Tools for Building on Youth Strengths

Kathy Cox

While rhetoric about strength-based approaches abounds, this perspective has not penetrated the front lines of practice. Many programs serving troubled youngsters are still mired in a deficit and deviance orientation. This article provides practical strategies for assessing the strengths of children and developing interventions to tap their assets in achieving educational and treatment goals.

Introduction

Recent decades have seen swelling numbers of children and adolescents presenting to human service providers, including social workers, counselors, therapists, and psychologists, with a plethora of problematic behaviors, symptoms, and adjustment difficulties that warrant mental health intervention. Many are depressed or anxious, impulsive or delinquent, and plagued with poor judgment, disordered thinking, or some combination of these commonly reported problems. The standard approach to treating these youth begins with a comprehensive assessment of presenting problems, environmental stressors, and family dysfunction, with an emphasis placed on areas of risk. The treatment process proceeds with a focus on goal-setting and intervention aimed at ameliorating targeted problems and behaviors. A recent trend toward the recognition of client strengths has prompted the addition of a cursory inquiry as to youth assets during the mental health assessment, but rarely is as much attention paid to youth capacities as it is to areas of deficiency and disorder. Also uncommon is the use of intervention designed to capitalize on specific child assets identified (Cox, 2006). Consequently, children and adolescents continue to receive mental health services that are more inclined to stigmatize than cure, instill doubt rather than hope, and generate avoidance over motivation (Saleebey, 2002).

This study aims to aid practitioners who strive to give more than lip service to the notion of building on youth strengths. Drawing from the literature on the strengths perspective, it offers a roadmap for practice that illuminates critical elements of strength-based intervention. Secondly, it introduces an assessment tool aimed at eliciting information regarding the personal strengths of children and adolescents. Case examples are provided that illustrate the application of strategies that may be used to marshal youth assets toward the achievement of mental health goals. Finally, recommendations are offered toward the development and dissemination of strength-based practice.

Conceptual Foundation

The strengths perspective is founded upon the belief that all children have strengths (Poertner & Ronnau, 1992). Even the most troubled youth have positive traits and capacities that can be mobilized in the service of growth and recovery. While this assertion is ascribed to by many, if not most, mental health practitioners, its significance is frequently lost as investors attention is diverted to the assessment of disorders and deficits required in the establishment of medical necessity for services. These service providers may benefit by the use of a structured format that promotes an equally clear and consistent focus on the strengths that each youth brings to the process of problem resolution.

Commonly noted advantages to a strength-based approach to practice include its potential for enhanc-

ing youth motivation for change. By recognizing the unrealized power within people, practitioners help liberate them from a sense of hopelessness and fear and, thus, trigger a willingness to "try out new behaviors, forge new relationships, or make a new commitment" (Saleebey, 2002, p. 7). A second advantage to a focus on strengths is that it reminds professionals of the competencies that can become the basis for positive change and development in the youth that they serve (Rapp & Winterstein, 1989). In other words, an emphasis on strengths orients practitioners toward solutions that tap the child's capacities, while concurrently resolving problematic behaviors or conditions. This practice principle is fundamental to the model advanced below.

A framework for assessing client strengths that is incorporated into the roadmap to follow was outlined by Cowger (1997). This author suggests that assessment ideally gathers information along two intersecting continuums or axes. The first is an environmental versus individual or personal factors continuum; the second a strengths versus obstacles continuum. When these two axes are enclosed, four quadrants are produced that represent content areas for assessment: personal strengths, personal obstacles, environmental strengths, environmental obstacles. Cowger recognizes that a comprehensive strength-based assessment does not ignore individual or environmental limitations but rather emphasizes information relative to the strengths domains.

A final concept articulated in the strengths-based practice literature that is embedded in the model below is that of the *social niche*. James Taylor (1997) defines social niche as "the environmental habitat of a category of persons, including the resources they utilize and the other category of persons they associate with" (p. 219). This author distinguishes between: 1) *entrapping niches* that tend to stigmatize people and offer few incentives for goal attainment or skill development and 2) *enabling niches* that are rich in resources, recognize capacities, and offer rewards for skill development and/or progress toward goals. The approach to strength-based practice discussed in the sections to follow is aimed at assisting youth in assessing their personal strengths and, based on those assets, creating or developing an enabling niche in their social environment.

A Roadmap for Building on Strengths

The model for building on youth strengths suggested here begins with a thorough assessment of the child or adolescent's capacities, interests, and resources. It progresses to a formal process of strengths recognition and, finally, the development of strength-based intervention focused on 1) creating an enabling niche and 2) utilizing this niche as a vehicle for furthering the youth's progress toward improved functioning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Process for Building on Youth Strengths
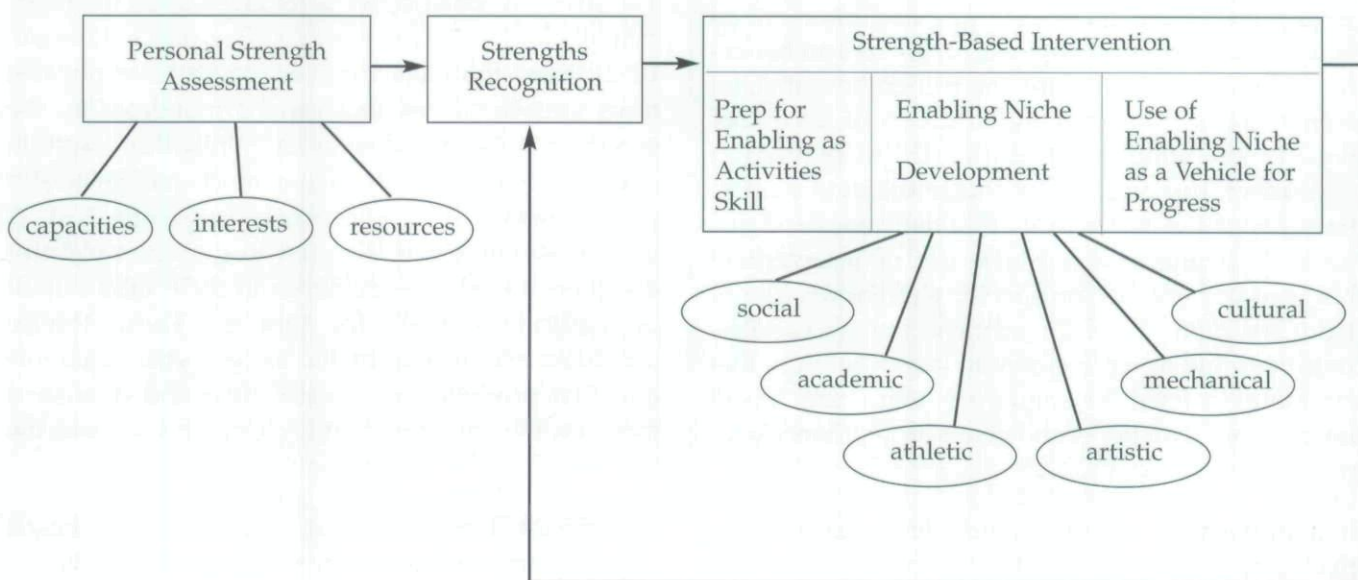
Personal Strengths Assessment

A variety of informal strategies can be used to facilitate the process of strengths assessment, including the "strengths chat" recommended by VanDenBerg and Grealish (1996) that involves the practitioner having conversations with the clients about what they perceive their strengths and social resources to be (p. 12). An assessment tool which can be incorporated into such a conversation is referred to as the Personal Strengths Grid (Appendix I on pages 23–24). Its intent is to prompt discussion of the youth's capacities, interests, and resources in a variety of domains: social, academic, athletic, artistic, mechanical, cultural, and spiritual. The Personal Strengths Grid has been adopted successfully by a large community-based organization in California that services high risk youth and families (Cox & Kendricks, 2006).

Strengths Recognition

The acknowledgement of youth skills, interests, aims, and abilities by practitioners and other service participants (e.g., parents, siblings, extended family members) is a key step in the process of strength-based practice. This can take place in office based sessions, home visits, and/or child and family team meetings.[1] The performance of strengths recognition during mental health therapy with youth has been linked to parental satisfaction with services and treatment retention (Cox, 2006). However, its positive impact is likely to be expanded when combined with the use of interventions that draw upon the unique strengths of the youth receiving services.

Strength-Based Intervention

The formulation of strength-based intervention is a creative process involving the design of a strategy that is intended to tap a specific youth asset while also remedying a mental health problem or impairment. For instance, a depressed, socially withdrawn girl who has a talent for poetry might be encouraged to write and read poems dealing with loss in sessions with her therapist. This clinical intervention would be enhanced by a plan to develop and support an enabling niche for this youth. For example, the girl might be assisted in locating a creative writing class or group wherein she would be encouraged to practice specific social skills and accept appreciation for her evolving ability and talent as an aspiring poet. Often strength-based interventions must ini-

tially focus on preparing youth for engagement in such enabling activities and on resolving barriers that prevent successful participation.

Case Examples

Trevor Loves Cars

Ten-year-old Trevor had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder and displayed impulsivity and poor compliance with adult directives. He has never known his father and has experienced little in the way of adult male role modeling. While gathering information to complete the Personal Strengths Grid, his counselor learned that Trevor loves cars and working with his hands. These interests were acknowledged at a family team meeting that included several of Trevor's extended family members. The counselor began to incorporate auto-related metaphors into his conversations with Trevor about managing his behavior (e.g., learning when "to put the brakes on" and how to read "stop signs"). Trevor's mother was encouraged to adopt language infused with these metaphors when praising him for efforts at cooperation. She was also enlisted in tracking his progress toward following directions without arguing. Trevor embraced an opportunity to work toward earning a remote-control toy car by consistently completing household chores. His uncle, a mechanic, agreed to let Trevor help out at his shop on occasional Saturday mornings. The two planned a trip to attend a NASCAR race together when Trevor makes passing grades in all his classes.

Amanda Likes to Crochet

Twelve-year-old Amanda had been diagnosed with Anxiety Disorder due to her chronic worry and sleep disturbances. She and her family had recently moved to a new city and Amanda was having difficulty making friends and adjusting to her new school and neighborhood. While she had always been on the shy side, Amanda's social stress was now crippling. While gathering information to complete the Personal Strengths Grid, her therapist noted that Amanda has an interest in domestic arts and had recently learned how to crochet. This interest and skill was recognized in a family session that included Amanda and her parents. The therapist encouraged crocheting as a self-soothing technique for Amanda to use when she began to worry. A

school counselor was informed of Amanda's interest in crocheting and she helped the 12-year-old start a crocheting club on campus, thus enabling her to meet other students at her school. Concurrently, the therapist assisted her in developing and practicing skills for initiating and sustaining relationships. Later that year, Amanda and her newfound friends were recognized at a school assembly for crocheting hats for cancer patients.

Conclusion

While many child-serving mental health providers embrace the value of strength-based practice, few utilize service planning protocols that prompt the design of interventions aimed at bolstering youth capacities and assets. To further a focus on youth skills, interests, and assets, the author offered a strength-based assessment tool, the Personal Strengths Grid, for use by counselors, social workers, therapists, and case managers (see Appendix I). Also adopted was a conceptual framework that is intended to 1) make clear the rationale behind strength-based intervention and 2) offer guidance in the formation of truly strength-based strategies. With the adoption of this roadmap, it is hoped that practitioners will find structure and support facilitating the provision of therapeutic services that are congruent with their stated intention to honor youth strength, capacity, and resilience.

Kathleen Cox, PhD, LCSW, is director of clinical services at EMQ Children and Family Services, Sacramento, California. Her interests include wraparound process, strength-based assessment, and intervention. She can be contacted by email: kcox@emq.org

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NOTES

[1]Child and family team meetings are commonly used to plan individualized services in the wraparound process, a team-based service delivery model for high-risk youth.
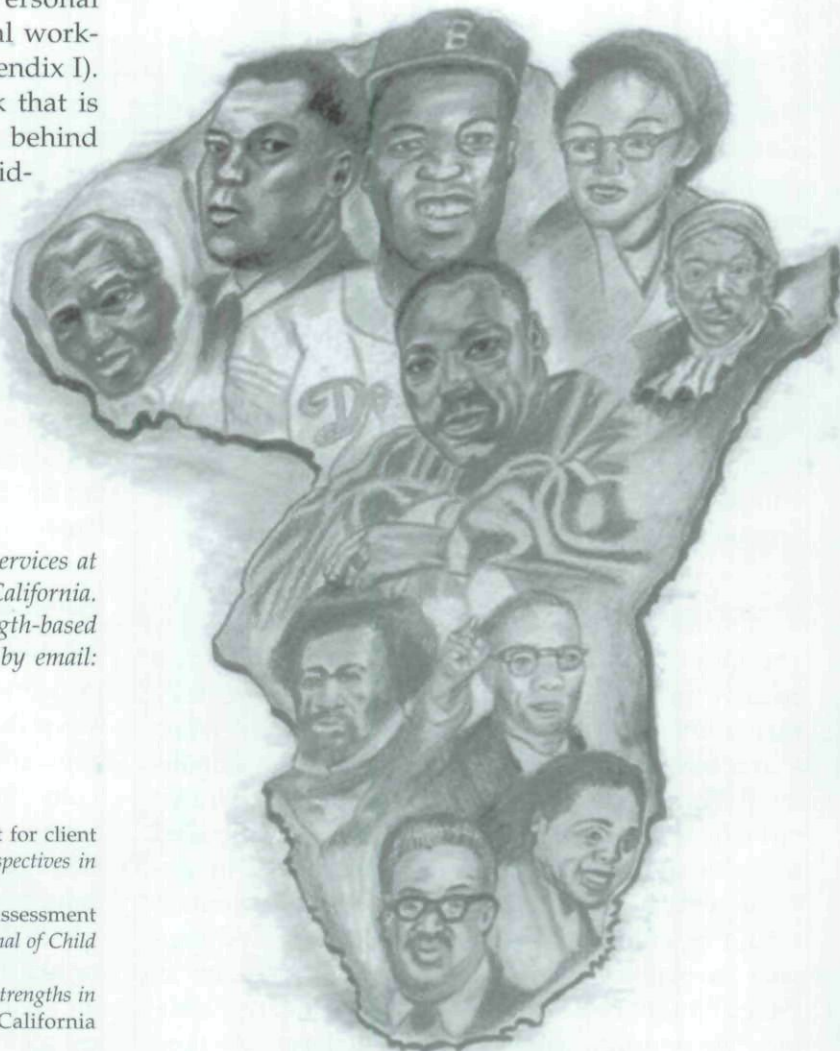
"African American Heros" by Andrew R., Lawrence Hall Youth Services, Chicago, IL. Used with permission.

Appendix I

Personal Strengths Grid

Youth's Name_____   Age_____

Sources of Information Regarding Strengths: Youth Interview   Caregiver Interview
                                                    Teacher Interview   Observation
                                                    Other Source _____

Strength Domain	Social	Academic	Athletic
Capacities	Initiates relationships with ease Sustains relationships over time Good interpersonal boundaries Relates well with peers Relates well with adults Comments _____ _____ _____	Good reading skills Good writing skills Good math skills Good verbal skills Good computer skills Comments _____ _____ _____	Good at team sports (e.g. basketball, football, baseball) Good at independent or noncompetitive sports (e.g. swimming, gymnastics, jogging, rock-climbing, yoga) Comments _____ _____ _____
Interests	Wants to have friends Wants relationships with caring adults Wants to belong to peer groups, clubs Likes to help others Enjoys caring for animals Comments _____ _____ _____	Enjoys reading Enjoys writing Enjoys math or science Enjoys computers Comments _____ _____ _____	Wants to play team sports Wants to learn individual or non-competitive sports Comments _____ _____ _____
Resources	Has close (pro-social) friend(s) Has access to adult mentor Has access to naturally occurring groups, clubs, volunteer work opportunities, etc. Comments _____ _____ _____	Has access to opportunities to display, share, or enhance academic abilities. Comments _____ _____ _____	School offers athletics programs Neighborhood offers athletics programs Comments _____ _____ _____

Strength Domain	Artistic/Creative	Mechanical	Cultural/Spiritual
Capacities	Talent in visual arts (drawing, painting, etc.) Talent in performing arts (singing, dancing, drama, music, etc.) Skills in domestic arts (cooking, sewing, etc.) Comments _____ _____ _____	Able to assemble and disassemble bikes, appliances, computers, etc. Skills in using tools for carpentry, woodworking, etc. Skills in car maintenance/repair Comments _____ _____ _____	Knowledge of own heritage Knowledge of spiritual belief system Practices cultural/spiritual customs/rituals Comments _____ _____ _____
Interests	Desires to develop talent in visual arts Desires to develop talent in performing arts Desires to develop talent in domestic arts Comments _____ _____ _____	Enjoys fixing appliances, etc. Enjoys building, woodworking Enjoys working on cars or desires to learn mechanics Comments _____ _____ _____	Likes to attend church or other place of worship Desires to learn about own heritage Desires to participate in cultural or spiritually-oriented activities. Comments _____ _____ _____
Resources	School offers programs in type of art preferred Neighborhood offers programs in type of art preferred Comments _____ _____ _____	School offers vocational program in mechanical area of interest/skill Has opportunity to serve as apprentice in mechanical area of choice Comments _____ _____ _____	Connected to place of worship Has access to opportunities to participate in culturally-oriented activities Comments _____ _____ _____

Other Strengths _____
_____

Completed By _____ Date _____
Supervisory Review _____ Date _____