
WORKOUT 13 Assessing Clients' Strengths

If there is anything that one can get all social workers to agree on, it is the idea that client assessment is the heart of the helping process. For most traditionally trained social workers, this means that the client comes to the worker with a problem, and together the two work to ameliorate it. For the worker coming from an ecological perspective, this means altering the person, the environment, or both under the presumption that a better "fit" between the two is the desired end. For the behaviorally oriented worker, it means examining the "contingencies" in the environment that "maintain" the problem and changing them. Ironically, while nearly all models of practice speak of "client empowerment," it is clear that this empowerment is to be derived from focusing on a problem, overcoming that problem, and emerging victorious.

All of us at some time have experienced this: We had a problem, we overcame it, and we felt a clear sense of accomplishment as a result. Stated in more empowering terms, we had an aspiration, or a goal, and we used our strengths to meet it.

It is this latter sentence that states the essence of the strengths perspective in social work practice. Fundamental to this perspective is the assumption—the fact!—that everyone, regardless of their current situation or their personal characteristics, has hopes, dreams, and aspirations and may fulfill those only if they use their talents, abilities, and skills and the resources available to them.

Let us, for the moment, use you as an example to illustrate this. Suppose you are unemployed and need to find a job. After searching for some time, you find one. The hours are great, and the pay is not bad, although it is far away and you do not have a car. A problem-oriented social worker might see the problem as "how do we get you a car?" The strengths-oriented social worker, however, would reframe the question as follows:

"How do we help you meet your goal of employment at this job? What are the resources in the environment and your own personal strengths that will get you working at this place?" The distinction here is crucial: The former focuses on "the problem" (the lack of a car). Further, the implication that there is only one solution limits the possibilities. If we focus on the acquisition of a car, for example, we may fail to find out that (a) someone who works at or near this same place lives very close by and would be willing to take you to work for the price of half the gas; (b) you live on a bus route that gets you very close to the workplace; or (c) you are a highly skilled cyclist but need a better bike—a lot cheaper than a car!

To get at these other alternatives and in the process learn about the strengths in your repertoire, a worker might begin by asking you if you have ever been in a similar situation and how it was dealt with. If you have an older sibling who took you back and forth to work on your last job, great!

The author is particularly indebted to Charles A. Rapp, Associate Dean, University of Kansas School of Social Work, whose work in this area has moved so many to fundamentally change their ideas about social work practice.

A supportive sibling is a strength! So is your location in the community—on a bus route and/or living near someone who works nearby. There is also your expert cycling ability—a personal strength.

The same is true for clients: They have goals and aspirations that, when viewed through a problem lens, suggest narrow solutions. When viewed through an empowerment lens, however, previously uncharted possibilities emerge.

Sometimes clients have goals and aspirations that (a) you may not agree with or (b) you may believe are unrealistic. For example, a student I once worked with was using the strengths perspective with a client with severe and persistent mental illness. She was quite enthusiastic about the approach until she asked him what his goals and dreams were. Promptly, he replied, "I want to be a United States senator." "Delusions of grandeur," she thought. How am I supposed to apply a strengths perspective to a problem like this? She was stymied. She had expected him to say something more like, "I want to go to a Royals baseball game," which was at least in the realm of possibility. She brought her dilemma back to the class, which was encouraged to think using the strengths perspective. "Well, he should be applauded for having such high aspirations!" said one student. "All politicians are crazy," scoffed another, "so I don't see the problem." The student working with the client sank deeper into her chair. "Look," she said. "The guy is on a ton of meds. His hygiene is poor. He doesn't get out of his apartment much. Maybe I should just tell him to think of something else." Then a really quiet student spoke up:

If his stated aspiration is truly what he wants, then he has handed you a gift. I think you should work with him on reaching this goal. In order to run for the Senate, he'll need to meet the public. To do that, he'll have to improve his hygiene. He'll need to read the newspaper and follow issues. He'll need to register to vote. All of these goals are important to the rest of his life! If he never becomes a senator, at least he'll have improved his hygiene, gone out and met a few people, and gotten more involved with the world. And who knows? Maybe he'll surprise all of us!

Now that's a strengths-oriented student! She accepted what the client had to say as a valid expression of what he wanted and told her classmate to start there. To do otherwise would have robbed the client of that which makes us human beings—our dreams.

Perhaps the most fully articulated strengths model in social work today is based on the work of Rapp (1997). Originally developed for use by case managers working with persons with serious mental illness, it has been successfully adapted for use with children (Benard, 1997) and the elderly (Fast & Chapin, 1997) as well as other populations. Rapp posits that the use of his strengths model is based upon the six cardinal principles discussed below. Read over these principles. Do you see how they could be (or were) applied in the examples given above?

Principle 1: The Focus Is on Individual Strengths Rather Than Pathology

This principle underscores the notion that people can grow and develop only when their strengths and opportunities are discovered and exploited. Focusing on diagnoses, pathology, and weaknesses may ground us in reality—we all have some of this, after all—but it does not help us progress. Thus, work with clients should be focused on what the client has accomplished thus far both in resources—personal and environmental—and in dreams and aspirations.

Principle 2: The Community Is Viewed as an Oasis of Resources

Individuals have strengths, but so too have environments. In this model, it is natural, or informal, resources that are preferred over more formal resources. For example, if you have children and need to work, you might find a baby-sitter or a nursery school. If you have limited funds, you might ask your mother or neighbor to care for your children, possibly in exchange for housework or yardwork on the weekends. Solutions such as these are preferable to federally funded child-care slots, for example, because this arrangement allows you to remain an integrated, involved member of the community. Furthermore, there is no stigma associated with this arrangement, as there is when formal income-maintenance resources are availed. Finally, the solution of bartering child care for house- or yardwork creates a relationship in which equity exists. Equity in relationships mitigates against resentment, embarrassment, or feelings of low self-esteem on the part of both principals in a relationship (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

Principle 3: Interventions Are Based on Self-Determination

The client has the right to determine the form, direction, and substance of the help desired. The professional works on behalf of the client and in partnership, and the client's goals, dreams, and aspirations become the center of the work.

Principle 4: The Worker-Client Relationship Is Primary and Essential

Much of social work practice stresses the importance of the client-worker relationship (Compton & Galaway, 1989; Perlman, 1979). Such relationships are sometimes difficult to establish: You are friendly but not a friend. You may be working on profoundly intimate goals with the client, but your boundaries are well established. Yet the relationship is terribly important. It is cooperative. There is trust. Sincere caring is there.

Principle 5: Aggressive Outreach Is the Preferred Mode of Intervention

This model of work with clients takes as a given that the best work with clients occurs in the less formalized settings of the client's environment. Asking the client to come to your office does several things: First, it deprives you of important sources of data. What is your client like in public? In what sorts of venues is that person comfortable? Second, the office is your turf, not the client's. It is a place where people who are either sick or poor or problem riddled come. Good things happen on neutral—or client—ground!

**Principle 6: As Human Beings, We Are Capable of Learning,
Growing, and Changing**

This principle overlays the entire perspective. We all have a history of pain and problems as well as accomplishments, talents, dreams, and aspirations. To believe otherwise is to institutionalize low expectations; thus, this belief must be absolute.

Now that you know a little about one strengths model, the next step is to practice. That is what this workout is about.

WORKOUT 13 *Instructions*

Location

In class

Purpose

1. To provide you with opportunities to assess an individual, using elements of an empowerment perspective.
2. To give you the opportunity for some feedback about how you go about making those assessments.

Background

Assessment in general is more difficult than you might think. And a strengths-based assessment is, I submit, doubly difficult because of the orientation of our society to problems (to be solved), pathologies (to be treated), and faults (to be overcome). It is simply not part of our worldview to focus on strengths.

This workout requires you to practice assessment using the strengths perspective on one of your fellow classmates. Given that your classmates are not clients and given that the workout is to be done in the classroom, you will not be able to put all of the principles and ideas into action. This is, however, a beginning on which you can build your own assessment expertise.

Directions

1. Select a partner with whom you wish to conduct this exercise. If there are an odd number of students, one group may operate as a triad, with members taking turns as observers.
2. The Workspace includes a strengths assessment template that requires you to assess your "client" in six domains: living arrangements, financial/insurance, vocational/educational, health, leisure time activity, and social support. These domains, broadly conceived, constitute all the areas of our lives, so if you are conducting the assessment, begin by asking about one of these domains. For example, you might start with "Where do you live?" (the answer would fit most appropriately in the "Living Arrangements/Resources Available" cell). Next ask if that person likes where he or she lives, or if there is somewhere else she would like to be. That answer would fit in the "Interests and Aspirations" cell if the client would like to be elsewhere. The "needs" cell would contain the answer to the question "What kinds of things would you need to help you meet this goal?"

The assessment is meant to be conversational. You need not discuss each of these domains in lockstep order. Nor should you worry too much about whether an expressed aspiration belongs more appropriately in one category or another (e.g., if someone were to say "I wish I had more friends up here at the university to do things with," that would fit in the

center column of either the "Social Support" or the "Leisure Time Activity" category.

When you have completed this activity, make a list of the "goals" at the bottom of the page.

3. When you are undertaking the role of the client, you should take the opportunity to think about things in your life you would like to change and discuss them. If, for example, you wish your study habits were better, by all means state that to your "social worker." I recommend, however, that you monitor yourself and do not tell your classmate anything you would not want discussed after the exercise is over.
4. After one person has had ample time to conduct the assessment, the person in the role of the client should provide the worker with feedback, based on the feedback sheet, at the end of this exercise. Similarly, this process should take place when the roles are reversed, for the benefit of the other person to play the social worker.

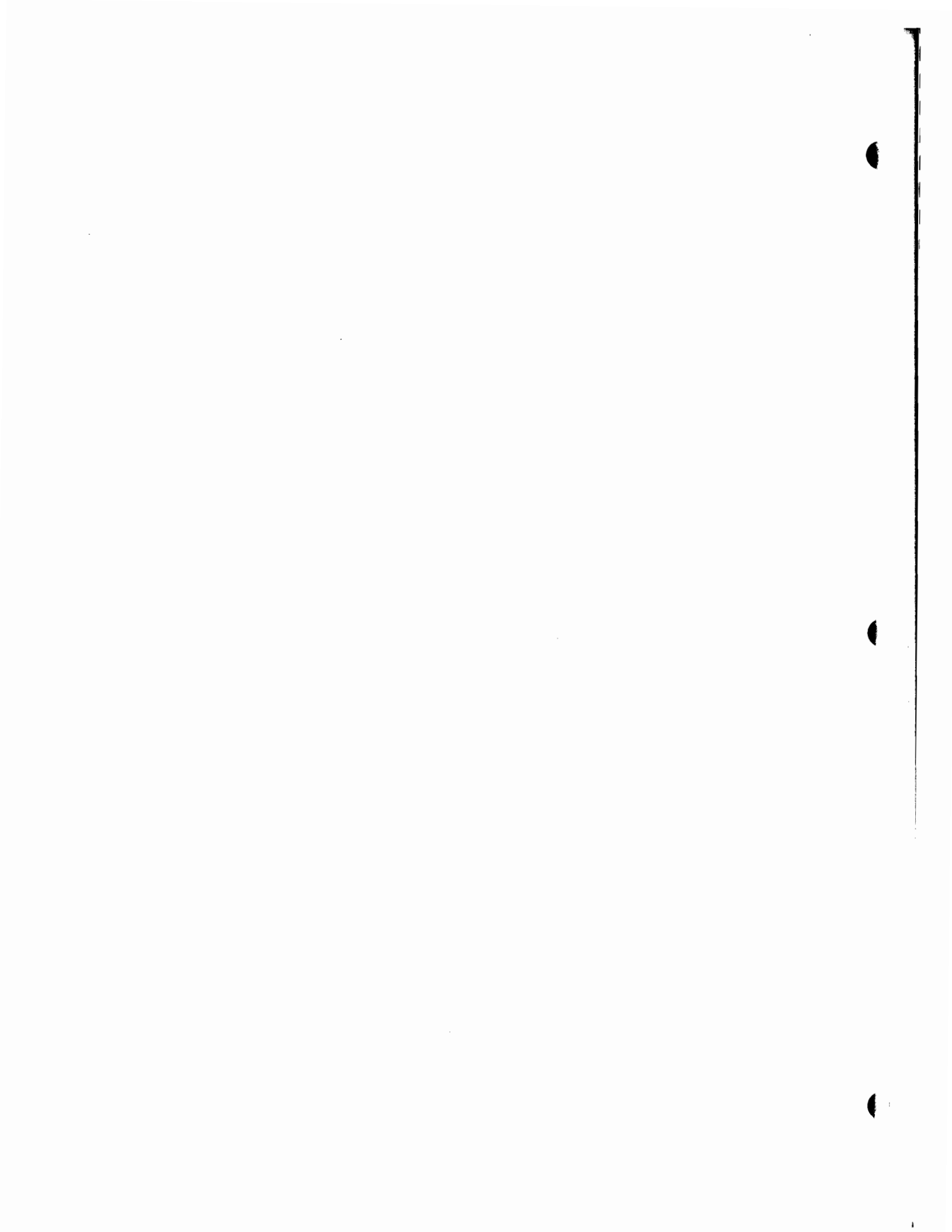
This feedback sheet, on which you should take a moment to write comments, should be given to the person playing the social worker for future reference.

5. If your group has a third person, this person should also have the opportunity to conduct an assessment as a worker. The other group members can undertake the very valuable task of monitoring the assessment as it happens and sharing feedback with the worker at the end of the role-play.

WORKOUT 13 *Workspace*

Strengths Assessment

<i>Resources Being Used and Involvements</i>	<i>Resources Available</i>	<i>Interests and Apirations</i>	<i>Needs</i>
Living Arrangements			
Financial/Insurance			
Vocational/Educational			
Health			
Leisure Time Activity			
Social Support			
Personal Characteristics			



Feedback Sheet

Name _____

Date _____

For the benefit of _____ ("social worker")

1. Did the social worker use empowering language? Ask about your wishes? What you would like to see accomplished?

2. Did the social worker accept your goals, or try to direct you to less ambitious ones, or ones that were less desirable from your perspective?

3. Was the social worker facilitative? Did he or she encourage you to talk?

4. Did you both, despite your best efforts, lapse into a discussion of problems? (This is a very natural thing to do!)

5. To the extent that resources for meeting the goals were discussed, did the social worker suggest informal resources? (For example, if you told your worker you need a winter coat but you need money to buy it, did the worker suggest asking your relatives if any of them has a coat they don't use much, or to look through garage sales for a good, cheap coat?).

6. Was the social worker respectful and attentive? If you are of different cultural backgrounds, did the worker make an effort to understand how your culture might impinge upon your goals?

7. As a result of this workout, do you see yourself as having more strengths than you thought you had?
