

BSW Students Favor Strengths/Empowerment-Based Generalist Practice

by A. Leavelle Cox

Abstract

This article discusses the results of incorporating the strengths approach into a curriculum that employed a theoretical framework based on systems theory and problem-focused intervention. This approach was introduced in bachelor of social work (BSW) generalist practice courses in a school of social work where social justice is the guiding principle. BSW students used the strengths approach across a variety of client systems including the homeless, pregnant teenagers, the elderly, and the mentally and physically challenged. In a final class assignment, the students presented successful intervention outcomes with diverse populations using clients' strengths as the focus of problem resolution. The students' stories of their work and the use of this method for instruction showed evidence of clients' development of self-efficacy, increased self-esteem, and with clients taking more personal responsibility for their own change. The empowerment/strengths model developed by the author illustrates collaborative intervention with client and practitioner and applies a synergistic process to BSW students' practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE INSTRUCTORS face the challenge of making the classroom a laboratory for what happens when students are in the field. This challenge increases when the curriculum undergoes a dramatic change with new theories, principles, and other content. Students seeking answers to, and an understanding of, the real-life situations of their clients, may be both wary and excited about integrating new approaches that both empower clients and challenge the traditional pathology-oriented approach to social work practice.

A strengths/empowerment perspective appears useful as a practice framework for a curriculum that is directed toward students studying to be generalist practitioners and guided by social justice principles. A number of practice research findings suggest the strengths perspective is a successful practice approach with diverse populations that are often deemed powerless (Early, 2000; Perkins & Tice, 1996; Siegal, 1995; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995; von Wormer 1999).

The teaching and practice goal for using this model is to help prepare students to work collaboratively with diverse populations where empowerment of the client is a major desired outcome, as well as a process. As a practice instructor, I had an opportunity to incorporate the

strengths perspective into BSW practice courses in a school of social work at a large, urban campus—Virginia Commonwealth University. The conceptual framework of the practice content espouses social justice as a guiding principle, thus providing an impetus for incorporating a strengths perspective. The senior BSW practice course emphasizes planning and intervention with diverse populations, and evaluation of professional practice. An assignment required students to integrate the strengths perspective and to assess themselves and client experiences. This assignment also required the students to use their own case material to evaluate practice effectiveness in a variety of settings. Summarized here are the experiences of students who used the strengths/empowerment perspective, and the guidelines given to the students for incorporating strengths-based content into the social work with a variety of population groups and settings.

The Strengths Perspective

The strengths perspective is an empowerment approach. The client is viewed as having the ability to solve his or her problems. The focus is on the client's strengths, rather than problems and/or pathology. Saleebey (1997)

offers the following principles to describe the strengths perspective: (1) *empowerment*—the process of assisting individuals, groups, families, and communities to discover and expend the resources and tools within and around them; (2) *membership*—recognition that the people we help are members of a community thereby being entitled to dignity, respect, and responsibility; (3) *resilience*—recognition of the peoples' and communities' ability to grow as they face and overcome serious adversity; (4) *healing*—the intrinsic and innate ability for self-regeneration; (5) *dialogue and collaboration*—people can only come into being through a creative and emergent relationship with others; and (6) *suspension of disbelief*—recognition of and belief in the legitimacy of the client's view of his or her problems. From the strengths perspective, practitioners are seen as creative collaborators with clients. Helping people discover and use the resources within and around them—empowerment—is the ultimate goal of the strengths perspective. Gutierrez (1990) claims that an empowerment perspective identifying and building upon the existing strengths of diverse groups is critical for intervention on both macro and micro levels. The four psychological outcomes of empowerment outlined by Gutierrez are: increasing self-efficacy, developing group consciousness, reducing self-blame, and assuming personal responsibility for change. These outcomes are viewed as goals for a school of social work curriculum that has social justice as its guiding principle.

Even though BSW students at Virginia Commonwealth University graduate as generalist practitioners, many BSW students (and other social workers) are often trained in organizations that use medical models. Such interventions focus on problems and pathology rather than client strengths. Practitioners and the supervisors of students who use medical models may find the philosophical and practical shift to a strengths-based perspective difficult and may be resistant to using this model in their practice. It is sometimes difficult for students to accept or even to identify the strengths of an individual as important to solving their clients' problems because of their inclination to understand that people who are helped are helpless and powerless. Moreover, a practice approach based primarily on the premise of strengths and empowerment may be even more difficult to accept because it demystifies the professional role. Finally, when practice texts explicate problem-focused approaches as being the primary social work intervention, it is confusing and problematic for students to simultaneously emphasize a strengths approach. This was the case in the senior BSW practice class that I taught. The primary texts

were Hepworth and Larsen's *Direct Social Work Practice* (1993) and Netting, Kettner, and McMurtry's *Social Work Macro Practice* (1993), texts that emphasize problems and problem-solving.

Literature Review

Many researchers, practitioners, mental health workers, social workers, and family therapists and others interested in the resilience of vulnerable populations, have proposed that practitioners in human service fields must become more cognizant of the resiliency and strengths that clients possess (Barnard, 1994; Benard, 1991; Cox, 1994; Saleebey 1997; Rutter, 1990; Yarrow and Sherman 1990). They suggest that practitioners can utilize these attributes as core treatment variables in helping clients achieve more satisfying lives.

Cowger (1994) and Weick, Rapp, Sullivan and Kishardt (1989) point out that assessment in social work usually focuses on diagnosing abnormal and pathological conditions, and targets the individual, family, or community as the problem. Such a focus requires intervention that is directed at changing the individual and less often, the environment itself. As an alternative or supplemental approach to traditional methods of assessing clients, Cowger (1994) offers 12 practice guidelines that foster the use of a strengths perspective and that recognize the importance of both personal and social empowerment of the client. Furthermore, empirical practice data found in studies guided by the strengths perspective, underscore the importance of including the voices of vulnerable populations in obtaining resources and directing their lives. For example, Thrasher & Mowbrary's (1995) ethnographic study of homeless women with children identifies a number of strengths that these women used to survive and solve daily problems as they sought to keep their families together.

The strengths perspective approach to practice has broad applicability across a number of practice settings and a wide range of populations. It may be used with individuals diagnosed with chronic mental illness (Sullivan, 1991) as well as in case management intervention with elderly persons (Sullivan & Fisher 1994; Tice & Perkins, 1994). More recently Poulin, Kauffman, Sullivan, and Thomas (2000) have underscored Saleebey's principles of strengths-based practice and integrated the postmodernist view with the strengths perspective. This view is that dialogue with the client is paramount in the client-practitioner relationship, and that the client is the expert and knows most about his or her life situation.

The social worker is a co-participant in the quest for meaning and is respectful of the clients interpretation of the situation. Worker–client interactions are characterized as collaborative conversations designed to create a crafted mutual understanding of the client’s life events and issues. The exploration of each participant’s values and beliefs and the process of hearing the client’s story are the basis for the worker–client relationship. Saleebey (1997) also confirms the power of dialogue and collaboration with clients rather than reliance on the “expert.”

Models of brief intervention with families also specify the importance of recognizing client strengths. Other authors (Berg, 1994; DeJong & Miller, 1995; Leung, Cheung, & Stevenson, 1994; McCallion & Toseland, 1993) all offer additional support for utilizing the strengths perspective with families, child-protective-services intervention, and populations with developmental disabilities. Finally, Morrison and Alcorn (1994) have further expanded the strengths concept to include community practice with a town meeting model to recognize and support community strengths. Each of these aforementioned approaches embrace a multifaceted view of autonomy and supports clients’ maximum participation in decisions concerning their destiny as individuals in families and communities.

Introducing the Strengths Concept to BSW Students

Introduction of the strengths perspective in social work education is a challenging opportunity for instructors to expose students to a practice premise believed to be equally as effective as the problem-solving approach. Introduction of the strengths perspective at the author’s university was a new concept for the BSW curriculum. Integration of the concept required portraying clients’ strengths as the major part of the solution, even when course texts supported pathology, and students perceived and responded to their clients as disempowered. Part of the academic challenge was respecting the fact that students practiced in field agencies that used medical models of intervention (problem focused) and whose clients were perceived as pathological. This dilemma required acknowledging the conflict between classroom curriculum and agency practice, and changing the primary intervention focus from problem-orientation to the strengths perspective. Also difficult was redefining the relationship between the students and clients as a partnership. But the most difficult task experienced can be defined as a “concept” change—that is, to understand that

simply talking about and identifying clients’ strengths is not the totality of using the strengths perspective. One must become a co-participant with a client in the relationship, which eliminates our role as “the expert”. Such a change may leave the practitioner feeling vulnerable with a lack of authority to tell the client what to do.

The Hepworth and Larsen (1993) text used in the class does incorporate strengths as a part of the assessment process, but their primary focus is problem-focused and task oriented. Integration of empowerment of clients as a major focus required portraying clients’ strengths as the primary component of solutions. Raising students’ awareness of clients’ strengths and helping to sensitize them to the effectiveness of focusing on strengths in intervention processes in social work practice resulted in inadvertent but positive and surprising results from a BSW practice class assignment. That is the subject of this paper.

Preparing Students for Generalist Practice

Generalist practice involves work with client systems of all sizes. The primary client may be an individual, family, small group, organization, and/or community (Poulin, et al., 2000). This approach views the client within his or her ecosystem (person in situation). In a BSW practice class, for students to graduate as generalist practitioners requires a systematic approach where both macro- and micro-level practice theory, its application, and related experiences are integrated into course content. Johnson’s (1995) framework for generalist practice includes a planning and assessment phase and an action phase (all guided by theory) to direct the intervention efforts of the worker and the worker–client relationship. From a wide variety of intervention possibilities during the planning and assessment phase, generalist practitioners must be trained to critically select the most appropriate strategy for intervening.

A Strengths/Empowerment Model for generalist practitioners was developed (see Figure 1) to illustrate the collaborative relationship between the practitioner and the client system. The model depicts the synergistic process that must take place between the collaborators, leading to the empowerment and self-determination of the client in the helping process. This is noted by arrows moving both from the client to practitioner and back from the practitioner to the client. This model integrates a generalist practice perspective encompassing work with individuals, families, groups, and communities. The model (see next page) has three conceptual foci founded on a social work value-based framework: (1) two core

social work practice principles—client self-determination, (2) the interdependence of the practitioner and the client (Johnson, 1995), and (3) the practice-assessment principles delineated by Cowger (1994, pp. 265–267).

Figure 1. *A Strengths/Empowerment Model for Generalist BSW Practitioners That Can Apply to Individuals, Families, Small Groups, Organizations, and Communities.*



From this model students are taught that assessment and intervention are dynamic processes and are dependent upon the good fit between practitioner skills and client needs and hopes. The practitioner consults with the client/client system and facilitates the discovery of client strengths and possible avenues of problem resolution. The students are required to use the Strengths/Empowerment Model as an overarching or meta model to guide their interventions with the client or client system and then to present their experience to the practice class. In their placements, students were involved daily with a wide variety of clients and client systems. The larger percentage of their clients were people of color, the elderly, women, and children who had previously been assessed at their agencies. These clients were variously described as: mentally ill, schizophrenic homeless clients, non-compliant hospital-renal patients, neglectful and abusive parents, and mentally retarded adolescents. Several clients were simply referred to as “schizophrenics.”

All of the students were assigned oral presentations and required to outline the practice principles that were effective and ineffective. Students were instructed to utilize their field experiences and assess how successfully they applied theoretical concepts learned in class to their field practica. By mid-semester, most students were grasping for theory applications that would provide quick-fix

interventions. Thus, the practice class became a forum where practice intervention approaches were analyzed, shared, discussed, and evaluated in a variety of student field placement settings. To a large degree, the students had incorporated concepts from the strengths’ perspective model into their work. As they presented their results to the class, the effectiveness of this approach was confirmed. Several students were initially very skeptical of the process. It seemed futile to them to look for strengths in a “schizophrenic, homeless mother,” for example. However, by the end of the semester, it seemed that there was a marked change in most of the students’ attitudes toward their clients. For example, a White student, working with a teenage group in an area high school, first expressed difficulty in dealing with the realities of class and diversity. As she changed her approach in working with the clients, to the strengths/empowerment model, she was able to identify and facilitate the interdependence of worker and client in the action phase of the helping process. As she began work with middle-school students who exhibited disciplinary and academic problems, she became aware that she had difficulty identifying strengths. But the more she learned about the strengths perspective, particularly the collaborative process, the more she was able to look beyond overt behavior to see their underlying strengths. She reached out to the students’ parents when they did not return her calls, or wrote them personal letters emphasizing the parents’ own strengths in relation to their children. She was then able to join with the parents in understanding more clearly the difficulties they experienced in raising their children as well as identify their competencies. This process led to the families beginning to find solutions to the problems they encountered with their children, solutions based on their resources and knowledge.

BSW students also became more self-aware and confident in their ability to intervene more effectively with clients. For example, as the students began to identify and support small accomplishments with clients and included clients more routinely in the planning phase of the helping process, clients began noticeably to make progress. The helping relationship tended to become more collaborative as well. Some of the students also began to identify strengths in agency staff that they had not recognized before, and as a result, gained new respect for staff who had elected to work with very vulnerable populations. In turn, agency staff began to reorganize and appreciate the positive results from the work with the students and their clients, and became more receptive to the student’s contributions to

the agency. One student, who worked closely with Head Start parents, also planned and facilitated a group for their children, using the strengths perspective as a meta model for intervention. She not only experienced ongoing success with her group, but also developed a proposal for a full-day children's program for the agency. Because changes had occurred in the way that staff viewed students and their contributions to the agency, the proposal was readily accepted and incorporated into agency programming.

This student, an African American female, realizing the need for connecting with the parents of the children, discussed the self-determination of clients and her growth as a practitioner (which is indicative of the strengths/empowerment model) as follows:

I have noticed a change in the way that I currently look at groups, families, and individuals' strengths as a whole. I find myself utilizing the strengths perspective when developing an assessment of the individual and group, which seems to give me a more positive assessment of the individual or group.... When looking at the children from a positive aspect, it helps me to build great goals and expectations [with] them, because I know they have some strengths, and that any kind of strength can overcome the majority of a person's weaknesses. The strengths perspective has also helped me to talk and deal with the parents/guardians, because I am now able to talk to them about their children in a positive way. Most of the parents/guardians have heard many negative things regarding their children and put up the wall so that they do not hear anything else negative. I found that I was very successful with the parents that I had sessions with and they seemed very pleased with the way their sessions went with me, and the way their children's sessions went as well. I feel that change comes as a person grows and learns about what works for them and what does not work for them. I have noticed a change in the way I handle and define my role as a social worker, which is good, because I find myself exploring all the options of a social worker before putting a label on myself. At this point in time, I believe that I focus the majority of my strategies and changes on the basis of the strengths perspective. I have noticed that it has put a positive impact on my group, as well as myself. It has helped me to focus on my strengths and positive points as a social worker and as a person.

Students enrolled in the BSW practice class are generally from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds than their clients. Many students in this class expressed frustrations with such differences. Differences in values regarding discipline of children, and age-appropriate expectations of parents, made it initially difficult for clients to accept genuine offers to help and plan with them. This was confusing and disappointing to the students at first. Numerous personal examples and models of successful work with seemingly powerless clients were shared by the instructor with the students during weekly discussions, while simultaneously supporting the students' own strengths. The resilience evident in many of the instructor's case examples appeared to motivate students in their work with clients who were in similar situations as the presented case examples. This process assisted the students in recognizing the need to discover, appreciate, and help the client utilize his or her own strengths. Though steps were often small at first, students were able to support the steps clients made to begin the work they had elected to do.

Other discussions among students centered around the students' awareness of themselves as a collaborative part of the synergistic change process and not as dictators with their clients. Although it was not as apparent from the weekly class discussions that the students were as responsive to the strengths approach as they were to other models of intervention, their oral presentations and final course evaluations overwhelmingly embraced the strengths perspective. Their reactions and responses to this model have greatly contributed to further clarify and define the strengths perspective from a student practitioner's perspective.

Student Practitioners' Experience Using Strengths Perspective

In evaluating the student assignments, it became apparent that each student had helped clients during the planning phase of the social work process based primarily on the collaborative helping relationship. However, some students found this phase more difficult because of their tendency to interact in a patronizing manner and because of their own desire to solve problems for the individual client. Because beginning with the strengths of the client is a marked departure from the usual problem-focused approach, it requires the practitioner to relinquish the authoritarian control of the client, and trust the client to discover solutions to his or her problems. When the students began to

shift from a paternalistic approach to a more egalitarian relationship, client cooperation and trust were greatly enhanced. For the assignment, students were to create an interdependent relationship with clients and promote their self-determination in the action phase of intervention, as suggested by Johnson (1995). Students eventually reported the collaborative process to be mutually rewarding for both their clients and themselves.

A White student placed with a retirement community for the elderly found this process to be very difficult, but was pleasantly surprised when she began to incorporate small strengths of her clients in her work and planning. Often it was simply allowing the client to make choices that might have previously been overlooked, such as letter writing, going for a walk, or choosing the sweater that the client wanted to wear. The student's surprise at finding client strengths supported her active use of the perspective as a primary approach for intervention with her clients.

Students also successfully engaged in actions requiring them to connect clients to resources. These actions required not only collaborative and egalitarian interaction with clients, but also required the students to build and use skills in mediation with other environmental systems. The strengths perspective also helped students maintain a focus on the principle of self-determination and to develop genuine empathic relationships with clients. As noted by one student who was placed at a rehabilitation home for long-term mentally ill patients, focusing on the strengths of his clients appeared to increase their self-esteem and the recognition that their lives were purposeful.

One White, male student worked with the Homeless Street Team, where the majority of the clients were African American men. Overall, these men tended to be mostly processed in and out of the welfare system and largely depersonalized by that experience. The student incorporated the strengths perspective on a short-term basis by simply taking the time to talk with clients and explore their past accomplishments. In just doing this, he helped them to discover many hidden talents, and he discovered an opportunity to identify strengths such as perseverance, charisma, and other skills and traits. He used these to help the clients become revitalized and to begin feeling some hope about their situations in life.

Finally, three BSW students articulated their views in a class reaction paper that summarizes and reflects the salient views of the entire class. Each student, in his or

her individual way, struggled to embrace an approach, at the BSW practice level, that provides the core values of social work practice for working with individuals, families, groups, and communities.

Sheila, a White, female student, had considerable previous social work experience. Her BSW placement was in a hospital working with renal patients. She reports experiencing more satisfaction and self-awareness after beginning to use the strengths perspective. An underlying theme that emerged from her discussion was that the strengths/empowerment perspective enhanced her confidence and initiative, and the relationships she had with the clients, the agency staff, families, and community.

Having worked in a sheltered workshop, social service department, psychiatric hospital, and substance abuse rehabilitation facility over a period of almost 20 years, I was used to looking for the pathology. I actually enjoyed trying to identify the problem. However, in my own personal and professional life, I was also engaged in attempting to bring in a more positive focus, which is probably why I am so interested in and want to share this strengths perspective with clients. There was some focus on the strengths and weaknesses of clients almost in passing before. Now, I am enjoying the emphasis on the strengths of the client.... I have consciously looked for strengths in clients first, rather than as an afterthought. Instead of focusing on the problems of this or that client, I have stood back mentally to see them as a whole and to be able to highlight their positive or strong aspects. I found that I felt so much better about them in an accepting way and that I enjoyed working with clients more when using this perspective. Also, I was even more likely to compliment them and encourage them to give themselves credit and to be specific in positively sharing my view of them and their capabilities. I found also that I was not as likely to take credit for "solving their problems as a super social worker." This perspective seems to fit in well with being a collaborator with the client rather than a fixer. Being more positive about clients has helped me to be more positive about myself and about my surroundings. In other words, this assisted me to be more positive about the agency, my supervisors, and other colleagues.

Julie, a White, female student working with African American women who had been in abusive situations, discovered during the empowerment action phase, that supporting clients with simple encouraging statements was powerful in reaffirming the clients' dignity and respect.

I have worked with seven women who are physically abused by their male partners. All of these ladies had separated from their partners because of domestic violence, and were involved in disputes over child custody or visitation with them. Incorporation of a strengths perspective into my work with these clients was extremely beneficial. Using a strengths perspective enabled me to view clients positively, affording credibility and respect to their situation. Strengths shared by these ladies included making sacrifices on behalf of their children throughout their abusive relationships and finally having the courage to leave the relationships. Identifying the client's strengths to the client was an important part of the intervention process.... Reaffirming clients' strengths and helping them to replace their past distorted beliefs with positive beliefs aligned with reality had a very definite effect on the clients and on my perception of myself as a social worker. I told one client that I had a great deal of respect for her as a person, because she had sacrificed so much to provide for her children. Tears filled her eyes and she told me that no one had ever told her they respected her. That was a very special moment for me personally because it demonstrated to me how important it is when working with clients to be empathic and positive, and how one simple statement can have a very big impact.

Jane, a White, female student was placed at an area high school working with African American students. Initially, she thought the students were doomed to failure because they appeared to lack the ability to set goals and became very unmotivated regarding her field placement at the high school. However, as she began to involve the students in the development of their own plans, she reported a renewed interest from them and she encouraged them to achieve academically and set career goals. She discovered a new meaning of the word respect and described a process that occurs in the strengths/empowerment model.

The NASW code of ethics and their relevancy really became clear this semester. Respect was the one thing that I thought I already understood. I figured I showed respect for the students I worked with. I never yelled at them when they became rowdy. I was never disrespectful to them so I assumed this was respectful. I have learned that respect is not just a lack of disrespect; showing respect is a very active process. I had to get to know each student to understand how to show respect for them. If I did not understand their norms, how would I know what would be disrespectful. I needed to see each student in his own right, not as a group of rowdy students. I also needed to try and understand the feelings behind the behaviors I was witnessing. I was not showing very high expectations of these students. I was happy if they stayed in the classroom and were not too disrupting. I should have recognized early that these students were better than that—that they were capable of engaging in an intelligent conversation. I was indirectly expressing lowered expectations, so that is what I was seeing. Even though I was trying not to, I went in the classroom with my own agenda, not showing faith in the students to come up with their own. I was taking total responsibility for the class, not allowing the class to hold any of the responsibility. I did not realize any of this until near the end of the semester. When I changed and gave students more control and set higher expectations, I was amazed at how much better the group went. I was told I needed more structure for the group and I was misinterpreting that for I needed to take more control.

As noted earlier, at first it was quite difficult for students to identify and conceptualize the strengths of seemingly powerless groups. The views expressed by these BSW students, who graduated as generalist social workers, further confirm the usefulness of the strengths perspective in a wide range of social work experiences. Clearly, the students have captured the essence of the strengths concept, and have individually utilized it in ways that not only enhance the client/client system, but also demonstrate their own self-awareness and growth—especially renewed awareness of the meaning of core social work values such as acceptance, respect, and self-determination. The unique position of the client as co-worker/collaborator and the synergistic process that

takes place between worker and client enhance this empowerment approach that revolves around the strengths of the client.

Implications for Social Work Education

It is not surprising that the current trend in social work practice of preparing our students for generalist practice is focused more on the development of community planning as well as individual systems-oriented work that requires students to be equipped both academically and experientially to deal with a variety of interventions and client systems (Alcorn & Morrison, 1994). As has been demonstrated by the Strengths/Empowerment Model and student attempts to incorporate this theme into social work practice in diverse settings, it is necessary to bridge the gap between theory and practice with the learning taking place in classrooms. A strengths-based curriculum that prepares generalist social work practitioners must be driven by a goal that consistently prepares students to ensure that their work supports the self-directedness, empowerment, and autonomy of the client systems, as well as reformulating problem-focused, pathology-centered approaches to social policy development (Chapin, 1995).

Social workers who are committed to working with such diverse and oppressed groups in our society as the elderly, homeless, mentally and physically disabled, gays and lesbians, people of color, and women, may help these populations by focusing on the concepts and techniques of empowerment. From this framework, social work educators must be on the leading edge of endorsing and implementing a curriculum and a practice that promotes social justice and empowerment, and that embraces the strengths of clients. Such models need to be encouraged and emphasized as primary approaches to social work intervention.

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