Moving Theory Understanding into Assessment Forms

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SUMMARY

The strengths perspective has been inherently and implicitly woven into the feel and texture of the social work tradition, even to the extent that social workers have been accused of being “Pollyanna” or naïve to place our focus on the skills, potentials, and assets clients possess. This paradigm shift from a traditional, deficit-focused, paternalistic medical model to this alternative possibilities-focused collaborative model has become controversial in some practice arenas and certainly not adopted by all agencies or even all social workers (Saleebey, 1996, 2006). For these reasons, it was important to examine the active role of theory in informing our current practice. Thus project represents an attempt to examine the history and evolution of the strengths perspective and then translate this understanding into actual practice application. The result was a five part assessment tool that can be used by any student and/or professional in their entry level social work learning practices.

FINDINGS

The tool that is presented represents the findings from the initial literature search on what guides the strengths perspective as a theory framework.

Overview

Saleebey is one of the founding authors on the strengths perspective and thus much of his work guides the use of the theory. Saleebey (1996) defines the intention of the perspective as a way to see people not problems while getting a “strengths orientation” and acknowledging barriers to fully understand the person and their situation. This orientation should help the social worker discover, embellish, explore and exploit clients’ strengths and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals (Saleebey, 1996, p. 1). The strengths perspective runs counter to the way we are taught, socialized, and acculturated. We have been raised in a society which is deficit-oriented, focusing solely on the current problem or concern and ignoring the potentials or possibilities currently existing. Although this perspective seems deceivingly simple, it is challenging to practice from this perspective. Truly, this perspective maintains that in order to genuinely approach life and one’s practice from a strengths perspective, the word problem [emphasis added] must be removed from the practitioner’s vocabulary and be replaced with terms such as challenge or barrier [emphasis added]. (Find a source from the literature.) Using the terms challenge or barrier [emphasis added] removes the acculturated blaming and narrative replaces it with an external factor that does not assumingly fall under the responsibility of the client. The careful and thoughtful use of language is another main tool in this perspective (L. McGregor, personal communication, January 19, 2010).

History

Just as defining, conceptualizing, and connecting with the original source and intention of the theory, can aid in understanding, another exercise that can be helpful is tracing the theory’s evolution through a historical and analytical framework, such as Turner’s (1996). From these research and analytical activities the history suggests that the strengths perspective stemmed from a reaction to the medical model’s deficit orientation. The primary concept of strengths perspective is not a complete novel feature, as assets and Carl Roger’s unconditioned positive regard had been around for a long time before the articulation of strengths perspective and contain central ideas shared by the completed current theory (Ericka source for Roger’s).

Perhaps one of the most fascinating characteristics about strengths perspectives is that it is the only human behavior theory utilized by professionals in the social work field who have drawn from other disciplines such as: sociology, biology, communication, anthropology, economics, and psychology. Interestingly, as well as this theory aligns with the spirit and helping nature of the discipline, it does not encompass all of the core values of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. The NASW Code of Ethics upholds six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2010) and the only theory that social work claims as its own does not incorporate ideas of social justice, which could be considered at the heart of the discipline. This misuse, or disuse, between the theory, its status in social work, and its absence of explicit concern for social justice is perhaps the main criteria that holds this perspective back from being the traditional social work theory (Turner, 1996). Once the theoretical framework has been analyzed and explored it is at that time ready to be synthesized, then evaluated, and if appropriate, applied to practice situations (Bloom, 1966).

Instrument Development

The instrument developed to move the strengths perspective into practice was based in the researcher’s efforts to analyze the strengths perspective to produce empirical evidence. Due to the elegant simplicity of the strengths perspective (Hove, 2009, Saleebey, 1996; Schriver, 2004) and using the work of Saleebey (1996) questions were generated to form a strengths-based assessment tool to use with elementary school students. This was because most schools had been strengths-oriented institutions, however, with more in-depth examinations the school system, as a whole, can actually be a fairly negative place for a child. The language used in the school is focused around “bad behavior,” “stop,” “wrong answer,” “be quiet,” “why would you do that?” and other deprofessionalizing utterances (Fine, 1991; Linde, XVI). After considering this relatively negative environment in which children have become acculturated, the instrument was born as emphasizing a strengths perspective and a counter-cultural-set of questions and beliefs about the assets, talents, and possibilities of these children.

8 Guiding Questions of Strengths Perspective

*Survival questions *Support questions *Exception questions *Possibility questions *Esteem (how do you feel about what people say about you?) questions *Perspective questions *Change questions *Time questions

Student Story

After development the instrument was used by several students in one elementary school. For confidentiality purposes the student discussed here will be name Client “D” client “D” is a teenage girl, who according to her teachers is “always talking, mocking, causing disruptions, and showing extreme disrespect to adults.” D became engaged in this strengths-based activity. D responded to the reframing of who she was and what she possessed. It was clear that she began placing value and effort into crafting thoughtful responses to these questions. She seemed to enjoy the opportunity to re-examine some of her characteristics that others had told her for years were her problems.

For the assessment, the practitioner intentionally provided D with a blank sheet of paper and a pen. It was a nonverbal gesture demonstrating that her strengths are valid and should not be corrected or changed; they can be committed in ink. This exercise also allowed for D to re-write her story. This might have been the first time she was provided the opportunity to tell her alternative story rather than hearing others reinforce the negative aspects of a dominant story created by a deficit-focused society. In the short period of time, D’s countenance transformed from one with shrugged shoulders and shifting eyes, to one with a more proud posture and assumed a position of engagement and curiosity. The practitioner could visually see the shift from problem to possibility (Hove, 2009; Saleebey, 1996). With this brief, yet significant, experience of being intentional and approaching my practice from a strictly strengths perspective, the practitioner continued to be impressed with the profound simplicity and sincerely look forward to gaining mastery over this approach and hope to one day naturally function from this perspective in all interactions.

References


Strengths-Based Assessment (S, G, B) by Julie Machedt (jmachledt@iupui.edu)

Directions: Please answer as honestly and as thoroughly as you can to get the best out of the strengths-based assessment. The instrument is based on a discussion of strengths, goals, and then barriers it enables big enough to ensure that barriers can be remedied by current strengths to facilitate the client in meeting their short and long term goals.

PERSONAL DOMAIN

What do you like about yourself?
What are you good at doing?
When have you felt proud of yourself?
What do others think you are good at?
What do you want to be when you grow up?
What kinds of things do you do to take care of your body?

EXTRA CURRICULAR DOMAIN

What do you like to do? (Hobbies, sports, etc.)
Where do you like to spend your time?
What was the best part of your last vacation?
Do you like animals?
Have you ever had a pet?

EDUCATION/SCHOOL DOMAIN

When do you feel good about yourself at school?
What would you like to learn more about?
What subjects are you good at?
Where do you see yourself in school?

FAMILY DOMAIN

What is one of the greatest things about your family?
Describe the things you like about your family and it’s environment?

HAPPINESS DOMAIN

What are positive things that people say about you?
What kinds of things do you like about yourself and feeling of satisfaction?

All we have are Strengths using the strengths theory simply allows us to remember to look for them.