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## A dynamic approach to psychological strength development and intervention

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Many practitioners working with clients from a strengths perspective largely rely on ad hoc interventions and employ a simplistic ‘identify and use’ approach. In this article, we suggest that clients can extract greater benefits when practitioners adopt more sophisticated approaches to strengths intervention. We introduce an alternative approach that we call ‘strengths development’. This approach is distinguished by the view that strengths are not fixed traits across settings and time (the dominant, contemporary approach to personality). Instead, we adopt dynamic, within-person approaches from personality science to research, assessment, and interventions on strengths. Specifically, strengths are highly contextual phenomena that emerge in distinctive patterns alongside particular goals, interests, values, and situational factors. Strengths are potentials for excellence that can be cultivated through enhanced awareness, accessibility, and effort. Finally, we outline potential psychological risks associated with the strengths perspective that are worthy of explicit discussion with clients.

**Keywords:** strengths; personality; values; intervention; positive psychology

### Introduction

Professional attention to the topic of strengths has increased dramatically in recent years. This upswing in scholarly publication on the subject, as well as the creation of strengths assessments and interventions, coincides with the growth of the positive psychology movement. As increasing numbers of researchers and practitioners shift to a focus on positive topics the promise of identifying and using personal strengths is becoming increasingly attractive. Scholarly volumes on strengths (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) as well as popular books (e.g., Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Fox, 2008; Linley, 2008; Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener, 2010) are being published at rapid rates. Ideally, the research and theory on strengths can be used by practitioners to create positive psychology interventions in a wide range of contexts including educational, therapeutic, coaching, and organizational (Biswas-Diener, 2009).

Research on ‘positive psychotherapy’ suggests that attention to strengths is beneficial within the therapeutic milieu – with greater client outcomes than several other highly touted interventions (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). In clinical research by Fluckiger and Grosse Holtforth (2008), priming client strengths was found to be associated with enhanced therapeutic bonding, client mastery experiences, and

decreased symptoms. Research within the educational context suggests that strengths-based curricula are associated with increased intrinsic motivation and effort in both secondary and post-secondary schools (Louis, 2009). Bowers and Lopez (2010) present evidence that the students who are most skilled at capitalizing upon their strengths within educational settings are better at mobilizing social support and building upon past successes. Perhaps, the largest area of scientific attention on strengths has been within the organizational context. The recently published Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology at Work (Linley, Harrington, & Garcea, 2009) includes three chapters with titles explicitly addressing strengths, and additional chapters that address specific strengths, such as authenticity or the capacity for cooperation. In a study of Americans included in one of these chapters, Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, and Seligman (2009) provide initial evidence that strengths are associated with work satisfaction. Similarly, Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) found that people who regularly use their strengths are more engaged at work. Similarly, in a study of managers in the United Kingdom, researchers found that when managers emphasized performance strengths, performance increased by 36.4%; when managers emphasized performance weaknesses, performance decreased by 26.8% (Corporate Leadership

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Council, 2002). Likewise, research conducted by Stefanyshyn (2007) found that employee turnover fell with working employees using their strengths more regularly.

Indeed, research appears to confirm that strengths are associated with a wide range of desirable psychological and behavioral outcomes. In research on individuals, Govindji and Linley (2007) found that people who used strengths more frequently experienced greater subjective and psychological well-being. Follow-up research by Proctor, Maltby, and Linley (2009) replicated these findings. Longitudinal research by Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, and Hurling (2011) confirmed that people who use their strengths experience less stress and similar research by Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, and Biswas-Diener (2010) found that people who use their strengths were more likely to achieve their goals. In a randomized clinical trial with comparison treatments and a wait-list control condition, Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) found that people who identify and use their strengths experienced higher levels of happiness and lower depression levels, even as much as 6 months after the intervention was concluded. These results were replicated in a small sample of university administrators in a study by Minhas (2010) who found that people who actively developed their strengths experienced increased well-being and elevated levels of self-esteem. Taken together, the research on individual, clinical, educational, and organizational outcomes suggests that psychological strengths are more than a passing fad; strengths identification, use, and development are potentially important tools in personal and organizational development.

Although there is a mounting case for the benefits of attention to strengths, there is currently little agreement on how best to use theory, research, and assessment tools related to psychological strengths. There are, of course, many studies published on specific strengths such as courage, hope, and creativity. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive discussion of research on the variety of specific strengths in existence. We therefore confine our attention, in this article, to research and theory related to strengths in general. Many practitioners work with strengths on an ad hoc basis, creating their own interventions as deemed appropriate in their practice. While this ad hoc approach is consistent with the typical behavior of practitioners in the field (Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2008; Treiweiler & Stricker, 1998), this approach tends to be divorced from the scientific centrality of positive psychology. Ironically, practitioners and consultants who identify themselves as aligned with positive psychology market their applied work as distinct from competitors because there is an inherent level of scientific quality control that is missing from other allied health

professionals and coaching practices. Specifically, positive psychology interventions are derived from scientific theories and empirically supported.<sup>1</sup>

There are natural problems in aligning research and practice. Often, practice ‘outpaces’ research in that practitioners find locally appropriate modifications of interventions that are not directly suggested by research. On the other hand, some practitioners do not keep abreast of the latest research findings and adjust their practice accordingly. This chasm between what is researched, what is marketed, and what is practiced suggests avenues for improvement. This article aims to provide a theoretical overview of the topic of strengths and to suggest new ways for practitioners from a wide range of disciplines to work with their clients to develop strengths.

### *Current state of strengths intervention*

Formal guidelines and standards for practicing from a strengths-perspective can help positive psychology become more firmly established as an applied as well as a basic science. The presence of efficacious strengths interventions (Minhas, 2010; Seligman et al., 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) are merely a starting point. As McFall (1991) states in his manifesto, psychological services should not be administered to the public (except under strict experimental control) unless services and claimed benefits are described in detail, and any claimed benefits are the result of empirical investigation. There is one important caveat – practitioners can conduct novel interventions, based on a strong theoretical rationale, as long as adequate data are collected to test the effectiveness of these deviations from the literature. Practitioners should be careful to collect data in a way to minimize their own biases such as change aversion, loss aversion, and attempts to ‘prove’ the intervention worked (rather than remaining open and receptive to the actual findings). Importantly, practitioners should minimize experimenter effects where subtle cues and the behavior and presence of the practitioner alter client responses. To handle this, data from clients should be collected in a manner such that clients can respond honestly (e.g., anonymous web-based surveys with answers collected and compiled from disinterested third parties). All data should be shared with the field to be evaluated for quality control and synthesized to inform existing theory and intervention. Work by practitioners in the field is an untapped resource for innovative developments and these guidelines provide an initial step for building a two-way stream.

Currently, the quality control of applied positive psychology is left largely to the discretion of practitioners and consultants who are often on the ‘frontlines’ of the service marketplace. We do not

believe it is controversial to claim that many lack the requisite skills to critically evaluate the existing body of evidence and/or collect data on services rendered to validate potential benefits. By the same token, we do not believe it is controversial to suggest that responsible practitioners will sometimes make small modifications to existing interventions to make them more locally appropriate and effective. Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, and Sheldon (2010) suggest that self-selection, effort, and other person-related factors may affect the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions. To the extent that this is true, practitioners act as local scientists testing and extending the effectiveness of interventions with new groups and in new contexts. Thus, it is probable that research provides the evidence that a specific technique might work within given parameters and practitioners must make expert judgments about the boundaries of local revision. Researchers and practitioners work in tandem, then, to provide validation for positive psychology interventions. Moreover, practitioners – whether they are school teachers, therapists, or coaches – bear an extra burden of responsibility to translate research and theory into responsible practice. To reiterate, we believe responsible practice can be enhanced by the proper collection of data to evaluate what works and what does not, and to share these data for the larger community of practitioners and scientists to learn from the trial-and-error, self-correcting nature of scientifically informed practice.

To better understand the current practices associated with the positive psychological topic of strengths, an informal survey of people interested in positive psychology was conducted in Spring of 2010. In this survey, we requested practitioners who are members of the *American Psychological Association – Friends of Positive Psychology* Internet listserv to respond to questions about which strengths assessments they commonly use and what types of interventions they employ with clients. Of the 20 people who responded – all of whom were therapists and/or coaches – nearly all reported the same pattern of intervention. Practitioners – whether they are coaches or therapists – tend to employ a formal strengths assessment to identify client strengths and then discuss ways clients can use these strengths for increased success. Although these various strengths assessments purport to measure slightly different concepts such as character or talents, we believe there is enough conceptual similarity among them (and they are treated by practitioners as conceptually similar) that we discuss them all as general measures of strengths. It is interesting that 33% of respondents spontaneously specifically mentioned using a ‘strengths approach’ early in the relationship with a client (i.e., within the first three sessions). These results suggest that strengths assessments are used to ‘set the stage’ for a positive focus. The vast majority

(18 of 20) of respondents used what we call the ‘identify and use’ approach to strengths intervention (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Admittedly, this short survey does not represent careful research with a large, representative sample and should not be viewed as conclusive. As pilot research, however, it suggests possible consistency in the way that those trained in or familiar with positive psychology practice strengths-based interventions.

In the ‘identify and use’ approach practitioners work with clients to first label personal strengths and then open a discussion to how they might use these strengths to address existing problems or amplify positive functioning. This is a straightforward and logical approach to intervention, and emphasizes the importance of self-awareness. The appeal of this approach is that it ‘uncovered’ an aspect of the client that he or she may be overlooking that if acknowledged and integrated into the sense of self and employed more frequently in daily life, might lead to greater personal success (for related ideas, see Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). One common aspect of the ‘identify and use’ approach to strengths assessment is the implicit view that strengths can and should be used ‘more than they currently are’. There is evidence that this approach is warranted. Results from studies show that only about one-third of people can identify their own strengths (Hill, 2001) and that only 17% of people say they use their strengths ‘most of the time’ each day (Buckingham, 2007). Further, the mere identification of strengths has been associated with benefits, such as increased happiness and decreased rates of depression (Seligman et al., 2005). Some of the most vocal advocates of strengths have argued for the importance of identifying strengths (Buckingham, 2007; Linley & Burns, 2010).

We believe that, while the ‘identify and use’ approach can be an effective, straightforward strategy, more nuanced and theoretically driven approaches to strengths development are called for in therapy, coaching, and other contexts. The current state of strengths theory, assessment, and research has made more sophisticated interventions possible than reflected in typical ‘identify and use’ approaches. We believe that the widespread adoption of newer approaches will ultimately lead to better client service and reflect well on the field of positive psychology. In particular, we advocate the use of ‘strengths development’ rather than ‘identify and use’ approaches. The strengths development approach is distinguished by the assumption that strengths interventions are not primarily about the use of strengths for performance (as in, ‘how could you use this strength more?’ or ‘where do you see opportunities to use this strength?’) but should be primarily about developing strengths (as in, ‘how might you know when you should use this strength more and when you

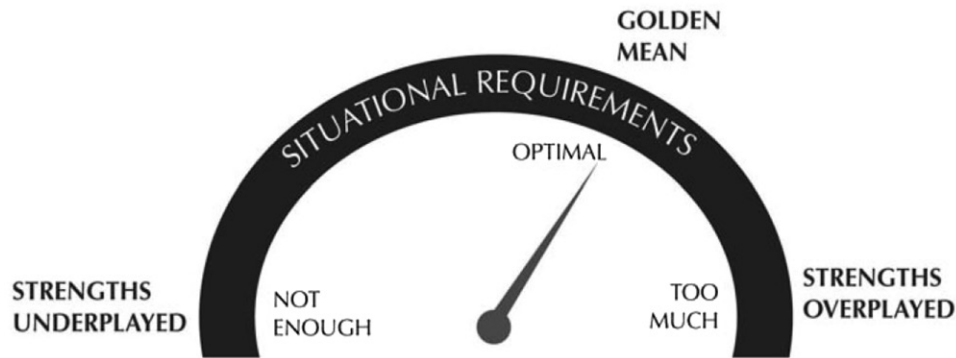


Figure 1. Strengths regulation.

should use it less' or 'what is the impact of your strengths use on others and how does that feedback suggest you might better use your strength?'). The 'identify and use' approach assumes competency and focuses on *employing* strengths in the pursuit of personal achievement while the development approach emphasizes building strengths competency (see Figure 1). Admittedly, these two approaches bear some passing similarity to one another. For this reason, we will spend the rest of the article articulating the differences between them.

### *Are strengths personality?*

Among the most important characteristics distinguishing the strengths development approach and the traditional identify and use approach is the issue of how strengths are construed. Many lay people think of strengths as 'behaviors at which we excel'. This commonsense view is largely shared by scholars in the field of strengths psychology. A number of academic definitions of strengths exist:

- A capacity for feeling, thinking, and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes (Linley & Harrington, 2007).
- A combination of talents (naturally recurring patterns of thoughts, feeling and behavior), knowledge (facts and lessons learned), and skills (the steps of an activity) (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).
- The psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define morally valued virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

While these definitions differ from one another all have their roots in classic trait personality theory. To some extent, the major voices in strengths psychology all think of strengths as having a genetic and/or evolutionary aspect which 'naturally' makes people good at

certain types of performances that in turn, lead to predictable individual differences. Linley (2008), for example, endorses an evolutionary perspective in which environmental circumstances, over time, shape strengths. Buckingham and Clifton (2001) emphasize the role of natural synaptic connections in the manifestations of talent, which they consider to be an integral aspect of strengths. Clifton and Harter (2003) acknowledge the role of personality theory as a foundation of their approach to strengths, 'The findings of high genetic composition may hint that how people most efficiently grow and develop is dynamically related to who they are to begin with . . . . People can change the changeable (satisfaction, subjective well-being, engagement, performance, etc.), but most efficiently through who they are to begin with (their inherent talents)' (p. 120). These understandings of strengths are consistent with research on the topic. Steger, Hicks, Kashdan, Krueger, and Bouchard (2007) employed a sample of twins to examine the contribution of genetic factors on the 24 VIA strengths and found a consistent pattern of genetic contribution, with medium to large effects in many cases. Similarly, in a sample of several hundred adult community members, Linley (2010) found strong correlations between strengths and 'Big 5' personality factors which, themselves, are understood to be strongly determined by genetic contributions. The answer to whether strengths are merely a facet of personality is a subject of more than idle academic interest; it speaks directly to interventions in that it addresses the degree to which strengths can be learned and developed.

Trait theorists distinguish between two aspects of behavioral consistency. *Longitudinal stability* reflects how people high on a personality trait at one point in time are high at another point in time. *Cross-situational consistency* reflects how people high on trait in some situations are high on that trait in other situations. The most widely used approach to personality, the Big Five, is focused on the statistical, structural differences across people (John & Srivastava, 1999). This approach

is useful to describe and classify people but less useful for modeling people's motivation, behavior, and reactions in their everyday environment. With the use of repeated assessments across time and various situations, researchers have raised questions about cross-situational consistency as the fundamental basis of a personality trait (Cervone, 2005; Cervone & Shoda, 1999; Fleeson, 2001, 2004; Mischel, Shoda, & Mendoza-Denton, 2002). Within-person variability in personality traits such as extraversion and agreeableness across occasions has been shown to be as large as the variability in emotions from one moment to the next (Fleeson, 2004). For modern researchers (Cervone, 2005), variability in behavior across situations is not a source of information to ignore and not something on the periphery of someone's personality. Instead, behaviors that are contingent on particular life circumstances (and not others) are a critical part of the structure of personality.

With the use of global strength terminology people can be classified (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and this act of enhanced self-knowledge offers psychological benefits (at least in the short-term). In this article, however, we argue that this descriptive approach has limited applications for improving people's quality of life. People can adjust their behavior to obtain the best possible outcome in a given situation and can learn to construct lives where strengths are more readily used. This includes using strengths to make regular effort toward goals that are aligned with a person's central values (e.g., Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). Instead of focusing on strengths as internal capacities that exist across time and situations (contemporary trait approach), we adopt a dynamic, within-person approach to personality. Instead of searching for behaviors that elicit strong performance and vitality across time and situations, we can search for interactions between people and their environment. Such behaviors can be defined as a strength-based structure within someone's personality. For instance, the strength termed courage can be represented in terms of a goal of standing up for other people that fail to adequately protect themselves, the situations that alter the likelihood this goal will be achieved (e.g., being alone while witnessing someone being bullied or being in a large crowd), and beliefs that when activated alter the likelihood that this goal will be achieved (e.g., feeling uncomfortable being the center of social attention).

To truly understand the overt expression of strengths, context must be taken into consideration. Some people will showcase behaviors that vary in predictable ways that distinctively characterize the individual. If we only defined strengths as existing across time and settings, we would fail to capture strengths that are only displayed in response to a smaller network of situational contingencies.

Conventional between-person approaches for describing the strengths of individuals, across time and settings, leads to an unnecessary, high probability of false negatives. Potential interventions would be less pronounced. This is because the recognition of fewer strengths, in turn, offers fewer opportunities to aid people in making strengths more accessible and finding new situations to use strengths (Seligman et al., 2005). We are not offering a new theory of personality; instead, we are adapting modern theories to research, assessment, and interventions with strengths.

Two of the most prominent voices in positive psychology – Peterson and Seligman (2004) – explicitly adopt a personality driven understanding of strengths. They also directly acknowledge the possibility that strengths are influenced by environmental factors and therefore, malleable:

The stance we take toward character is in the spirit of personality psychology, and specifically that of trait theory, but not the caricature of trait theory held up as a straw man and then criticized by social learning theorists in the 1970s. We instead rely on the new psychology of traits that recognizes individual differences that are stable and general but also shaped by the individual's setting and thus capable of change. (p. 10)

The degree and the pace of change suggested by Peterson, Seligman, and other psychologists interested in strengths, remain unclear. It is uncertain, for instance, whether change means 'becoming even better' (proficiency), 'using the strength more' (frequency) or 'knowing when to use a strength, and in what amount' (regulation). And herein lays the crux of the problem: currently, relatively few practitioners are taking a theoretically integrated approach to strengths development, in part because strengths development runs counter to the very personality theory in which an understanding of strengths is grounded. We suggest that proficiency, frequency, and regulation make an important, but perhaps not comprehensive, list of ways that people can develop their strengths. The 'identify and use' approach to strengths is more aligned to classic personality psychology in which strengths are viewed as relatively immutable traits. There is reason people focus on the identification of strengths – Seligman et al. (2005) present evidence that merely labeling strengths can lead to tonic psychological effects. These effects are limited to happiness and depression, however, and do not speak to motivation, effort, interpersonal effectiveness or other aspects of personal performance or flourishing. The 'strengths development' approach, on the other hand, views strengths as personal capacities or potentials that must be cultivated through effort to be applied most effectively.

Practitioners focusing on strengths sometimes appear to overlook an existing literature that suggests that the labeling of strengths has potential downsides.

Most notably, labeling strengths has the potential to lead people to underperform (see Dweck, 2006; Mueller & Dweck, 1998, for general overview). If people believe that their newly labeled sense of self is a stable entity, they are unlikely to invest effort in developing strengths and uncovering new opportunities to use them (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Smiley & Dweck, 1994). We believe that this is one of the reasons that people often direct effort toward working on personal weaknesses rather than strengths: they believe that there is ‘more room for growth’ in areas of weakness. For a person with an understanding of strengths as stable traits, uncovering strengths can be a source of initial intrigue followed by a period of stagnation. This is mirrored in some practices wherein the initial excitement of a strengths focus is replaced by an uncertainty regarding what more ‘can be done with strengths’. Strengths labeling without an explicit growth mindset may lead to iatrogenic effects. The potential risks of a stable entity mindset in a strengths-based intervention should be described clearly and the exact nature of how this will be handled must be made explicit to clients (McFall, 1991).

The question of the relation between strengths and personality is important primarily because lay perception of personality in general – and client perception of the stability of strengths in particular – bear directly on how strengths interventions should be introduced, how they will be received, and how effective they might be. Strengths-related interventions can be grouped under what Dweck (2008) calls ‘self-theories interventions’ or those that are intended to help a person grow by seeing core aspects of the self as capable of development. This suggests that practitioners should consider adopting intervention approaches that speak less to the ‘use’ of strengths and more to the ‘development’ of strengths. Admittedly, Dweck’s research is not focused explicitly on strengths but is directed toward theories concerning the self and attributes of the self such as intelligence. Although she does not explicitly draw conclusions related to strengths, her research on self-theories is applicable to strengths to the extent that the latter can easily be construed from a growth or fixed mindset.

### ***Do strengths exist in isolation?***

Another important distinction between the ‘identify and use’ and ‘strengths development’ approaches is the isolationist versus context-sensitive nature of strengths interventions. Many practitioners who adopt the ‘identify and use’ approach rely on strengths assessments to label an individual’s strengths and these strengths are often viewed either in isolation (as in ‘I see from your test results that you are a curious

person’) or within artificial boundaries (as in ‘Tell me about your ‘top five’ strengths’). The implicit assumption here is that strengths exist in isolation, divorced from intrapsychic and social factors. Most modern personality theorists recognize that social situations have an impact on individual behaviors (for review, see Mischel & Shoda, 1998), and Peterson and Seligman (2004) explicitly make this case for strengths. In this vein, the strengths development approach assumes that strengths are heavily influenced by situations and that it is contextual, and not personality, factors that determine the appropriateness of strengths use. Indeed, the optimal amounts of proficiency, frequency, and regulation of strengths can be best determined by situational factors rather than their synergy with individual strengths (e.g., Kashdan, McKnight, Fincham, & Rose, in press). For example, as a person’s role changes at work he or she may need to change the specific strengths used or the amount in which they are used (including the possibility of using a strength less rather than more). Schwartz and Sharpe (2005) argue that wisdom is a meta-strength in that it is vital for the appropriate use of other strengths. To work more effectively with clients, then, practitioners might shift from a ‘use it more’ mentality (or even a general ‘use it differently’ mentality) and adopt the competency approach of regulating strengths by using ‘them in proportion to situational demands’ (Linley, 2008).

It is important for practitioners to have a solid understanding of personality theory, cultural and situational influences, and related factors that might increase the effectiveness of strengths interventions. There are other intra- and interpersonal factors that impact strengths effectiveness and suggest that strengths should not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon. We present an initial but, perhaps, incomplete list here:

#### *(1) Strengths tilt*

Although most strengths theorists ground their work in the foundation of personality theory most, if not all, also acknowledge the role of positive emotion as a hallmark feature of strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Linley et al., 2010). Indeed, the emotional aspect of strengths use appears to be an important motivator for individuals as they continue the process of strengths experimentation and development. There is an increasing understanding that strengths may interact with interests and passions in a variety of ways. Morris and Garrett (2009) suggest that strengths use leads directly to more passionate work. In addition, Peterson, Park, Hall, and Seligman (2009) found that zest was strongly associated with workplace outcomes such as job satisfaction. These recent findings are reminiscent of the research on the ways that talent and interests affect professional outcomes. Consider a series of studies by researcher Lubinski

and Benbow (2006), Lubinski, Benbow, Webb, and Bleske-Rechek (2006). In one study, the researchers examined the work preferences of intellectually talented students and then again years later when the research participants were 35 years old. The researchers found dramatic shifts in work preferences over the years. For example, the young men in the study were principally concerned with their education and ‘finding a niche’ but, at follow-up, they were more concerned with ‘making their mark’. At work, a leaning toward friendships, satisfaction, and enjoyment was gradually replaced with an emphasis on leadership opportunities and merit-based pay. This directly suggests that both the identification and intervention with strengths may be modified to fit individual values as individuals grow older.

There were interesting differences with the talented women in the 35-year study. Although they were just as likely as men, on follow-up, to have tenure track research positions at universities they were also nine times more likely to be homemakers. Moreover, while all the young people in the study thought a flexible work schedule and fewer hours were important, the 35-year-old women who were mothers thought these facets of work were even more important than their peers at follow-up. Thus, talents (or strengths) are not enough in themselves, they interact with a person’s interests and values (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). This is why, for instance, one person might have the strength of courage manifesting and being used in very different ways than another person (e.g. an emergency room doctor versus a whistleblower).

The idea that interests influence how strengths manifest is even more clearly seen in a second study. Here, the Lubinski team looked at the work performance among hundreds of profoundly gifted people; children who, by the age of 13, were identified as being in the top 1% on standardized tests of intellectual ability. Upon follow-up 20 years later, the researchers found that it was not basic intellectual ability (strengths or talents) that predicted specific achievements later in life but, rather, it was ‘intellectual tilt’. The researchers identified ‘tilt’ by subtracting verbal scores from mathematical scores, effectively pinpointing whether the 13-year olds leaned more toward humanities or quantitative reasoning. The researchers found this tilt could predict not *whether* the individual was successful but the *type* of success he or she had.

Taken together, these studies provide evidence that people’s natural leanings and interests interact with their basic strengths to move them forward in one specific direction and away from others. Regardless of whether these leanings are the product of genetics, socialization, or individual preferences; they strongly influence how a person chooses to manifest her talents. Thus, strengths should not be viewed in isolation but

should be paired with interests to get a better understanding of how strengths are likely to best optimally employed by each individual client. Although the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) is often paired with an interest measure such as the Holland Interest Inventory (Holland, 1996) to create an in-depth report, this is rarely done with strengths assessments. To work with individual clients on the idea of strengths tilt, ask questions that highlight the importance of personal values. These might include questions as basic as ‘How might you use this strength to live your values?’ or as complicated as ‘How does this strength manifest in you in a way that it does not manifest in others?’ or ‘What choices have you made around using this strength, and what prompted you to make those specific decisions?’

## (2) *Strength constellations*

We feel that the single greatest area of improvement in strengths intervention is to formally increase our collective understanding of strengths constellations. By ‘strengths constellations’, we mean the unique profiles of strengths from person to person. Currently, many practitioners focus – somewhat arbitrarily – on their client’s ‘top 5 strengths’, most often meaning those that the client most heavily endorses on a strengths measure. We feel there is much to be gained by looking at specific pairings or groupings of strengths. The science of psychology is replete with examples in which researchers have found it advantageous to examine concepts in tandem rather than in isolation. Take the construct of ‘subjective well-being’ (Diener, 1984) for example. Subjective well-being consists of specific components (life satisfaction and positive and negative affect). While it is instructive to assess each of these individually, it is more sophisticated to understand how each of these affects the others (Schimmack, 2008). In some cases, attention to the interplay between subjective well-being components has led to new insights, such as the finding that global life satisfaction is not merely the aggregate of specific domain satisfaction but is, instead, affected by cultural norms (Diener, Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Suh, 2000). In the clinical setting, the Minnesota Multi-Phasic Personality Inventory – II (MMPI-2) is useful not simply because it can measure somatization, depression, paranoia, and other clinical symptoms, but because it creates distinctive profiles based on the relative relationship among these different symptoms. Similarly, the usefulness of the MBTI in organizational settings rests, in part, on its ability to distinguish different ‘types’ (e.g., an extroverted personality type that is coupled with a leaning toward ‘thinking’ is different than an extroverted personality type coupled with a leaning toward ‘feeling’). We feel the merits of examining the interactions between intrapersonal factors and processes can best be seen in personality



theory. Cervone (2005) suggests that, historically, theorists have tried to understand intra individual personality architecture by dividing their topic of interest into distinct parts. As an improvement on this approach, Cervone condones the development of multi-factor and context-sensitive understanding of behavior, such that it might be explained by the whole person, rather than the person's parts.

In our own work, we have seen interesting examples of this, especially where two strengths seem to be contradictory. For example, one of us (RBD) recently worked with a client who had the strengths of 'spotlight' and 'humility'. Spotlight is the ability to thrive as the center of attention, to be able to hold other people's interest and focus, and to perform well under the scrutiny of others. Humility is actively avoiding arrogance by sharing credit for personal successes and appreciating those who act in a support capacity. At first look, these two strengths are contradictory. How can someone be humble but also love to be the center of attention? What we often find with individuals with this combination is that they get energy from speaking up on behalf of others. In a team setting, for instance, they are happy to speak on behalf of the group. Individuals with this particular combination of strengths make good spokespeople for a cause they believe in. We feel this provides an additional layer of sophistication to that of examining strengths in isolation. There is a definite need for more research on strengths constellations. Currently, we know very little about how specific strengths interact with one another or manifest in real world circumstances. Practitioners are in a uniquely well-suited position to gather some of this information. We advocate both more research and increased sharing of insights related to strengths constellations.

### *(3) Strengths blindness*

People tend to value their own area of strength and – to some extent – disparage their areas of weakness. So aligned are the concepts of strengths and values that the VIA approach to strengths explicitly acknowledges the link by calling itself 'Values in Action' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Interestingly, because there is so much conceptual overlap between strengths and values, people might not be aware of their strengths. For instance, in a recent qualitative study of 50 highly courageous people, one of us (Biswas-Diener, in press) found that people are often 'blind' to a personal strength because they view it as 'ordinary' rather than 'extraordinary'. This does not appear to be a matter of humility or socially desirable self-presentation but represents a true psychological blind spot. Evidence for this rests, in part, in the fact that many of the interviewees were obviously high in self-confidence and spoke openly about their feats, such as obtaining

World Records or skiing to the South Pole. In addition, many of the respondents in this study reported genuine surprise to learn that other people might act in non-courageous ways if faced with similar situations. A similar understanding of courage is illustrated in this interview quote:

I never thought of myself as courageous. I always just did what needed to be done. I thought I acted in exactly the same way as other people. I never thought it was anything special until other people started complimenting me. Only then did I realize I was different.

There are several possible reasons why people might be susceptible to psychological blind spots regarding their own strengths. First, people are prone to false consensus biases (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) where they are likely to overestimate the similarity of the actions and thoughts of others to their own. This could lead to a situation in which individuals habitually overlook the uniqueness of their own strengths. A second possibility lies in the fact that strengths are often interwoven with personal values and therefore, more apt to be viewed as 'the right thing to do' rather than a unique behavior pattern. Third, research on comparisons biases suggest the possibility that, to the extent that individuals occasionally underestimate their own prowess (below-average-effect), especially in instances where tasks are perceived as difficult (Kruger, 1999). To the extent that 'strengths blindness' occurs it would be helpful to know where we might expect strengths blindness and to better understand its consequences. To use the 24 VIA strengths as an example, it might be interesting to learn that people tend not to be blind to strengths such as humor and spirituality but are more typically blind to the strengths such as kindness, curiosity, and bravery. Understanding areas where strengths blindness is more common would enable us to better work with clients by creating interventions that were appropriate to their level of insight and readiness for change. Indeed, identifying personal blind spots is central to individualized coaching and psychotherapy. Currently, we know little about where clients have natural insights and natural blind spots related to their own strengths. Once again, we feel that practitioners are in a good position to help collect and disseminate this type of information.

### *(4) Strengths sensitivity*

We notice that very few people, ourselves included, talk much about any potential downsides of a strengths focus. Scholars tend to emphasize the benefits of a strengths focus, in part, because this is what the results of research suggest (e.g., Govindji & Linley, 2007; Seligman et al., 2005; Stefanyszyn, 2007; Wood et al., 2011). Despite the potential benefits of a strengths approach we have noticed that, occasionally, clients feel disappointed, disengaged, or otherwise distressed

as a result of strengths use. This is particularly true when people experience failures or setbacks – as they inevitably will – when working in areas of strength. There is reason to believe that people who adopt a strengths approach to goal pursuit will be more confident and optimistic of success (Proctor et al., 2009). Thus, when failure occurs, people who more strongly anticipate success may be more disappointed or self-punitive relative to those whose optimism is more cautious. This is a case where an emphasis on strengths may make people psychologically more vulnerable to failure than they might otherwise be.

This dovetails with a wider body of research – discussed above – on performance and its relation to perceptions of trait-stability by Dweck and colleagues (Grant & Dweck, 2003; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). It may be that people are more vulnerable to failures associated with the use of strengths than they are with failures associated with the use of weaknesses. Past research suggests that people are susceptible to a wide range of strong reactions based on feedback, and that these reactions are larger for personality feedback than for intellectual feedback (Snyder & Cowles, 1979). Furthermore, negative feedback that results from the interpretation of personality inventory scores can undermine future performance (Cianci, Klein, & Seijts, 2010). The study by Cianci et al. (2010) is particularly worth noting because of its potential implications for sensitivity related to strengths-based performance. Cianci et al. (2010) examined learning goals – those focused on gaining competence – and performance goals – those that emphasize achievement. These concepts are very similar to the growth and fixed mindsets described by Grant and Dweck (2003). The Cianci research team found that after receiving negative feedback people with learning goals appeared to perform better than those with achievement goals.

It could be that failure in an area of perceived strength is associated with psychological costs. Currently, little is known about how people react when they fail or are criticized in an area of strength, as will inevitably happen. Anecdotal evidence with our own clients suggests that people tend to be excessively hard on themselves when failure or criticism occurs around a strength. Additional research and sharing of practical experience are needed to better understand this phenomenon (see McFall, 1991 for role of front-line practitioners in collecting data) and to create interventions that might effectively address meta-cognitions concerning strengths.

##### *(5) The social costs of strengths*

Similar to personality characteristics, strengths are often treated as intrapersonal phenomena. We offer no argument against this position but add to it the often overlooked fact that the use of strengths often has social

consequences. For example, a person high in creativity may be viewed by others as clever or they may be criticized as being non-conformist. Whether a particular strength is perceived as a positive or a negative by observers is less important than being aware that strengths can alter or be altered by the social world. One way strengths interventionists can help people to develop strengths is by focusing on awareness of the social impact of strength use in order to minimize potential social costs and maximize social gains.

There are several possible social costs associated with strengths use. First, because strengths are closely aligned with values (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), it is possible that people will not value the strengths of others if they are different from their own. Such reactions may be a matter of predictable social biases such as those related to in-group favoritism as much as they are a matter of personal opinion. Someone low in forgiveness, for example, may interpret forgiving behaviors as a sign of weakness in others. Another potential social problem related to strengths use lies in egocentric biases (Dunning et al., 2004). People tend to overestimate their own strengths and contributions to group endeavors while underestimating the strengths and contributions of others (Kruger, Windschitl, Burrus, Fessel, & Chambers, 2008). Kruger et al. offer evidence that such biases are particularly associated with areas of competence, such as strengths. This could lead to potential discord in romantic relationships, work teams and other groups. Thus, an ‘outside-in’ view of strengths may be one intervention approach that challenging clients to enhance self-knowledge, overcome natural cognitive biases, and promote superior social functioning.

The ideas presented here – strengths tilt, strengths constellations, strengths blindness, strengths sensitivity, and the social costs of strengths – are the direct products of the ‘strengths development’ mindset. The strengths development approach views strengths within a complex web of situational, social, and intrapsychic factors that lead to unique real-world behavior patterns ranging from unrealized potential to optimal outcomes. It is because of this contextual understanding of strengths that development is possible at all. Rather than seeing strengths as isolated traits, we urge practitioners to work from a position of client growth. From this perspective, personal effectiveness is a matter of recognizing and being more aware of the bi-directional relationships between central personal values and strengths, and the information dictated by a situation for what strengths should be deployed and to what degree.

## **Conclusion**

Practical work with strengths is a core component of positive psychology and offers a potentially powerful

avenue for increasing performance and affecting social change (Linley & Garcea, 2011). Despite the rapid gains made in the psychological study of strengths, there remain few formal guidelines for practice, and there is a sense of disconnect between the research on strengths and the practice based on this research. Although there are undoubtedly clever clinicians, educators, and coaches using strengths in novel and powerful ways, anecdotal evidence suggests that most employ rudimentary approaches to strengths based intervention. Although the so-called ‘identify and use’ approach to strengths is logical and effective, we present an alternative approach called ‘strengths development’. This approach helps us to identify more nuanced aspects of strengths use such as the ways that we are tempted – often to our own detriment – to simply use strengths more, regardless of what is wise. Specifically, we believe that strengths can be developed in an on-going manner by attending to the proficiency, frequency, and regulation of use. We encourage practitioners to develop a growth mindset around strengths and to help their clients adopt the same mindset.

We also believe that strengths should be viewed as being highly contextual rather than isolated in nature. We argue that positive psychology practitioners – whether coaches, educators, or therapists – can expand upon the identify and use approach in ways that will make interventions more sophisticated and effective, and reduce the potential for harm. We offer several guiding principles for strengths assessment and intervention:

- (1) The situation provides important information about which strengths should be used and in what capacity/degree. Thus, increasing competency can be developed through awareness of the impact of situational factors and the wise application of strengths in response to these.
- (2) A client’s understanding of the growth-oriented nature of strengths can affect their success in using them. Lay views of the extent to which strengths are fixed or can be developed have implications for how they are introduced to clients and, possibly, the effectiveness of strengths interventions.
- (3) Personal interests and values often interact with strengths to affect performance.
- (4) There may be utility in taking a multi-dimensional approach to intrapersonal phenomena as they affect strengths. Self-defined interests and values, to name two such phenomena, influence people’s awareness of their own strengths and how strengths are manifested.
- (5) Practitioners should steer away from viewing at strengths in arbitrary formats such as looking

at the ‘top 5’ or ‘bottom 5’ strengths on a list and move toward addressing strengths in tandem and in constellation. More research is needed to determine how two or more strengths might manifest together in unique or emergent ways.

- (6) Potential negative side effects might outweigh benefits for a particular person confronting particular life circumstances. Strengths work simply should not be treated as appropriate for everyone in every circumstance. In fact, attention to strengths might be associated with psychological vulnerabilities such as decreased motivation or a perceived threat to a coherent understanding of one’s own identity.

The current state of strengths research and practice is largely a patchwork of studies from the fields of management, sports, coaching, and social and clinical psychology. Because of this, it can be difficult for practitioners to be kept abreast of important developments, new theories, and assessments, and be exposed to new intervention techniques. Although we make an attempt to address this problem in this article we realize that a single piece of scholarly writing cannot, in itself, be sufficient as a solution. We call upon practitioners and the institutions of positive psychology, including (but not limited to) journal editors and leaders of professional organizations, to create platforms for research on strengths to be widely disseminated. In addition, practitioners and institutions need to advocate specific, concrete standards for practice. We also recognize that more research is needed to guide practitioners as they work with clients. In particular, we see a need for research on strengths constellations to better understand how personal qualities operate in synergy to alter psychological and physical well-being. Finally, we have limited our discussion primarily to interventions at the individual level. There are other possible levels of intervention including small group, organization and community levels, although these fall beyond our ability to address in this article. Major advances in basic and applied knowledge will arise from the integration of these various levels of strengths intervention.

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### Note

1. In this article, we confine our discussion to strengths interventions that explicitly address strengths as trait-like personal attributes. Although there are differing

classifications of strengths (e.g. VIA, Strengths Finder, Realise2) they share in common a primary concern with labeling specific named trait-like strengths. There are other intervention techniques such as appreciative inquiry (AI; Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, & Fry, 2008) and solutions focus therapy (SFT; Berg & Szabo, 2005) that are positive in nature. These do not, however, represent 'strengths interventions,' as we understand them because they are concerned with a far broader understanding of personal and group resources. It is true that AI or SFT practitioners might label individual strengths but they might just as easily work with concepts such as financial wealth or time affluence as resources that can be leveraged toward achieving goals. It is here that we make the distinction between AI, SFT (and related intervention modalities) as being primarily 'resource focused' rather than specifically 'strengths focused'. The strengths interventions referred to in this manuscript represent a narrower set of interventions concerned exclusively with working with trait-like personal attributes. To the extent that practitioners of AI, SFT, and similar interventions specifically address strengths than the comments made in this manuscript would be just as relevant.

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