

Why and how to facilitate a strengths-focused identity

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Abstract: A strengths-focused identity is a person's self-description in terms of personal strengths. A *personal strength* is defined as the positive pole of a personal construct often used by a person to describe self and others. The *Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP)*, which has had more than 25 years of development, is a subjective approach to articulating strengths. It is a 10-hour process involving four individuals who take turns sharing stories of positive experiences. As a result of these and other activities, each participant articulates self-identified strengths. The DSAP has had considerable evaluation, showing positive outcomes. A streamlined version of the DSAP, called *Articulating Strengths Together (AST)*, has recently been developed to provide greater accessibility. This version does not require a trained facilitator and it takes less time and expense than the DSAP. Published research identifies several benefits of having a positive, strengths-focused perspective. Benefits include better health, more productivity at school and work, more creative problem solving, more successful marriages and greater motivation at work. Two methods of getting at strengths, subjective approaches and objective approaches, are compared and contrasted. A case is presented for using the subjective approach to articulate a strengths-focused identity that is more experientially grounded.

Key words: personal construct; strengths-focused; identity; articulation process; subjective approach; objective approach

What is a strengths-focused identity?

Personal identity is a complex concept, better described as a process. I will not attempt an in-depth explanation of the process of self-identity in this paper because of the task is too complex for the space I have. For those of you, who are interested in a deeper exploration, please read the chapter "Differentiating the *I* from the *ME*" (Forster, 2009a), in *Reflections in Personal Construct Theory* (Butler, 2009). The more simplified definition of strengths-focused identity used in this paper is a person's personal description of self when asked to use personal constructs that he or she identifies as personal strengths. This definition does not specify that a person's strengths-focused identity is synonymous with his or her total identity, which would be nearly impossible to describe because of the complexity of personal identities. Instead, a person's strengths-focused identity will be limited to the description of self that a person gives, when asked to describe self in terms of personal strengths.

Strengths as the positive poles of personal constructs

The primary psychological theory that I use to make sense of people in my life, including myself, is *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (Kelly, 1955). I use the idea of a *personal construct* as my primary means of thinking about strengths. My definition of strengths is that they are the positive poles of personal constructs used by any individual to describe self and other people. When I started my exploration of how individuals use the positive poles of selected personal constructs as ways of describing self and others, I elicited the personal constructs using a Rep Grid technique. However, I subsequently found this technique to be more cumbersome and technical than was necessary for my purposes of eliciting strengths. I adopted an approach originally developed by Bernard Haldane (Forster, 2003). This approach, which we came to call *Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP)*, will be described in the next section.

How the DSAP works

The key activities of the Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) are done in small groups, usually four people. The process is designed so that each participant takes a turn describing four Good Experiences¹ to the other participants. As the other participants listen to the four stories being told, they try to identify strengths that were demonstrated by the storyteller. When the storyteller finishes the four stories, each listener offers the teller some possible strengths that he or she identified during the telling of each story. All of the participants in the small group take a turn at being the storyteller and receiving a list of possible strengths from each listener. After completing the group activity, participants, now working alone, complete a Chart² where they identify some supplied labels for strengths that were demonstrated in each of ten Good Experiences they had identified prior to the small group activity. After completing the Chart activity, each participant studies the list of possible strengths given to him/her by the listeners in the earlier group activity, and also considers any new strengths listed in the Chart. Each participant then comes up with at least four most valued strengths. These four strengths are then put through a process called Reality Testing³. During the reality testing the participant thinks of two or three events when each strength was demonstrated. After completing the reality testing, the participant prepares a Strengths Report that describes the strengths and the evidence supporting the claimed strengths.

Although the DSAP sounds complicated, the essence of the process is similar to the Rep Grid Process (Kelly, 1955). The stories about Good Experiences are like figures or elements in the Grid format. In the Grid Process, the participant elicits the positive poles of personal constructs by considering themes or constructs that differentiate some events or elements from others. In the DSAP, the participants think of strengths, which are the positive poles of constructs that were present or demonstrated during the events, the stories of Good Experiences.

Articulating strengths together

An important aspect of the DSAP not present in the elicitation of personal constructs using the Rep Grid process is the group interaction, the activity of articulating strengths together. This innovative approach adds a new dimension to the process by which an individual articulates personal constructs/strengths. In both the Rep Grid process and the DSAP, it can be said that personal constructs are being *elicited*, which is similar to being *articulated*. Elicitation and

articulation are similar because in both processes, the final words that are expressed come from the cognitive processing of the individual, and not from some outside source, such as taxonomy of constructs or strengths. The group interaction in the DSAP facilitates the articulation process because other individuals who heard the storyteller's experiences offer words or possible constructs for describing the person's strengths. These offerings often remind the people, who are trying to articulate their own strengths, of words that are just at the tip of their tongues. Sometimes a person who has been too modest or embarrassed to claim a given strength will go ahead and claim the strength after others have suggested it during the feedback portion of the process.

Support for articulating strengths together can be found in Ken Gergen's recent book, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (2009). Gergen makes the case that the relationships between people provide a more solid theoretical framework for explaining the motivations of the individuals than does more traditional personality theories. Gergen reminds us that *Relational Being* replaces the traditional concerns with the individual and the community by illuminating the significance of relationship. Gergen suggests that it is not individual minds that come together to form relationships; it is out of relationship that individual functioning emerges.

Why should you facilitate a strengths-focused identity?

By definition, to be strengths-focused is to have a positive perspective on whatever is the focus of attention at any particular time. It seems likely that human beings, with their remarkable capacity for self-awareness, have as a foundation for their waking experience a constant awareness of themselves while they also focus on other stimuli. The positivity or negativity accompanying this self-awareness is very difficult to document by external observation, measurement and summarization. The difficulty can be traced to the complexity and the ephemeral nature of the self. One way to characterize the self is to conceptualize it as a process that is in constant change. The positivity or negativity of the process at any moment is difficult to describe at this stage of our scientific/technical development, so the documentation of the positivity/negativity ratio remains at a rather undeveloped stage. However, there are scientific models and methods being developed (Fredrickson, B. L., and M. F. Losada, 2005) to understand and measure these ratios.

There is growing support for approaches that increase the length of focused attention devoted to generating positive emotions. If people could focus more of their attention on phenomena that stimulate positive emotions, their self-identities could be expected to become more positive.

Another way of describing a person who is self-aware and experiencing positive emotions a lot of the time, is to call the person *happy*, or experiencing *subjective wellbeing*. The variables of happiness and subjective wellbeing have been studied in connection to a host of other positive qualities, such as optimism, hope, gratitude, flourishing, resilience, engagement, mindfulness, elevation, strengths-focused, wellness, flow, self-esteem, positive relationships, etc. These variables tend to be highly correlated when they are related with each other, suggesting that we could refer to any of them as *positivity* or *having a positive perspective*.

We also know that there has been an explosion of research that has produced many positive results within the field of psychology and the other social sciences. These results verify that there are many advantages to having a positive perspective or being strengths-focused. The extent of the research literature is rather overwhelming, but the following authors of research-

focused publications provide a solid sample of this body of evidence: Seligman, M. E. P. (2002); Lyubomirsky, S. (2007); Fredrickson, B. L. (2009); Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005); Sin, L.S. & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009); Snyder C. R., and S. J. Lopez. (2007); Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (2001); Forster, (1991).

The results of the research studies on these topics demonstrate benefits such as satisfaction and success at school and work; flexibility; creativity; better physical, mental and emotional health; longevity; problem solving; marital satisfaction; team work; goal attainment; higher self-esteem; more internal locus of control. The benefits of having a positive perspective have been clearly documented and these benefits should motivate most people to seek a more positive perspective if it seems attainable.

There is, however, some disagreement as to the *attainability* of a more positive perspective, if a person does not have the genetic predisposition for such positivity. Lykken & Tellegen (1996) analyzed their data from identical twins, some separated at birth, and some who grew up together. After studying the patterns, they concluded that much of happiness is determined by a genetic set point. They even compare the happiness set point to the height set point, suggesting that it is mostly determined by genetics. However, four years later, Lykken did modify his position, saying that happiness can be changed more than he earlier thought possible. He attributed this possibility to the fact that if certain conditions had stifled the person's normal development, interventions or changing conditions could result in noticeable gains. Lyubomirsky interpreted the available data related to the determinants of happiness and summarized her analyses using a pie chart. This chart attributes 50% of the variance to a person's genetic set point, 40% to intentional activity, and 10% to circumstances. She writes: "To understand that 40 percent of our happiness is determined by intentional activity is to appreciate the promise of the great impact that you can make on your own life through intentional strategies that you can implement to remake yourself as a happier person" (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p.39).

Focusing on strengths in the workplace

In addition to the significant activity occurring within the positive psychology movement during the past fifteen years, considerable activity has also taken place on the fringes of psychology, in the organizations and businesses that might be called our workplace. Donald Clifton, who is often called the Father of Strengths Psychology (Rath, 2007), teamed up with James Harter to write a chapter titled "Investing in Strengths." They start this chapter with the following paragraph:

For more than thirty years, the Gallup Organization has investigated the nature of human talents and strengths. By interviewing approximately 2 million people in a wide range of roles and industries, Gallup has discovered that our talents – defined as our naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied – are our greatest opportunities for success. Further, by refining our dominant talents with skill and knowledge, we can create strength – the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity. (Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 111)

Based on Gallup's 40-year study of human strengths, Clifton and others created a language of the 34 most common talents and developed the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*© assessment. In 2001, the team at the Gallup Organization included the initial version of this assessment with the management book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton,

2001). Millions of people have participated in StrengthsFinder assessment and learned about their top five themes of talent. The assessment is now offered in more than 20 languages and it is used in more than 100 nations. It is certainly the most popular strengths identification instrument used in our contemporary world. In 2007, the Gallup group used their research and knowledge base to expand the first version of the StrengthsFinder. They introduced the StrengthsFinder 2.0. The language of 34 themes remains the same, but the assessment is now faster and more reliable than the first version. *A Strengths Discovery and Action-Planning Guide* has been developed that explores the nuances of what make a person unique, using more than 5000 new personalized Strengths Insights that have been discovered in the research data collected over the years.

The extensive Gallup research has documented some of the value gained from the identification and use of strengths. After surveying more than 10 million people worldwide on employee engagement, only a third of the respondents strongly agree with the statement: “*At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.*” It was found that those who “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with the statement mentioned above, just about never say that they are emotionally engaged on their job. In contrast, those who say that they do have the opportunity to focus on their strengths everyday are more than six times as likely to be engaged in their jobs and more than three times as likely to report that they have an excellent quality of life in general. This research has documented how important it is to use your strengths at your work and in your life. The results of this research contributes to the knowledge that people need to be strengths-focused if they are going to optimize their talents and realize more of their potential.

How to facilitate a strengths-focused identity

There are many ways to facilitate a strengths-focused identity, but I will propose only two, one being a *subjective* approach, and the other an *objective* approach. The subjective approach is grounded on the assumptions and principles of constructivism, and the objective approach is grounded on the assumptions and principles of traditional scientific and nomothetic psychology.

The subjective approach rests on a basic assumption of constructivist theory, that the individual creates his or her own reality. The constructivist approach that flows from this assumption emphasizes the elicitation of the participant’s *personal constructs* (Kelly, 1955), these constructs being the means by which the person makes sense of his or her strengths and how those strengths might be used. The elicitation process might also be called an articulation process, and it enables the participant to name strengths, using the positive poles of the constructs that he or she uses to differentiate phenomena. The strengths, which are articulated in this way, are ones that the participant had probably constructed during past experiences. The meanings of these words can be anchored to past experiences that the participant can recall and partially re-experience.

The objective approach is grounded in the idea that words describe the world as it really exists, or at least in as close approximation as you can get at this time. The words that are used have shared meanings among people who try to assemble taxonomies for describing how the world is probably organized. The strengths named and described using objective approaches have definitions that can be found in dictionaries and appropriate taxonomies. Strengths that are considered objective are usually combined with a finite number of other strengths, forming a taxonomy of assembled strengths. This taxonomy is designed to create an organized structure made up of the important strengths needed to describe a large group of people in terms of their

different strengths. The objective strength is one that can be measured and compared with a specified group of people in terms of norms. The meanings of the scores have objective standards so that people can be compared and classified in a larger system of norms.

The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) is an example of a subjective approach to articulating strengths. The strengths articulated while completing the DSAP represent the participant's own way of describing his or her strengths. The process is designed to help the participant analyze his or her past experiences and to name the strengths that were used in those experiences, using the person's own words.

The StrengthsFinder 2.0 (Rath, 2007) is an example of an objective approach to identifying strengths. This objective approach can be tried by first buying Rath's book, which costs about \$12. Each book includes a unique code number for accessing the online inventory. Soon after you respond to this inventory you will receive, online, a listing of strengths that were identified as your top five strengths. You will also get information about where you ranked on the other strengths measured by this inventory, and you will receive elaborate definitions of all 34 themes measured by this approach.

In the last paragraph, I used the verb *identifying* when describing how the participant found out about his or her strengths when using the StrengthsFinder 2.0 approach. You might also have noticed that I used the verb *articulating* when describing how the DSAP participant comes up with his or her strengths. This choice of verbs gets at the important difference between the two methods. In the case of the StrengthsFinder 2.0 the participant responds to an inventory of strengths and receives a listing of strengths that summarizes those strengths that best describe the inventory-taker, in terms of the particular strengths included in this taxonomy of strengths. The strengths articulated during the DSAP are in the personal language of the participant. These strengths may or may not be found in official taxonomies of strengths. Only the person who has articulated them can define these personalized, subjective strengths.

My own experience of using subjective and objective approaches

I identified my strengths using the StrengthsFinder 2.0 and I also articulated my strengths using the DSAP. The top five strengths identified or articulated by these two approaches are shown below:

Top five objective strengths identified by responding to the StrengthsFinder 2.0:

Learner
Ideation
Maximizer
Input
Connectedness

Top five subjective strengths articulated using the DSAP:

A Positive Perspective (Optimism)
Emotional Balance/ Solid Mental Health
Theorizing & Designing Applications
Mentoring (Facilitating Development)
A Big Picture Perspective

The meanings of these two sets of descriptors of my primary strengths were quite different for me. The objective strengths had little experiential meaning for me. Fortunately, the StrengthsFinder 2.0 feedback system does provide fairly elaborate definitions of the strengths. However, after reading the definitions, I had difficulty translating these concepts to my personal experiences. In contrast, I had a number of personal experiences that I could relate to each of the strengths articulated while participating in the DSAP. This is not surprising because I articulated these particular strengths by analyzing selected Good Experiences that I had remembered and shared with three other people when participating in the DSAP. These DSAP-elicited strengths were tied from the beginning to personal memories about specific, positive experiences. The words and phrasing of these descriptive statements were ones that I chose myself. These words have personal meanings that are more elaborate and tied to life events than the words provided to me from the computerized analyses of my responses to the StrengthsFinder 2.0 inventory.

My comparison between a subjective approach and an objective approach was made in order to explore how each approach might affect my strengths-focused identity. While my personal experience of the two approaches definitely favored the subjective approach, I do want to acknowledge that the objective approach also has its advantages. The objective approach is built around a theoretical system that proposes a set number of strengths determined by statistical analyses of various objectively measured strengths. The resulting taxonomy of strengths and the development of norms that permit comparison of self with normalized samples of other people provide a system where you can compare yourself with others on several different standardized strength scales. This system allows a larger body of people to communicate comparative information about a fixed number of strengths. The objective approach does enable shared communication on several standardized scales developed to systematically cover a network of strengths that have been scaled and normed. While these advantages are of real value for comparing yourself with others on a fixed number of strengths that have been carefully defined, it does not allow you to think about yourself using the personal constructs that you primarily use to make sense of yourself and others in the complex world where you live. I believe that the subjective approach contributes more to clarifying and communicating my strengths as I experience them. However, I did gain further insight about myself from responding to and getting feedback from the objective instrument, the StrengthsFinder 2.0. I think that individuals should do both, but if they only have time and money for one, they should use the subjective approach first. This recommendation only applies if the time and money of the two approaches are similar. Since the DSAP does usually cost more and takes more time than the StrengthsFinder 2.0, my recommendation would only apply if the costs and time for a subjective approach could be reduced to that of an objective approach. Fortunately, I have developed a streamlined version of the DSAP that equalizes the costs and the time. That streamlined version, named *Articulating Strengths Together (AST)*, is described in the next section.

How to articulate your strengths using a streamlined version of DSAP

The DSAP has generated enthusiastic support for its use during the past twenty or more years. The evaluations by participants have been very favorable (Summers, 2009). However, the fairly costly resources required to conduct the DSAP have hindered its usage. The DSAP was designed to be delivered in groups of people by trained facilitators. The essential component of articulating strengths and preparing a report on the articulated Dependable Strengths takes about

nine or ten hours, and this part is then packaged with another nine or ten hours using the Dependable Strengths Report in a process called the Job Magnet Program. Those who facilitate the process are required to have a 5-day Training Workshop to prepare them for leading these groups. All in all, the necessity for having a trained facilitator and at least 20 hours of time for the workshop is fairly expensive, which has hindered the spread of the DSAP.

After having participated in the training of hundreds of facilitators and observing the process over and over again, I came to the conclusion that the essential and most powerful part of the standard 20-hour workshop took place during what we called the *quad portion* of the process. I decided that this part of the DSAP, which included the essence of the articulation process, could be completed in about three hours, without the need of a trained facilitator, if the four participants each had a detailed packet of guidelines to follow while they went through the seven steps. I experimented with a 90-minute version and then a 2-hour version, before settling on a version that could be done in one 3-hour session. I also provided guidelines for options to the 3-hour continuous session, permitting two or even three shorter sessions, if participants complete some homework between sessions. In the autumn of 2009, I published the book describing the rationale and the methods for this streamlined version of the DSAP. The book is titled *Articulating Strengths Together (AST): An Interactive Process to Enhance Positivity* (Forster, 2009b).

What is the AST and how do you get it?

The AST is an inexpensive book, under \$14 (USA currency) that can be purchased by an individual and then used by that individual to guide the process for self and three other participants. The book includes three sections. Part 1 is titled, “What is the AST and why should you use it?” This part provides a rationale for its use, a brief summary of research that supports its use, and elaboration about possible ways to use it. It includes information about supplementing it with objective instruments for identifying strengths, such as the StrengthsFinder 2.0.

Part 2 is titled “How do you facilitate the AST process?” It has detailed guidelines for facilitating the process. The process can be facilitated in one 3-hour session, or in two or three shorter sessions, with homework in between. After using the different formats for awhile, I now recommend the format using two untimed sessions that might take from 90 minutes to two hours a session. This 2-session format requires participants to do about an hour of homework between the two sessions. The book is written so that the person who buys the book or who volunteers to guide the other three through the session/s, can facilitate the process after about two hours of preparation.

The third section of the AST book includes four Participant Packets that are organized into four major activities, which are further broken down into seven detailed steps.

The AST book is available online through Amazon.com. It can also be ordered through bookstores using the ISBN number 1-4392-4711-0.

What you will probably gain from using the AST book

I prepared this paper to tell you why and how to facilitate the strengths-focused identity of yourself and others. My simple, but practical, definition of your strengths-focused identity is your personal description of yourself in terms of strengths. I have tried to make the case that your

personal descriptions are made up of words that have experiential meaning for you. By experiential meaning, I mean that the words should help you connect with real life experiences that you can recall and partially re-experience. As you use the words to describe yourself, you should be able to easily recall past events when you were living or demonstrating those strengths. The words have special meaning for you because they help connect you to past experiences that exemplify the times when you were living at your best, being the person you feel proud to be. You felt good about yourself when you were engaged in those past experiences, partly because you used your best strengths during the experiences.

If you use the format and guidelines described in the AST book, you will end up with at least four descriptions of your most valued strengths, phrased with the words that have experiential meaning for you. It should be worth the small cost of time and money required to articulate those strengths with the help of others.

Notes

1. The definition of a *Good Experience* in the DSAP is: Something you feel you did well, enjoyed doing, and are proud of.
2. The *Chart* in the DSAP lists 52 strengths on the vertical dimension and it has 10 columns on the horizontal dimension, a column for each of the top 10 Good Experiences identified by the participant. The participant checks those boxes of each strength which was strongly applied during each of the 10 Good Experiences.
3. The *Reality Test* in the DSAP is applied when the participant selects the 6 most valued strengths articulated at this point and writes the descriptions of 2 or more experiences which illustrate his or her best performance in the case of each strength.

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