

# Playing to your strengths

**W**HAT are your strengths? In everyday conversation people are generally modest and reluctant to talk about their strengths. When asked this question in an interview, most people feel slightly awkward and tend to rely on formulaic answers designed to create a positive impression and improve their prospects of interview success. Likewise, surveys that ask people to name their strengths have found that only about one third of people can readily name their own trait-like strengths (Hill, 2001; cf. Arnold, 1997). Could this simply be a reflection of natural reserve? Or is it that we just don't know what our strengths are? Possibly, but all this may conceal a deeper truth: that we often do not fully appreciate our strengths, and may not even know what they are.

This reluctance to talk about one's strengths is also reflected in psychology, where strengths have been the subject of very little systematic empirical research. However, with the advent of positive psychology, this is now changing. In this article we review the historical context of psychological work on strengths, consider approaches to strengths from both academic and applied perspectives, and



**P. ALEX LINLEY and SUSAN HARRINGTON** discuss academic and applied perspectives on strengths psychology.

identify some of the most exciting potential applications of putting strengths into practice in education, work and life.

## Historical context

The absence of an integrative theoretical framework for strengths research within mainstream psychology can be traced back to the earliest origins of modern personality psychology, and Gordon Allport's (1937) seminal definition of personality (Cawley *et al.*, 2000). Allport – one can only assume with the best of intentions – argued that character was a term that was more relevant for ethics and philosophy than for psychology, and specifically and explicitly excluded the topic of character from his definition of personality:

*Character is personality evaluated, and personality is character devaluated. Since character is an unnecessary concept for psychology, the term will not appear again in this volume...* (Allport, 1937, p.52).

The effect of this 'defining out' of evaluative terms (e.g. character, virtue) was decisive (Nicholson, 1998). Personality psychologists since Allport have almost totally ignored the concepts of character and virtue, from which a psychology of strengths would be derived, and this has been one factor that has led to

the predominant focus on dysfunction and disorder within psychology.

However, these questions of character and virtue are now squarely on the agenda of psychology once again, with the new emphasis on positive psychology underpinning the development of theories, classifications and measures of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Most importantly, psychologists are now beginning to provide a common vocabulary for researchers and practitioners interested in the good life of happiness, health, well-being and fulfilment, just as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* has done for researchers and practitioners interested in psychopathology, illness, disorder and distress (Linley & Joseph, 2004a).

## Character strengths

Positive psychology began with Martin E. P. Seligman's (1998) APA Presidential Address (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and a major early initiative was the development of a scientific classification of strengths. The classification (see box) included 24 character strengths, based on brainstorming, extensive literature searches and the subsequent application of 10 criteria for a character strength. These criteria were developed through scrutiny of the candidate strengths and the identification of common features among

## WEBLINKS

Alex Linley's online study of strengths, personality and positive psychology:

[www.personalitystrengths.com](http://www.personalitystrengths.com)

Take the VIA Inventory of Strengths:

[www.viastrengths.org](http://www.viastrengths.org)

Join the UK Positive Psychology Network:

[www.positivepsychology.org.uk](http://www.positivepsychology.org.uk)

them (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Although the criteria are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for character strengths, they are considered to be pertinent features that, taken together, capture a 'family resemblance'. Importantly, Peterson and Seligman (2004) note: '...we intend these strengths as neither exclusive nor exhaustive, but we expect that subsequent research will help us achieve a nearly exclusive and exhaustive list' (p.13). Hence, the door is very much open for further revisions to this classification, and for a new generation of psychologists (and others!) to make their mark through improved theory, measurement and application of character strengths.

### Strengths in applied psychology

Another approach to strengths psychology has been taken within applied settings, largely through the auspices of Don Clifton at the Gallup Organization in the United States (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). Clifton argued consistently that the two most prevalent assumptions about human nature are flawed: that anyone can learn to be competent in almost anything, and that a person's areas of greatest potential for growth are in their areas of greatest weakness. In contrast, Clifton argued, first, that each person's talents are enduring and unique, and second, that each person's greatest room for growth is in the areas of their greatest strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). If this doesn't seem to fit with you, think about this: How many times do the same shortcomings keep coming up in your annual appraisal (or those of your staff), and how many times are you (or they) sent on training courses to address these 'developmental opportunities', but with little, if any, sustained effect? Still we persist in believing that weaknesses can be fixed and that they provide our greatest potential for development and growth.

However, Clifton argued that 'to produce excellence, you must study excellence', and took a very different approach. In order to establish the factors that facilitated top-level performance across a number of different professional occupations, Clifton and his team of researchers at the Gallup Organization interviewed thousands of professionals with the aim of identifying the themes of talent that differentiated the top performers

from the rest. Strengths were developed from one's innate talents, they argued, through the application of knowledge and skill. Working from these definitions, Clifton and the researchers at the Gallup Organization identified hundreds of themes of talent from their interviews with professionals, but condensed these to the 34 most prevalent themes (see Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, or Clifton & Anderson, 2002, for details).

It is unfortunate that, given the commercial sensitivity of much of this research data and material, it has not typically been published in mainstream sources, such as academic journals (but see Schmidt & Rader, 1999, for a discussion of the development of structured interviews for strengths). Accordingly, the applied strengths perspective has not engendered the consideration that it may warrant. This problem is representative of some of the issues that plague occupational psychology, and provide an unfortunate obstacle to the integration of academic research and applied practice (Anderson *et al.*, 2001), a point to which we return below.

### Towards a new understanding of strengths

Reviewing these academic and applied approaches to understanding the psychology of strengths, a notable demarcation arises. Academic approaches have arrived at classifications of strengths derived from reviews of existing literatures and the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria. While this approach does allow some semblance of order and the delineation of naturally arising distinctions, it is also (perhaps unnecessarily) restrictive. In contrast, applied approaches have arrived at differing classifications of strengths from studying strengths in practice across thousands of professionals. While this approach has clear applied value, it might be argued that it lacks an integrative conceptual framework that allows a deeper understanding of the structure and taxonomy of strengths. Which is right?

As an academic psychologist, one's interest is likely to be in how best to 'carve nature at the joints'. That is to say, one may wish to develop a taxonomy of strengths based on a deep theory that explains why this construct is a strength while that one is not, and how each strength relates to each other strength at varying levels of hierarchical abstraction (Bailey, 1994).

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

### WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE – 'cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge'

1. **Creativity**: Thinking of novel ways to do things
2. **Curiosity** (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience)
3. **Open-mindedness** (judgement, critical thinking): Examining counter-arguments
4. **Love of learning**: Mastering new skills and knowledge
5. **Perspective** (wisdom): Providing wise counsel

### COURAGE – 'emotional strengths that involve the exercise of the will to accomplish goals'

6. **Bravery** (valour): Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty or pain
7. **Persistence**: Finishing what one begins
8. **Integrity** (authenticity, honesty): Presenting oneself in a genuine way
9. **Vitality** (zest, enthusiasm, vigour, energy): Approaching life with excitement and energy

### HUMANITY – 'interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others'

10. **Love**: Valuing close relationships
11. **Kindness** (generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, 'niceness'): Doing favours and good deeds for others
12. **Social intelligence** (emotional intelligence, personal intelligence): Being aware of the motives and feelings of others and of oneself

### JUSTICE – 'civic strengths that underlie healthy community life'

13. **Citizenship** (social responsibility, loyalty): Working well as a member of a team or group
14. **Fairness**: Treating all people equally
15. **Leadership**: Encouraging others

### TEMPERANCE – 'strengths that protect against excess'

16. **Forgiveness and mercy**
17. **Humility**: Letting accomplishments speak for themselves without seeking the spotlight
18. **Prudence**: Being careful about one's choices
19. **Self-regulation** (self-control): Regulating what one feels and does

### TRANSCENDENCE – 'strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning'

20. **Appreciation of beauty and excellence** (awe, wonder, elevation)
21. **Gratitude**: Being thankful for good things
22. **Hope** (optimism, future-mindedness): Expecting the best and working to achieve it
23. **Humour** (playfulness): Liking to laugh and bringing smiles to other people
24. **Spirituality** (religiosity, faith): Having coherent beliefs about one's purpose and meaning

*Adapted from Peterson & Seligman (2004, pp.29–30).*

As a practitioner, one's interest may be less in how best to carve nature at the joints, but rather more directly in 'What works?', 'What are the benefits?' and 'Does this classification system answer the questions that are important to me, such as allowing measurement of strengths that are predictive of performance and achievement in my domains of interest?' Here, the theory may not be so much important as the practice, but critically, one must be able to demonstrate the benefit.

Practitioners and researchers in strengths psychology would do well to keep these alternative, but equally valid, perspectives in mind as they progress in the development of the theory and measurement of strengths. At some ideal future time, we may yet find that the two are able to integrate, as researchers identify natural classifications that meet the applied needs of practitioners, thus allowing the 'new dawn' that occupational psychology is striving for (Hill, 2003).

As a first step in this direction, we define a strength as *a natural capacity for behaving, thinking or feeling in a way that allows optimal functioning and performance in the pursuit of valued outcomes*. 'Natural' refers to the fact that strengths are partly innate, but are shaped by our environmental experiences that may facilitate the development of some strengths, but impede the development of others. This process of natural selection mirrors neural development and brain plasticity, since as some neural connections (which underpin strengths) are used and strengthened, so others go unused and wither. 'Natural' also indicates that strengths are largely stable, in the tradition of personality stability, but can be more or less developed by our psychological activities and experiences. Just as

personality may flex according to the demands of the situation, but be stable and consistent over time (Fleeson, 2001), so strengths may fluctuate according to situational demands, but will always remain largely consistent.

The term 'capacity' reflects the idea that a strength may be more or less developed, and is a potential within us that may be more or less realised, according to regularity of use, availability of opportunity, situational demands, or contextual appropriateness. It underpins the idea that a natural strength can be developed to full potential, but that a capacity that is not naturally occurring in a person may allow the use of a strength to be improved, but not to the level of optimal functioning and performance that defines a strength.

The triad of 'behaving, feeling or thinking' captures the entirety of lived human experience, covering the ABC of affect, behaviour and cognition. Within this triad, one may also locate aspects of human experience that are attitudinal, attributional, motivational or relational, among many others, but in any case they are simply a lower-order factor of one or more of behaving, feeling or thinking.

'Optimal functioning and performance' are hallmarks of a strength, since refinement of a strength is the royal road to operating in a way that is the most efficient and effective we can possibly be. Using our strengths comes naturally to us. We yearn to use our strengths, we feel fulfilled when we use our strengths, and we achieve our goals efficiently and effectively when we use our strengths.

'Valued outcomes' are deliberately broadly and loosely defined, since they may include happiness, health and well-being from an individual, personal perspective (Linley & Joseph, 2004a); increased productivity, sales, turnover and profit from a business perspective (Hodges & Clifton, 2004); or goal attainment from any perspective.

However, 'valued outcomes' should be interpreted as descriptive, and not prescriptive (Linley & Joseph, 2004a). Valued outcomes may be intrinsic or extrinsic, individual or communal. Different outcomes may be valued at any of the individual, couple, group, community, society, regional, national or international levels, and it is not for us as psychologists to specify which 'valued outcomes' are right and which are wrong



**Teams with complementary strengths profiles could optimise performance**

(Linley & Joseph, 2004b). While the exercise of a strength *per se* should not diminish others (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004), there can and probably will be differences and even conflicts in the valued outcomes that strengths are used to pursue.

A notable point in this regard is the goal to which strengths are applied. Strengths may be used in the pursuit of 'good' objectives (e.g. world peace) or 'bad' objectives (e.g. inciting hatred and violence). There is nothing implicit within a strength that necessarily determines it as 'good' or 'bad'; rather, the goals to which a strength may be applied are themselves subject to our own value judgements. This should be an important consideration for future research.

### Putting strengths into practice

Work continues apace on the development of theories and measurement of strengths, but it is already possible to envisage the potential benefits of applying a strengths framework within organisations. Such a framework would provide the consistent building blocks for defining an organisation's processes for recruitment and selection, career development and succession planning, performance appraisal, individual development and team building. Furthermore, it would provide the language to create a strengths culture throughout the organisation, providing a logical, progressive flow from initial recruitment and onwards through all aspects of an individual's career with the organisation.

Compared with a competency-based framework, there are two major benefits of applying a strengths framework. First, strengths are grounded in psychological constructs that can be defined and measured. Second, strengths are, by their very nature, natural capacities within individuals that, when played to, allow the

## DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Which is most effective – building strengths or repairing weaknesses?

Can playing to your strengths be a bad thing?

Would you like to use your strengths more? Why?

Should organisations do more to capitalise on people's strengths? Why?

Have your say on these or other issues this article

raises. Write to our Letters page on

psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute to our online forum via [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).

individual to achieve optimal functioning and performance. For individuals within organisations, a clear understanding of their strengths allows them to exploit and optimise their prevalent strengths, and to gain awareness of those areas where they are not so strong. They can then seek to work in a way that plays to their strengths, while managing their weaknesses through complementary partnering and team working with others.

For example, an individual whose key strengths at work are organisational ability and a meticulous eye for detail may excel in a project management role. This same individual may not, hypothetically, be very empathic. Hence while they may be extremely good at ensuring a project is delivered on time, this may be at the expense of people's feelings. Given that an increasing amount of organisational work is conducted in teams, a strengths-based approach would suggest constructing the project management team on the basis of complementary strengths profiles. Our hypothetical project manager might benefit by having a people-oriented person in the team, who has empathic strengths, and so can deal effectively with people's feelings, while the project manager deals with the more task-focused project delivery.

By exploring each individual's pattern of strengths, the emphasis becomes one of optimising what people are best at, while recognising and managing those situations that they may not handle naturally well, and addressing these through appropriate job allocation, complementary partnering, or strengths-based team working, rather than trying perennially to 'address their weaknesses' and rectify the fact that people may have been put in the wrong job to begin with.

Overall, a strengths-based formula for organisational success would be to play to your strengths (through identifying them and finding a role that is congruent with them), develop your competencies (through ensuring that you are at least minimally effective in critical areas of the job), and manage your weaknesses (through job redesign, complementary partnering, or strengths-based team working).

From a team-building perspective, a strengths framework provides individuals with a language to gain a greater understanding of each other's behaviour at work, and a new context within which to view these behaviours. An understanding of each person's strengths provides an

insight into how and why team members could work more effectively together.

From a manager's perspective, a clear articulation of the strengths of their individual team members provides them with an understanding of which individuals may excel at certain tasks and why. Further, it enables the manager to provide individualised management and developmental support to each team member in accordance with their own unique combination of strengths. Finally, at an organisational level, a strengths approach provides a way of articulating the key human resource requirements needed to meet current and future business goals, and to ensure that individuals are recruited, developed and managed in a way that is based on their own individual strengths, in tandem with the strengths needed to meet the goals of the organisation.

### Applications and future directions

Strengths psychology offers much to the understanding of constructive human nature, and provides psychologists with a rare opportunity of working with people in a way that enhances their identity and self-worth and respects their individual talents and potentialities. Career selection, recruitment and development; coaching in both business and personal settings; specific strengths-based therapies; building self-esteem and developing new skills with offenders; using one's strengths to guard against mental and physical decline in old age; all these areas could benefit from strengths psychology.

Of central significance is the way in which a strengths psychology transcends traditional barriers between groups. Taking a strengths perspective empowers people irrespective of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, or (dis)ability: people have strengths irrespective of these factors. The language of strengths can become a universal language through which people are able to recognise, develop and celebrate their natural talents and abilities, and recast their lives in ways that allow them to do more of what they are good at.

Some might argue that we have been here before, and that research on what we have described as strengths (e.g. creativity, humour, hope) already exists. Indeed it does, and this provides a foundation on which strengths psychology can build. However, what has been missing until now is an integrative framework of

strengths that allows strengths to be studied and understood in relation to each other, rather than in isolation. We suggest that these are exciting times for strengths psychology, and, more exciting still, we suspect that the best is yet to come.

■ *P. Alex Linley is at the University of Leicester. E-mail: pal8@le.ac.uk.*

■ *Susan Harrington is a Director of Potenthos Ltd. E-mail: sueh@potenthos.com.*

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