Connecting the Strengths Perspective to Social Work Policy Analysis and Formulation

Outline
• What is the strengths perspective?
  • Theory
  • Research
  • Practice
• The importance of the strengths perspective
  • With whom?
  • How?
• Applying the strengths perspective to Policy Formulation & Analysis
• Conclusions, implications, discussion

Exercise
• On a sheet of paper:
  (1) Use one word to describe where a social worker would focus on the strengths perspective.
  (2) List three words that name the strengths of someone that you admire, a mentor, family, or friend.
  (3) List three words that describe your primary strengths.
• Was any one question easier or harder to answer?
We do clients a disservice when we insist that they have a problem for us to pay attention to them. Our first question to someone who comes to us for help should not be... “what problems bring you here today?” but rather,... “you have lived life thus far, tell me how you have done it.”

Bertha Capen Reynolds

What is the Strengths Perspective?

• The Social Work Dictionary definition:
  An orientation in social work and other professional practices that emphasizes the client’s resources, capabilities, support systems, and motivations to meet challenges and overcome adversity. This approach does not ignore the existence of social problems, individual disease, or family dysfunction; it emphasizes the client’s assets that are used to achieve and maintain individual and social well-being.
  (Barker)

What is the Strengths Perspective?

• Theoretical definitions:
  • Understanding empowerment and human strength at the personal and political levels
  • Emphasizes the human capacity for resiliency, courage, strength in the face of adversity, ingenuity at accessing and creating resources, and the right of individuals to form their own aspirations and definitions of their situations
  • The assumption that people are most likely able to grow and develop when their strengths are recognized and supported
  (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda)
### What is the Strengths Perspective?

**Theorists:**
- Saleebey
- Freire
- Rapp
- Sullivan

**Theories:**
- Strengths-based perspective in social work practice
- Empowerment theories
- Feminist and Feminist Standpoint theories
- Lesbian and Gay empowerment theories
- Black empowerment (Solomon)

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## What is the Strengths Perspective?

**Research uses:**
- Community needs assessment:
  - What are the positives in the community?
  - What are the signs of resiliency in the community?
  - (Grinell & Unrau)
- Empowerment research:
  - Merging four approaches:
    - Ecological
    - Feminist
    - Constructivist
    - Strengths perspective
    - (Kreuger & Neuman)
- Action research:
  - Democratic, empowering, and humanizing approach to scientific inquiry
  - “Subjects” as equal and full participants in the research process
  - Participant-driven research
  - Participatory research and evaluation
  - (Grinell; Greenwood & Levin)

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## What is the Strengths Perspective?

**Practice applications:** the orientation to strengths

**Concepts**
- Empowerment
- Membership
- Resilience
- Healing and wholeness
- Dialogue and collaboration
- Suspension of disbelief
  - (Saleebey)
What is the Strengths Perspective?

• **Practice applications**: the orientation to strengths
• **Principles**
  • Everyone person, group, family and community has strengths.
  • Trauma and abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious but they may also be sources of challenges and opportunities.
  • Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change and take individual, group, and community aspirations seriously.
  • We best serve clients by collaborating with them
  • Every environment is full of resources.  
  (Saleebey)

Why is the Strengths Perspective important?

• It is the quintessential social work theory, practice modality, research method, and policy focus.

• It furthers social work skills and values:
  • Respect
  • Collaboration
  • Naming and fostering resources and strengths
  • Avoiding the victim mindset

Why is the Strengths Perspective important?

Essential assumptions:

(Weick)
Everyone has inherent power.
Power is a form of knowledge that can transform.
When strengths are supported, we are more likely to act on those strengths and capacities.
(Lavy)
Why is the Strengths Perspective important?

- Social Work Code of Ethics:
  - The core value of Dignity and Worth of the Person
    - Social workers seek to enhance clients’ capacity and opportunity to change and address their own needs
  - The Ethical Standards of:
    - Public participation 6.02
      - Social workers should facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions.
    - Social and political action 6.04
      - (a) Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.
      (NASW)

Why is the Strengths Perspective important?

- Social justice and empowerment
  - Addressing and resolving inequities in power, wealth, income, and other essential resources
  - Naming that social institutions, public and private, are established and maintained by power groups
  - Liberation
  - Control over one’s destiny
  - ‘Enabling’ power
    (Haynes & Mickelson)

With whom do we apply the Strengths Perspective?

- Clients
- Social Workers
- Communities
- The majority public
  - Charitable giving, taxation, altruism
  - Conflict and macro theories
  - Political movements in history
How do we deliver the Strengths Perspective?

- Models
- Stages
- Service delivery
- Assessment
- Case management and casework
- Administration, supervision, and leadership
- Group work
- Practice responses
- Naming unrealized strengths

Naming strengths

- Advocacy
- Empowerment
- Resilience
- Spirituality
- Community
- Coping
- Competence
- Effectiveness
- Education
- Intelligence
- Social skills
- Humor
- Work experience and skills
- Talents
- Coping mechanisms (Sands)
- Leisure
- Relationships
- Support
- Living
- Finance and entitlements
- Health
- Assets
- Service delivery and access (Saleebey)

Formulation: Applying the Strengths Perspective to Policy

- With an understanding of what the strengths perspective is and how social workers use it, how would we apply it in policy?
- In a strengths perspective model, policy is seen as a bottom-up, inductive process rather than an activity carried out by experts without the participation of client groups
- The group effected by policy has a **VOICE**
- Social policy can achieve **SOCIAL EQUALITY** through participation in the process (Gibbons & Gray)
Formulation: Applying the Strengths Perspective to Policy

- Funding sources
- Taxation and tax law
- Community needs assessment
- Policy analysis using gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic focus
- Charitable contributions
- Altruism
- Values
- Perceptions

Gibbons & Gray (2005): 5 Stages of Applying the Strengths Perspective to Policy Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Policymaking process</th>
<th>Strengths focus</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step one: engagement (change the community in the policy-making process)</td>
<td>Connecting people with power issues, gaining understanding of the policy problem, increasing accountability and involving seldom heard and marginalized people in the policy process, especially the community when the policy concerns, especially clients.</td>
<td>The solution needs to be exploratory in depth and in breadth of the issues and the problem or issue in question. What community members non-marginalized from the community? What is the history of their struggle with this issue? What policies or laws influence the issue? How were those policies or laws given power?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step two: understanding the problem or issue (relationships in policy)</td>
<td>To give the best of a strengths understanding involves a full understanding of the problem or issue involved and idea of a better way to be developed. To give the best of the policy process involves thinking about the political environment and the policies involved. In order to work the issue would usually be groups of variable size and the way in which these issues are problems usually leading to policy making.</td>
<td>The idea is to respond to as many perspectives as one possible to understand particular client and community perspectives, which are either in a number or a problem or issue on the people affected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step three: environmental description and policy analysis</td>
<td>What are the needs or wants of the environment in which the policy problem or issue is occurring? What are the needs or wants of the community involved in the policy problem or issue? What are the needs or wants of the policy makers who are policy makers?</td>
<td>A strengths assessment involves attending the problem in language that is not “problem-oriented” focus on what others are doing right and what others are not doing. Attending to a strengths orientation and policy perspectives are, in many cases, more useful for understanding and shaping policy.</td>
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Gibbons & Gray (2005): 5 Stages of Applying the Strengths Perspective to Policy Practice (continued)

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<td>Step four: implementation (community strengthening)</td>
<td>Empowering strategies should be used and most often these involve a number of components in the policy-making process. Empowering strategies are those that build on client strengths and could do so by involving, coordinating, building, participating and active research, social action, and deep involvement in policy processes where new options are possibilities.</td>
<td>Collaboration strategies are best to access and mobilization strategies encourage policymakers to work at cross-purposes and to work with marginalized people and power brokers, subverting rather than empowering, consulting, building, teaching, educating, etc. by the activities of those in social workers, boards, and services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step five: evaluation (impact and outcome assessment as well as content)</td>
<td>Determine the extent to which goals of each stage have been achieved and make decisions. Do you have reliable estimates of the benefits? Is the process effective for the people involved? Do the benefits outweigh the costs? What are the benefits to the community? Does the success of the intervention? This is the policy implementation phase. The policy makers need to involve others. The people who are affected need to be involved. Does the change in the program help the client? Does the policy group have the support of the people involved? Have the people involved in the process achieved the goals? If yes, they will need to continue to increase the focus. Are the policies better not take a policy position or issue about?</td>
<td>Adapted from Early and Gewirtz (2005)</td>
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Formulation:
Applying the Strengths Perspective to Policy

- Integrating the strengths perspective into the policy-making process:
  - Mitigate the labeling process
  - Emphasize common human needs rather than social problems
  - Infuse policy formulation with the strengths approach
  - Analyze the barriers to meeting these needs
  - Value the input of those who are disadvantaged
  - Use client stories in policy making
  (Chapin)

Chapin’s (1995) Comparison of Policy Formulation Process Based on the Strengths Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem-Centered Approach</th>
<th>Strengths Approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem definition</td>
<td>Identification of basic needs and barriers to meeting needs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definition negotiation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem analysis</td>
<td>Identification of ways that barriers are currently overcome by clients and through programs (best practices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Consequences</td>
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<td>Informing the public</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development of policy goals</td>
<td>Identification of opportunities and resources necessary for people to meet their needs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy formulation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consent building</td>
<td>Negotiating consensus on policy goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program design</td>
<td>Program design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation and assessment</td>
<td>Evaluation and assessment of client outcomes</td>
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</tbody>
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Analysis:
Applying the Strengths Perspective to Policy

- Policy Analysis:
  - Values: what values under gird the policy?
  - Multiple identities: how does gender interact with ethnicity and class in the policy?
  - Equality: does policy achieve gender, class, ethnic equality?
  - Power analysis:
    - Are recipients of policy effects involved in the making, shaping, and implementation of the policy?
    - Does the policy empower recipients?
    - Who defined the problem?
    - How does the policy effect balance of power?
    - How does the policy incorporate group assets and resources?
    - Does the policy support and utilize these strengths?
  (McPhail)
Examples:
Applying the Strengths Perspective to Policy

- Americans with Disabilities Act
  - Ensure equal access and nondiscrimination for those with specific disabilities
  - Public accommodations ‘user friendly’
  - Behavioral changes in the workplace
  - Positive means to adapting to environment
  - Fostered resilience

- Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell
  - Stop gay and lesbian harassment in the military
  - Non-gay and gay members to change behaviors
  - Hindered resilience
  - Silence and arresting ‘coming out’
  - Increased discharges

(Truly)

What if….

- Only those persons affected by policy voted on it.
- Words like ‘problem’ and ‘pathology’ were replaced with ‘concern’ and ‘strength’.
- We were taxed only on the percentage paid in comparison to other groups.
- Only the representatives and members of certain groups who would be effected by potential policy were the only legislators who could lobby or support such bills.

Conclusion

- Strengths perspective is applicable to theory, research, practice, and yes, policy
- Implications: The Hard Part
  - How do we apply what we have learned about the strengths perspective to social work policy analysis and social justice?
- Discussion
References


References