Impact of Strengths development upon performance and professional aspirations of students in the 'helping professions'.

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Executive Summary

This project was a pilot study to evaluate the usefulness of StrengthsQuest™ coaching in shaping the aspirations of students in the ‘helping professions’ in New Zealand and to investigate the potential usefulness of a new approach, provisionally known as ‘Narratives of Strengths’ to complement StrengthsQuest™ coaching. The project’s primary aim was to investigate how the usefulness of the Gallup StrengthsQuest™ could be extended by bringing narrative practice to bear on StrengthsQuest™ results.

Strengthfinder® identifies an individual’s top 5 strengths based on a sophisticated online questionnaire underscored by 30 years of research. Whilst sophisticated, these Strengthfinder® descriptions become extractions from a person’s life history, leaving them free floating from the context in which they have emerged and been fostered. We saw an opportunity to extend the usefulness of Strengthfinder® results by re-siting them within the contexts of a person’s life. Our experience of narrative practice led us to hypothesize that the sophistication of the Strengthfinder® descriptions would give us a platform for an inquiry into the history of strengths that would not have been otherwise available. Our aim was to ascertain whether Clifton StrengthsQuest™ coaching and ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews can make a useful and unique contribution to strengths enhancement worthy of further development in a second research phase.

Our other aims were to research whether or not participation in the Strengthfinder® on its own and the Strengthfinder® together with narrative interviews, could positively support and influence the professional aspirations of social practice and nursing students and impact upon their hope, well-being and emotional engagement.

A final, but more minor aim was to ascertain if particular strengths identified by the Clifton Strengthsfinder® occur especially frequently for social work, counselling or nursing students. We speculated that if a particular pattern emerged there might be possible implications for the teaching of social practice and nursing which could then be researched independently.

All aspects of the project have been beneficial for the students who took part. All students who took part in the evaluations gave extremely positive accounts of their participation in the research. There were no negative findings.

Transcripts of the narrative of strengths interviews indicate that students were not only able to locate their strengths and their development within their life histories but for the majority, doing so produced specific benefits. Reported results indicate themes regarding the influence of the project upon career direction, increased confidence in practice and in study and unanticipated results in their personal lives.

Two draft articles have been written to date. The second article summarises the results of the research overall under the themes that emerged and also highlights the results of the narrative of strengths interviews and the seeming usefulness of different aspects of the project for assisting social practice and nursing students in making career choices. We are currently considering which journals we wish to approach.
The pilot study has been effective in researching the usefulness of Strengthfinder®, Strengthfinder® coaching and narrative of strengths interviews to social practice and nursing students. The results so far indicate:

- That ‘narrative of strengths interviews are a useful tool for situating strengths within life histories and produce insights which lead to change in professional and personal life and impact positively upon hope, engagement and well-being.
- Merit in a larger project to further develop and research the use of narrative of strengths interviews with Strengthfinder® and/or Strengthfinder® coaching. More specifically the results indicate that this combination of approaches could be effective in supporting students in the ‘helping professions’ to refine their career aspirations, potentially leading to more effective practice in the field.

Background

Whilst narrative therapy has a strong and growing reputation within the fields of social practice internationally and whilst narrative ideas have been applied widely within the social practice arena, they are only very recently beginning to be applied within other contexts such as organizational change. The Clifton Strengthfinder® is a tested and standardised method for identifying individuals’ strengths and how these can be expanded. It has been used successfully within business, educational and community organisations; however, it has had no specific applications within the social practice domain. This project presented an opportunity to bring together the originator of Narrative Therapy (David Epston) and an expert in Clifton Strengthfinder® coaching (Debbie Marriott) to develop a way of working based on narrative principles and incorporating Strengthfinder® method within the context of higher education and the ‘helping professions’. We were interested in whether narrative practices could develop participants’ understanding and utilisation of their strengths beyond the quasi-essentialist characterological descriptions that Gallup offers. We were also interested in whether participation in any aspect of the project or the project as a whole could positively influence career directions for social practice and nursing students and support them in the application of their strengths as beginning practitioners.

Aims and Objectives

Some of the objectives were met and some require further work. See comments under the outcomes section.

1. Determine the impact of Clifton StrengthsQuest™ coaching upon the professional aspirations of students in the ‘helping professions’.
2. Quantify the impact of Clifton StrengthsQuest™ resources, tools and coaching on student engagement, hope and well being.
3. Evaluate whether ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews can make a useful and unique contribution to the enhancement of strengths following participation in the Clifton Strengthfinder® and in partnership with StrengthsQuest™ coaching.
4. Identify whether Clifton StrengthsQuest™ coaching together with, or separately from ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews could be of wider benefit to Unitec students, to other higher educational institutions, and to organisations offering post-Clifton Strengthsfinder® consultations.
5. Begin to develop a new model of practice, known provisionally as ‘Narratives of Strengths’ and explore the value in developing this approach further (in a second phase of this project).
6. Ascertain if particular strengths identified by the Clifton Strengthsfinder® occur especially frequently for social work, counselling or nursing students.

Methodology

This study is primarily qualitative, in keeping with the discursive quality of the area under study. It also includes some quantitative data (still to be analyzed).

All second year students in social practice and nursing were asked to complete an initial questionnaire which asked questions about:

- How participants perceive their strengths
- How participants perceive the utilisation of their strengths
- Participant aspirations for study and career
- Clarity of aspirations for study and career
- Participant’s level of confidence that they will reach their aspirations for study and career
- Measurement of current levels of engagement, hope and well being.

- Two groups of 12 students (groups 2 & 3), were selected from this initial group. Groups 2 & 3 were matched as closely as possible according to their responses to the questionnaire as well as according to their gender, age, ethnicity, prior educational experience, course of study and grades. The intention was to have equal numbers from both professions but as insufficient nursing students came forward more social practice students took part.

- Group 2 served as a control group for the use of the StrengthsQuest™ coaching. This group took part in the Clifton Strengthsfinder® test and in a post-research questionnaire only.

- Group 2 served as a control for group 3B (described below).

- Group 3 was divided into two groups (3A and 3B). Both groups took part in the Clifton Strengthsfinder® and received StrengthsQuest™ coaching. They were trained in working as a team to support one another in strengths development and had access to extensive resources and materials from Gallup. Group 3B will, in addition, took part in a ‘Narrative of Strengths’ interview.

- All groups took part in evaluation questionnaires. This questionnaire was identical to the initial questionnaire, serving as a post-test. In addition the evaluation asked about Surprise outcomes e.g. impact of involvement in the study upon other areas of participant’s lives.

- Group 3 also took part in semi-structured evaluation interviews.

Data collection

- Clifton Strengthsfinder® results
- Initial questionnaire
- Clifton StrengthsQuest™ coaching and ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews (transcribed).
- Final questionnaire and evaluation interviews.

Analysis

So far the final interviews have been analysed. The transcripts were read by 3 members of the research team who identified key themes. The narrative of strengths interviews have also been studied.

The quantitative data that has been collected has resulted from participants’ answers to some of the qualitative questions that the study explores using a simple rating scale. The data from the questionnaires is still being analysed. When this is complete qualitative and quantitative comparisons can be made between the outcomes reported by each group. This evidence can then be analysed to determine the extent to which StrengthQuest™ coaching has impacted professional aspirations, engagement, hopes and well being. It is already evident from the interviews that both the StrengthQuest™ coaching has had a positive impact on these factors. It is also evident that the ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews have made a useful contribution.
Results

These are the current results. Further results will be available once the data from the questionnaires has been fully analysed.

- Analysis of the final interviews shows that involvement in the coaching and the narrative of strengths interviews has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for the students involved. Involvement in the project has influenced career direction for a number of the students. All 10 who took part in the evaluation interviews found involvement in the project has improved their confidence in relationship to study, career or both.

- Our own experience and that of four of the five students who we talked to about the influence of the narrative of strengths interview, was that they had embodied what had been previously one-dimensional strengths inside of their life histories with some striking and clear outcomes. For most, taking part in the narrative of strengths interviews made a unique contribution to their gains from the project.

- An interview structure for a ‘narrative of strengths’ interview was developed and trialled successfully for this project. The interviews were developed by the chief researcher and David Epston, the co-founder of narrative therapy. The process of designing these interviews was documented, and an article is currently being finalized and has been accepted in advance for publication in the International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. This article illustrates the process by which a narrative interview about strengths was arrived at and shows how the quasi-essentialist strengths presented by Gallup can be placed in the context of an individual’s personal and familial and summarizes results from the interviews with the students.

- A second article, summarizing the results of the project is in draft form and is currently being edited by Kay Ingamells, Ksenija Napan and Sue Gasquoine. We are currently deciding which journal(s) to approach for publication.

- Other highlights have been the involvement of Debbie Marriott from the UK and Sweden, who is licensed by Gallup to coach people following their participation in Strengthfinder®. Debbie gave a number of seminars including a Unitec wide seminar whilst she was visiting to take part in the research project. Debbie’s expertise was very well received and she was able to offer training to key individuals as well as to the social practice team. One outcome from the seminars is that the Department of Not for Profit Management now use Strengthfinder® with all their students and have had seen positive results.

- Our relationship with Gallup through the research project has given all Unitec students and their friends and families to participate in Strengthfinder® and use the Strengthfinder® resources website at a greatly reduced rate. This is available indefinitely to all departments.

- Students’ participation in the project was so positive that at the very least, participation in Strengthfinder® itself could be recommended for students across the social practice and nursing disciplines and also across Unitec as a whole.

Outcomes/findings

We are still awaiting some of the results of the quantitative data, which has not yet been analysed fully due to staff illness and workloads. See comments under objectives below:

1. Determine the impact of Clifton StrengthsQuest™ coaching upon the professional aspirations of students in the ‘helping professions’. Data is still being analysed from the pre-and post questionnaires. However, the data from the transcribed final interviews shows notable and positive impact upon professional aspirations.

2. Quantify the impact of Clifton StrengthsQuest™ resources, tools and coaching on student engagement, hope and well being. The results from the interviews show that the StrengthsQuest™ resources, tools and coaching had an overwhelmingly positive impact on
students’ confidence, sense of self and study. The extent, to which ‘engagement, hope and well-being’ were specifically aided within these larger findings, will be more apparent from the quantative data.

3. Evaluate whether ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews can make a useful and unique contribution to the enhancement of strengths following participation in the Clifton StrengthsQuestTM and in partnership with StrengthsQuestTM coaching. The results from the transcribed interviews suggest that ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews could build very successfully on StrengthsQuestTM and StrengthsQuestTM coaching and that they beneficial in their own right. What is not known is to what extent the coaching provided a foundation for the results from the narrative of strengths interviews and how the results would differ if the ‘Narratives of strengths’ interviews independently of the coaching programme. Further data analysis may help to answer this question.

4. Identify whether Clifton StrengthsQuestTM coaching together with, or separately from ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews could be of wider benefit to Unitec students, to other higher educational institutions, and to organisations offering post- Clifton Strengthsfinder® consultations. The results from this pilot study were so overwhelmingly positive, application of this model within Unitec and elsewhere could clearly be beneficial. The use of the model to support individual and team professional development for workers could be explored as part of a separate research project. Mind and Body have suggested such a project.

5. Begin to develop a new model of practice, known provisionally as ‘Narratives of Strengths’ and explore the value in developing this approach further (in a second phase of this project). This is an exciting area for further research. This model was developed and used with interesting and positive results. The use of narrative practices alongside a strengths approach could open up developments for developing this relationship further in the social practice arena. Response to articles when published may well bring about further research opportunities. If the results of any further research are as positive as the pilot then it may be that this new way of supporting students to be successful in their fields and to make a greater contribution to the professions could become part of the Unitec’s success and retention strategy and further improve the reputation of our graduates.

Conclusions

Key conclusions:

- The Narrative of Strengths interviews achieved what we had predicted and there is an argument for researching their use further. This could be done simply with use of StrengthsQuestTM and one interview per student, or could chart and explore this history of all of the strengths identified by Gallup for each individual rather than only one. From these results we would be able to develop a robust model and explore other opportunities for its application with students and within organisations.

- There are numerous other research possibilities from this project including further research into the influence of strengths quest and the Narrative of Strengths interviews upon career aspirations, as already stated.

Implications

- The results of students participating in StrengthsQuestTM alone, within Social Practice, Nursing, Not for Profit and The Business School, as well as amongst many Unitec staff, suggests that there is an argument for advocating use of StrengthsQuestTM across Unitec and the promotion of Unitec as a “strengths-based campus”. Whilst the Business school have a long history of using StrengthsQuestTM, collaborations with Not for Profit and Social Practice and Nursing are possible for further research or projects.
Mind and Body Consultants\(^1\) have expressed their interest in a possible project involving the application of Strengthfinder® and narrative of strengths interviews to their organization. At present this is an idea only and has not yet been pursued.

Further research (as already stated), into the usefulness of this approach to the social practice professions. This research could be conducted in collaboration with the careers centre

Exploration of how narrative and strengths based practice could be combined in other ways. The limitations of strengths based approaches invite experimentation with strengths based approaches). Of particular interest would be the use of narrative of strengths interviews in strengths-based agencies such as Family Works Waitakere\(^2\).

Gallup may wish to be involved in further work/research arising from this pilot project. Gallup is interested in supporting research into methods and approaches which enable the utilisation of strengths identified through the Clifton Strengthfinder® and have offered considerable support to this project through provision of free materials and access to resources.

Other separate but related research projects may arise from the pilot study. For example, research into the usefulness of StrengthsQuest™ coaching and ‘Narratives of Strengths’ conversations for uncovering how individual strengths influence preferred styles of work and choice of model for counsellors and therapists.

Likely impact on student success and retention and increase in students’ competence as beginning practitioners in their chosen fields.

Possible development of interest in using StrengthsQuest™ coaching and ‘Narratives of Strengths’ conversations within other Unitec departments and within other educational institutions.

The chief investigator may apply to Gallup for funding for phase two in 2010 and possibly for other research ideas arising from this pilot study.

The results of the use of ‘Narratives of Strengths’ interviews alongside StrengthsQuest™ coaching may give rise to opportunities for further development and research into the application of narrative ideas to organisational development\(^3\)

**Recommendations (optional)**

- Use of Strengthfinder® across Unitec for students and possibly staff

**Publications and dissemination**


Article 2: Strengthsquest and Narratives of Strengths. Currently re-writing and selecting journals to approach.

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\(^1\) Mind and Body Consultants is a registered company in its twelfth year of operation. It is managed and staffed by talented and professional people with personal experience of mental illness. Mind and Body provides informed advice on the policy, planning, implementation and evaluation of mental health services at local, regional, national and international levels, undertakes health research and service development projects, provides peer support services, promotes healthcare ethics and the development of ethical practice. Mind and Body is a strengths based organisation.

\(^2\) Family Works is a division of Presbyterian Support. Collectively the seven Presbyterian Support organisations are one of the largest providers of a range of social services in New Zealand. Family Works works with, families at risk, and children and young people from a strengths based perspective.