The multifaceted message of the strengths perspective has been presented in a series of journal articles and book chapters, most originating at the University of Kansas, many resonating in professional forums throughout the world. One succinct summary, quoted by many of the subsequent writings, is the following passage by Saleebey (1992), a central figure in the Kansas group:

*The strengths perspectives obligates workers to understand that, however downtrodden or sick, individuals have survived (and in some cases even thrived). They have taken steps, summoned up resources, and coped. We need to know what they have done, how they have done it, what they have learned from doing it, and what resources (inner and outer) were available in their struggle to surmount their troubles. People are always working on their situations, even if just deciding to be resigned to them; as helpers we must tap into that work, elucidate it, find and build on its possibilities. (pp. 171-172)*

Strengths-oriented social workers engaged in direct intervention or in case management refuse to identify clients according to their deficits or pathologies. To refer to a human being as a paraplegic, a manic-depressive, an unmarried mother, an addict, an offender, a borderline personality, a sexual psychopath, a bag lady, a pre-orgasmic or a post-traumatic is to elevate the deficit or deviance to the status of dominant identity of that person. Assessments and interventions built on the foundations of such pathology-derived definitions of persons and situations are more likely to perpetuate the pathology than to modify it (Goldstein, 1990). Professionals trained to view their clients as human beings using their strengths and resources to cope with adversity as best they can have a much better chance of helping those clients find the means to improve their situations. The language such professionals use to describe their clients is the same language they use to converse with them; it is the plain, direct language of persons who work with other persons, not the "scientific" language of persons who classify other persons. The language is also not stigmatizing (except for those unusual cases in which clients may choose to be identified by a stigmatizing label as sometimes happens, for example, with AA or NA members). De Jong and Miller (1995) state: "... the strengths perspective asserts that the client's 'meaning' must count for more in the helping process, and scientific labels and theories must count for less" (p. 729). Indeed, the professional is not the

expert; the individuals, families, and communities with whom the professional works in partnership are the experts. They own the intimate knowledge of their situations and, for the most part, they own the most important resources. Strengths-oriented professionals seek to pool their own knowledge and resources with those of the clients (Saleebey, 1994).

"Beginning where the client is" means focusing less on the client's problems and more on what he or she is doing about them. Nevertheless, working with clients according to the principles of the strengths perspective does not mean denying the existence of their problems or talking them out of their authentic feelings of distress. McQuade and Ehrenreich (1997) raise the question of the appropriate time to address strengths. They point out that clients typically arrive at the social worker's doorstep with a "vulnerability perspective," obliging the worker to empathize with the client's pain and attempt to lighten the burden through sharing. Identification of strengths is not likely to be relevant to the client during the first sessions, and a premature focus on strengths may be seen by the client as lack of understanding, dogmatism, or even rejection. These authors regard activating the client's strengths-oriented self-concept as a crucial phase of intervention and have developed a self-report instrument (McQuade & Ehrenreich, 1997, p. 209) to facilitate this task.

The recent emphasis on client strengths was, in its initial stages, articulated most clearly by professionals engaged in rehabilitation programs for persons with psychiatric disabilities (Anthony, Cohen, & Farkas, 1990). Partly because of domain conflicts, the non-medical authorities in this field needed to delineate the boundary between treatment and rehabilitation and they did so unambiguously:

*Treatment focuses on decreasing a person's symptoms or pathology, while psychiatric rehabilitation focuses on developing a person's strengths or assets. Treatment alleviates a person's dysfunction; rehabilitation restores a person's function. (p. 17)*

Modes of intervention and case management based on the strengths perspective do not ignore the problems assailing individuals and groups. Schizophrenia is real in its consequences, as is child abuse, cancer, and widowhood. Nonetheless, the strengths perspective teaches us that it would be as foolhardy to overlook the coping mechanisms that the person has developed in dealing with these difficulties as it would be foolhardy to overlook the

difficulties themselves (Saleebey, 1996). Strengths-based humanistic social work does not dispute the hold that psychopathology or addiction can have on a person's life and the ways in which it can challenge the human spirit. But it does reject the notion of psychopathology's absolute grip. It rejects the premise that all persons who have suffered trauma or tragedy during their lifetimes will remain injured, disabled, or become less than the persons they might otherwise have been. For some, an enhanced resilience accompanies the scars of past trauma (Benard, 1997; Palmer, 1997; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Goldstein explains, however, that resilience is not a quality that develops in response to a particular stimulus or set of stimuli, nor is it an attribute present at birth; it is, in Goldstein's words, "a complex form of flexibility and mastery [that] arises out of and is nourished by interpersonal and social processes" (1997, p. 31). Resilience, in any case, is a major focus of the strengths perspective.

The seriousness of the philosophical differences between pathology-based and strengths-based social work practice is the source of the divergence between traditional and strengths-based supervision.

## Strengths-Based Supervision

The traditional definition of social work supervision builds on three essential elements: administrative, supportive, and educational (Kadushin, 1976). Watson (1973) has further specified the educational function into the tutorial mode, appropriate for students and beginning professionals, and the consultation mode, appropriate for supervising more experienced workers. All of these, anchored in the traditional problem-oriented paradigm of social work practice, require major adjustments if they are to be relevant to practice informed by the strengths perspective. Even if we set aside some of the more extravagant claims of the parallel process argument (Holloway, 1997; Kahn, 1979), it is clear that the supervisory relationship cannot help but provide the worker with a model for his or her approach to clients (Raichelson et al., 1997). It is the supervisor's responsibility to recognize conflicting philosophical or theoretical perspectives and, along with the supervisee, to seek solutions to the resulting difficulties.

Gary Yontef (1977), writing from a gestalt-therapy perspective, describes parallel process as a kind of modeling that appears as a normal correlate of the supportive function in supervision:

*As the work proceeds in supporting the therapist, focusing on and protecting the patient, there often arise parallels between the dynamics of the patient-therapist relationship and that of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. The therapist sometimes does to the supervisor what the patient does to him or her, and conversely, the therapist often does to the patient what the supervisor does to him or her. It is hoped that this latter is a more benevolent parallel process. (p. 160)*

In a parallel process situation, problem-centered supervision would render strengths-based practice very difficult indeed and could result in the strengths-oriented supervisee developing either a powerful resistance to the supervision or a grand confusion in his or her work with clients. The probability of such a resistance/confusion response would be even greater in a student fieldwork or classroom situation when teacher and supervisor hold contrasting views of the centrality of strengths vs. deficits in practice.

One early indication of the form strengths-based supervision might take can be found in Kadushin's classic paper, "Games People Play in Supervision" (1968). Kadushin describes a game he calls "I Have a Little List" in which the worker arrives at the supervisory session armed with a list of problems and questions designed to tempt supervisors into showing off their superior knowledge or, alternatively, confessing their ignorance. Either

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response can effectively distance the supervisor from the supervisee's work and neutralize the supervision. Supervisee games derive from the anxiety generated by traditional supervision. Supervisors can create a more supportive, less threatening environment for supervising strengths-oriented workers by defining the central content of the supervisory session as a joint evaluation of the worker's recent successes rather than a joint struggle with questions, problems, and frustrations.

Transforming this focus on success into the normative supervisory stance ("Let's talk about your most successful professional activities during the time since we last met") is the first prerequisite for adapting supervision to

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strengths-based intervention or case management. Supervisory or classroom sessions in which the central content is the worker's or student's successes and what can be learned from them can provide support, learning opportunities, and enhanced motivation for strengths-based practitioners.

When the supervisee responds to the supervisor's request to describe his or her most successful recent professional activities, the supervisor can guide the discussion in the direction of analyzing the success and exploring its implications for other situations and other cases. This process should be conducted with appropriate self-awareness and self-criticism, but its potential for transforming the supervisory encounter into an unambiguous learning experience is probably as great as that of any other approach to case supervision. It even allows the worker to exit from the meeting with an answer to the perennial "What-did-I-get-from-that?" question. It is hard to think of a better motivator for a serious social worker or social work student.

In the event that the supervisor does not share the supervisee's evaluation, and there is disagreement as to what degree the action taken by the worker can be considered successful in the context of the case being discussed, an alternative type of learning opportunity has been created. A non-threatening analysis of the basis for the disagreement can lead the supervisory dyad to the discussion of larger issues, including ethical dilemmas, and enhance awareness in areas that might otherwise not have been touched upon.

Williams (1995) points out that when workers seem "stuck" in their practice, their situation usually does not relate to a lack of knowledge. More often, something is happening that is interfering with their ability to use their knowledge. Liese (1998) contends that such situations commonly involve issues of process and timing, which su-

perisors can help resolve. Williams suggests focusing on the "supervisee state." The supervisor could, of course, define that state in terms of problems and deficits but to be most effective, he or she should be helping the supervisee pinpoint the strengths necessary to get the process moving again. Liese proposes that at least some part of the supervision process be dedicated to reflecting on the supervisee's personal growth.

Strengths-based supervision, similar to strengths-based practice, is consistent with the social mission of social work. Unlike deficit-based philosophies, the strengths perspective does not blame the victim.

*Problem-based assessments encourage individualistic rather than social-environmental explanations of human problems. Although it generally is understood that people live in complex social milieus that dramatically affect them, assessment rarely takes into account larger social variables. Even when conditions such as poverty are seen to limit severely people's ability to manage their lives, attention often is concentrated exclusively on efforts to change the behavior of those affected. (Weick et al., 1989, p. 351)*

When economic deprivation, racism, sexism, or other social ills have limited a person's opportunities, the strengths-oriented professional helps identify and evaluate the modes of coping used in the past and the available resources for fighting these limitations in the present. Some of the most impressive successes of strengths-based social work have been recorded in work with the most distressed populations (Glasser & Suroviak, 1989; Rapp & Chamberlain, 1985; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). These reports have demonstrated how strengths-oriented interventions can help clients move from resignation to resilience and, eventually, to planned, systematic, and rigorous efforts to improve their situation and that of their loved ones.

Strengths-oriented supervision can help workers adopt a proactive stance when clients are not being provided essential services whether because of budgetary cutbacks, policy changes in contracting agencies, or unanticipated demands on limited resources. Supervisors can join with their workers in the effort to overcome initial feelings of frustration and impotence, and they can work with them in taking inventory of their proven and potential skills in coping with adversity. Nearly all social workers own such skills, and with support from supervisors they can mobilize them for individual or group action.

Ideally, clients, workers, and supervisors might act together; in many real-life situations this might not be feasible. In any case, workers can model strengths-utilization and support client efforts, much as the supervisor can provide support for the worker. Even if the action does not succeed, there are lessons to be learned about confronting adversity.

There is widespread agreement that supervisors have an important role to play in the mediation of conflicts between workers and agencies (Kadushin, 1974; Munson, 1993; Shulman, 1993). In Shulman's view, at such times the supervisor is "caught in the middle" and "that is exactly where [he or she] should be" (Shulman, 1993, p. 287). Identifying with neither side, the supervisor is the person best suited to facilitate the process of conflict resolution and contribute significantly to the prospects of a successful outcome. Working first with each side on recognizing the positive features of the other's position, then working with both on appreciating the potential rewards of settling the conflict, strengths-based mediation tactics are likely to enhance the supervisor's ability to help resolve many types of conflicts in agency settings.

Supervision for strengths-based practice should not be crisis-driven consultation, initiated when the supervisee "needs help." Clearly, this would reflect a problem orientation rather than a strengths orientation. On the other hand, proactive supervision provided to the worker on a regular, predetermined time schedule, with the twin purposes of enhancing professional development and sustaining quality control, would be consistent with a strengths-based context for practice.

Rosenfeld (1997) sees learning from success as a necessary condition for generating the innovative social work interventions that can facilitate change within severely distressed populations. He believes it is the single most effective way of creating the "actionable knowledge" so necessary for social workers who seek to help these most difficult clients. The three techniques he recommends to professionals who wish to learn from success are: to adopt a reflective stance toward their work in real time, to pay close attention to clients who have developed resilience, and to enter into genuine partnerships with the clients in order to learn what they know. Rosenfeld's approach, which posits innovation in the field, could be equally relevant to those situations in which innovation emanates from teaching and supervision. When a supervisee presents a problem or weakness of his or her own for discussion in the supervisory session, a strengths-based approach would encourage exploring a treatment situation in which the problem is not present in order that

learning may proceed from analysis of successful coping.

The application of the strengths perspective to supervision need not be limited to individual supervision. Recent descriptions of innovations in group supervision, whether expressly designed to promote strengths-based social work processes (Rapp, 1998) or only touching indirectly on issues related to the strengths perspective (Arkin, Freund, & Saltman, 1999), underline the potential of group supervision and peer-group supervision for facilitating the identification and development of therapeutic strengths by students and professionals engaged in strengths-based helping.

Supervisors sometimes have difficulty confronting workers who are not fulfilling their administrative obligations (Kadushin, 1993). On the other hand, supervisees often appreciate supervisors who are frank about these matters and can relate them to issues of personal growth (Worthington, 1984; Williams, 1995). The ability to deal intelligently with administrative requirements is a professional strength, crucial to agency-based social workers. Strengths-oriented supervisors can address this aspect of the work with only minimal risk of unintentionally slipping into a scolding or preaching mode not likely to further the goals of supervision.

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Munson points out that agency constraints on practice can be an artifact of practitioner perceptions that are amenable to supervisory intervention. He cites an example (p. 123) in which the worker interprets agency policy as opposed to a clinically indicated course of action. The supervisor's alternate interpretation of the policy prevails, the plan is implemented, and the best interests of the client are served. Munson concludes that it was the supervisor's support for the practitioner's effort to overcome the perceived organizational obstacle that made this outcome possible. Strengths-oriented supervisors do more; they help supervisees through crises and then work with them on evaluating the long-term implications. Focusing in this way on the skills and strategies of coping can build competencies for overcoming present and future organizational difficulties.

Thirty years ago, Scott Briar (1970) pointed out that

when agencies choose to limit practitioner autonomy, they often make use of the supervisory function to realize their goals. Supervisors may be unhappy about this, and they may make their objections known, but the administrative component of supervision is a legitimate function, and the agency is likely to prevail. Agencies may sometimes decide to limit supervisors' autonomy as well. Agency administrators do not always approve of strengths-based supervision because they perceive it as encouraging independence at the expense of loyalty to the agency. In the short run, they may be right, but if the agency's ultimate goal is to provide the best possible service to clients, autonomous supervisors, free to support a practice designed for mobilizing professionals' and clients' strengths, can help the agency reach for the highest levels of success. Strengths-based supervision is not a threat to a goal-oriented agency; it is an asset.

The strengths perspective is probably not appropriate to every helping situation and supervisors, as ever, need to proceed with caution and not exercise their authority with a heavy hand. If a supervisee, even one whose general orientation to the work is a strengths orientation, has reservations about its goodness-of-fit to a particular case or situation, the supervisor's obligation is to respect the worker's professional sovereignty. There may also be supervisees who do not subscribe to the strengths perspective, and the strengths-oriented supervisor should consider the possibility of transferring such workers to a more ideologically compatible supervisor (Cohen, 1987).

Judging from the increasing frequency with which strengths-perspectives content is appearing both in the professional literature and in professional education, it seems that there is indeed a revolution in process. The strengths perspective has tremendous appeal for social work. It can help us regain our orientation to the populations who need us most, it can help us generate positive and measurable outcomes, it can help us define the uniqueness of social work relative to the other helping professions. Even if we approach these matters with caution (Saleebey, 1996) and refrain from long-range predictions, it seems that the immediate future of the profession will be significantly affected by the diffusion of the strengths perspective throughout the social work enterprise. The limited, and perhaps biased, personal experience of this author indicates that the innovators are to be found in the academic setting. If this is the case, focusing our efforts on supervision could provide the linkage that would enable the revolution to move forward and the profession to identify its strengths.

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