The 'rule of optimism'

Dilemmas of embracing a strength based approach in child protection work

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Written from a practitioner's perspective, this article explores some concerns with the application of the very popular strength based approaches to statutory child protection work. It is suggested that, despite the many benefits and positives in these approaches, these models are sometimes used (or misused) too early in intervention, which can lead to over optimism about the possibilities for change. The article questions whether a solely strength based approach can be safely applied to child protection work, and encourages practitioners to question their practice and 'proceed with caution'.

The increasing popularity and appeal of a strength based approach is hard to resist when working with vulnerable families. The approach offers much by way of joining with clients, respecting them as authorities within their own lives, and as capable of finding their own solutions. The approach is client owned, client directed and fundamental principles include empowerment, hope, resilience and self-determination. Research shows that families like it, in particular the ability to focus on their practical needs. The approach has a strong following amongst Australian social and welfare workers as it emphasises the maintenance of dignity, integrity and self sufficiency for clients and talks of partnerships with parents. It involves engaging clients as equals and can begin to counter the internalised message of deficits and problem saturation.

The approach is firmly based on the idea of optimism toward work with families. Elliott, Mulroney and O'Neil (2000) define optimism as 'the belief that change is possible and that the starting point for change is the strengths and capacities of family members' (2000:xvi). They state that it is not about a naturally sunny outlook, nor a generalised hope that everything will be all right, but a stance of possibilities. The premise is that people can successfully transform stressors into challenges and be strengthened by their difficulties. The approach also offers some very useful tools, such as measuring/scaling, normalising, developing future pictures, exceptions, and miracle questions, while one of the benefits of the approach is that it admits workers don't know everything.

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So, with such a positive outlook, how could I possibly have a problem with this approach? Reading some of the literature again, I feel inspired, challenged and encouraged, and yet I also feel uneasy. This is an approach that does not altogether sit comfortably with myself or some colleagues who have worked in the Australian statutory child protection environment. This paper is intended to be an exploration of the struggle in which I am engaged in terms of understanding the resistance and concerns that I feel. It is by no means a completed work – more, it is about inquiry into the dilemmas raised by the overly optimistic approach I have seen practised around me with this client group. This is an approach that these workers claim is based on a strengths perspective; however, it is quite possibly not the best example of this approach in action. In the area of work with statutory or even semi-voluntary child protection intervention, I have come to believe that 'thoughtful eclecticism' is required, where workers are aware of the benefits and pitfalls of a variety of approaches. In particular, Trotter's (2004) recent Victorian study outlines the need for workers to draw from approaches that incorporate cooperation and partnership with parents and, simultaneously, that address risk to children and exercise authority.

THE FINE LINE

When as workers we engage with clients in this arena, we can, I believe, find ourselves falling to two different and dangerous sides of the care/social control continuum. Where the worker has a great deal of authority to define the problem, some situations tempt workers to be punitive, authoritarian and judgemental. This is a real possibility when there is something about the client that rubs us the wrong way, when the abuse that has occurred horrifies us, or when our own history and values get in the way. In this work, it is fairly easy, given the power and authority held by the

worker, to push a client to react in a way that justifies our judgement of them. A hard line stance causes mistrust and often provides the opportunity for the parent not to comply. Also at this harsh end of the scale is defensive practice, a kind of 'if in doubt, remove' mentality. This approach, to always judge parents with strict rules and recommend removal of children any time there is doubt, is ultimately the safer option for workers. There is an understandable fear about being called to account for the actions of others or experiencing the horror of public reaction that can follow a child death. In this context, it is not surprising that some practitioners avoid taking risks and 'cover themselves' whenever doubts exist. Yet these life changing events have the capacity to cause great damage for the child and family.

In this sense, a strength based approach is brave, in that it takes the risk of leaving a child/children in a vulnerable situation while the family attempts to change and view itself differently. A strength based approach could never be accused of falling towards this judgemental side of the 'fine line'. However, with this approach there is a temptation toward over emphasising our caring, supporting role. This side of the line can result (intentionally or unintentionally) in the minimising or denying of the abuse and its effects (see, for example, Munro 1999). This occurs with the parent we like, empathise with, or identify with, and is, I believe, a real possibility where there is a solely strength based approach of either a worker or agency. There can be a danger of an overly optimistic outlook – looking for strength and hope when they do not reduce the risk to the child. It is what Robert Dingwell originally termed the 'rule of optimism'. This is a belief which 'enables professionals to find the most positive explanation of a situation, one which creates the least conflict with parents and within themselves' (Morrison, 1998:6).

The dangers involved in the 'rule of optimism' can include an over identification with the parents which leads to the child's perspective being lost. An overly optimistic approach can lead to workers failing to hold individuals accountable for their actions and failing to make the consequences of further actions clear. As Mark Furlong (2001) states:

> Working with statutory presentations requires that the professional is clear about action and consequence, is able to put a name to uncomfortable, disturbing behaviours ... in short, being overt about power issues is a pre-requisite for working effectively with families in the difficult sphere of public welfare (2001:215).

I have seen too many examples of workers utilising the smallest of achievements as a sign that 'all is well', a hint of insight as an indication that the child is now safe. The strength based approach advocates praising parents for these small achievements, highlighting them and encouraging their continuance. Berg and Kelly (2000:59) state that questions should never focus on what the client is doing wrong, only on what they are doing right and the positives. They encourage an attitude of awe and respect for the client's fortitude. It is not the praise and acknowledgement I have concerns with, but the inaction that can accompany such an optimistic outlook. There is no question that an adult's ability to make changes in their life should be highlighted and acknowledged with respect for all that is involved. However, those changes may make little or no difference to the care and safety of the child. The optimism can result in serious problems remaining unmentioned. It can lead to ignoring or failing to recognise warning signs when someone is unable to effect the change required in their lives to keep children safe. The strengths given weight must be clearly related to ability to provide care and protection, or the expectations and hopes of the worker may be outside the capability of the parent, which can lead to a situation of increased risk. It is an approach that can allow workers to hope for the best and avoid the unpleasant task of confronting the parent/s who have been abusive, at a potentially harmful cost to the child/children.

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CONCERNS REQUIRING SOLUTIONS!

Despite liking much of what the strength based approach offers, it does raise some concerns with this specific client group that require attention when applying this approach. I am not suggesting that all practitioners using a strength based approach are not considering these problems already; however, some versions of it which I have seen in practice in Australia fail to take them into account.

WHO IS THE CLIENT? OR, WHERE DID THE CHILD FOCUS GO?

When reading strength based articles and books, I find myself wondering, who is the primary client? Who is it that workers are there for, and who do these ideas benefit? From my early days in social work and the child welfare field, it has been drummed into me that my client is the one who is the most vulnerable, that is the child; that, by all means, I should work toward the best for the family group, but if there is ever a conflict of interests, my commitment is to the child. And yet I find that in my work with other services and colleagues, we all too often fall into the trap of describing the needs and approaches of 'clients' and 'families' when what we are really talking about is the adults involved. This

appears to be a problem facing a strength based approach – the child's rights, wants, needs and desires are rarely mentioned, the focus is on the adults or parents, even though the language at times conceals this with the word 'family'. When abuse has occurred, the needs and rights of all family members are not equal, and yet it seems it is all too easy in child protection work to leave out the position of the most vulnerable member. There appears to be a danger of them losing a voice within this approach, especially when considering the attention often paid to the more dominant voice of adults.

In families where parents have been abusive, it is the adults who are responsible for change, and therefore, upon whom we should focus our work. As part of engaging with parents, there is often an invitation to accept their view of the world and of their child. This is partly to avoid confrontation and partly because often we can empathise with the parent's own difficulties or history of victimisation. Mark Furlong (2001) aptly calls this potential conflict 'colluding or colliding', ie, in not challenging the views of parents (for example, the child's behaviour as solely responsible for the parent's violent response), we risk colluding with their view and, in moving on to a strength focus before challenging this view, we risk having condoned their prior inappropriate and harmful response in some way.

Society sanctions certain behaviours because they are harmful, and no matter how difficult the child, some responses are not acceptable. Yet to challenge too early can lead to collision, non engagement and potentially to termination of the relationship. There is a difficult balance between not wanting to alienate the parent and, at the same time, holding a child focus in which the child's views and rights are respected; to ensure sanctioning of inappropriate and harmful responses, alongside empathising with the parents' plight. However, to focus too much on the adults' view can, I believe, be dangerous. As Leslie (1995:366) states,

> ... the field is just beginning to recognise and examine another group, children, which may have been misserved over the years by an emphasis on the needs of adults.

LOOKING AT THE PAST

An overall strength based approach challenges the long held notions of the need to revisit the past before moving forward and whether it is necessary to revisit the abusive incident with its antecedents. The need to look backwards is shaped by the theories that have become almost second nature to many of us in this field. Whether it be a psychotherapeutic approach, systems theory, family therapy, a cognitive based approach or a narrative approach – all involve some revisiting of the past to uncover such things as meaning, defence mechanisms, behavioural antecedents, or even to reframe experience.

I find myself challenged by the notion of whether there can be safety for children if the past has not been revisited; whether the sanctioning that has occurred by the involvement with services is enough to prevent further abuse. Writers such as Berg and Kelly (2000) suggest it is *our* need to revisit the past that drives this paradigm rather than being in the best interest of families (or children?). However, for children still living in the situation where the abuse has occurred (and may still be occurring), there are a number of unresolved issues raised by a strength based eagerness to focus on the current and the future. I have separated these issues into three categories: the acknowledgement of the child's experience; issues of power and responsibility; and the link between insight and future safety.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE CHILD'S EXPERIENCE

A criticism of the strength based approach that is not new is that the feelings or emotions associated with abuse can be, at worst, ignored and, at best, minimised. The stance is 'lets move on ... look at solutions'. There does not appear to be time to acknowledge, give credence to, and hear the hurt and pain. This can be true for the adults involved, but more especially the children. Does this failure to revisit, to discuss, to acknowledge the experience of abuse of a child fail them? Does it keep terrible secrets just that – secret? Does it fail to give their survival and strength acknowledgement? While an event may be in the past, the child may not be emotionally ready to move on. It is understandably appealing for a parent who has been abusive to focus on the future – who wants to recall the pain and suffering they have inflicted on someone they love? And yet acknowledgement of this pain and hurt may be the very thing the child needs.

Would we do the same with an adult who has suffered hurt and pain, for example, the loss of a spouse. We would be likely to allow time for grieving, confusion, anger and questioning before moving on to look at the positives in how well they are coping. Perhaps a less emotive example can explain – using the analogy of a car crash where a driver has ignored a road rule and the car is damaged. Do we simply focus on the parts of the car and the driving skills that are

working well, praise the driver for all the times they have not crashed, and move on. Or do we at least need to ensure the driver receives some education in road rules as a further preventative measure and attempt to fix the damage before, or even alongside, moving on?

My instincts and experience tell me we do need to acknowledge the past and its significance in work with children and their parents in overcoming the effects of any trauma. Sometimes knowing that their parent has heard their pain and is sorry can be incredibly healing for a child, and this can be done whilst also building their resilience, encouraging their strengths and celebrating their survival skills. Recognising that a parent feels no remorse may also be useful and necessary in planning for the child's future safety (see, for example, Kilpatrick 2001).

ISSUES OF POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY

A further concern with not revisiting the past is the degree to which power imbalances in families can be ignored, minimised or missed if focussing solely on strengths. This approach does not appear to give a great deal of consideration to the misuse of power as a source of problematic behaviour, nor to promote the idea of individual responsibility for behaviour. The idea of individual responsibility for actions is one that child protection workers, sexual assault workers and counsellors working with abusive relationships have generally held to for some time. Put simply, the premise is that in order for change to occur, responsibility must be taken for abusive behaviour. This presents a dilemma for those wanting to adopt a strength based approach. An invitation to accept responsibility involves going backwards, it involves discussing and looking at what led to the abusive incident. It holds that one cannot move forward towards solutions until this has occurred. In contrast, Scott and O'Neil (1996:11) state the strength based approach is '... not necessarily [about] owning responsibility for past actions, but owning responsibility for solutions.' Herein lies a fundamental disagreement.

Berg and Kelly (2000:157) suggest that this need to hold an individual responsible, to have acknowledgment of responsibility, is about the worker's own need for retribution and revenge. Whilst I have given consideration to this possibility, I do not think it is as personal as this. It is a principle of western society to hold individuals responsible for their actions if they result in harm to others, and whilst this principle has not always been applied fairly, to throw it out has implications far more wide spread than child welfare. Taken to its logical extension, there is a danger here of 'therapising' what could be criminal acts.

If anyone is held responsible for change in the strengths model, it is the whole family, which results in criticisms similar to those of more traditional family therapy (for example, the incestuous family, the violent family, the alcoholic family). To move on and look for strengths, changes and solutions within the whole family can have the effect of making the whole family responsible for change where one or two individuals' actions have caused the need for interventions. There is a danger of making powerless people responsible.

THE LINK BETWEEN INSIGHT AND FUTURE SAFETY

Given the recidivism rates, the likelihood of further abuse in child protection referrals cannot be overlooked. Various approaches to managing this are advocated by different theoretical models. Is it about self insight (psychiatric model), about social context (sociological model), self control (behavioural model) or about building on exceptions as a solution (strengths model)? Was there malice and intent in the abuse (psychiatric), was it the stress of poverty (sociological), was it a lack of skills (behavioural) or was it a 'slip up', a mistake in an otherwise resourceful family (strengths)? Each of these explanations leads to very different treatment models. They each emphasise a particular area of change, within the individual and/or their behaviour, within the family or within society as a whole.

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In my experience, workers are often encouraged to assist their clients to develop their parenting skills – it is assumed that in order for the abusive incident to have occurred, there must have been a lack of skills rather than intent, and that education is what is required. We also often find ourselves assessing to see if an adult has accepted responsibility for any part they may have had in abuse and whether they have developed, or have the potential to develop, empathy for a child. These insights are taken as good indications of the chances of future change.

However, Berg and Kelly (2000:90) advise not to expect insight. They ask:

> Can people change without admitting problems? This comes from the mind-set that one must admit or confess there is a problem before one can change ... this thinking postulates that one must understand the reason for the mistake before one can change. This is a very seductive idea that may suit academics, philosophers, or analysts ... However, those of us in child welfare do not have the luxury of time to wait for someone to gain insight into

> their behaviour and then learn how to become more responsible. We want this mother to do something about her childcare responsibility today!

They feel the expectation of insight is related to wanting to hold our clients accountable for their abusive or neglectful behaviours. Yet it is difficult to understand why someone would make the efforts involved in change when they feel there is no problem. Berg and Kelly (2000:91) feel that focussing on getting parents to admit or confess their abusive behaviour is not productive, saying that 'only changing leads to change'. There is then an almost throw away line – 'Of course, we do hold clients responsible for abuse'. From what has been said prior to this statement, it is unclear how.

I would agree that admitting to a behaviour or action doesn't necessarily mean you won't repeat that behaviour or action. But I would argue that it provides some grounds for a discussion around understanding the clients' behaviour or action in context, as well as some possibilities for exploring ways of avoiding this reaction in the future. Mark Furlong (1989) states that there are very good reasons for being positive, and while this is preferable most of the time, it can become an obstacle. Our 'preferred language can encourage habits that de-emphasise or even disqualify gritty and often unpleasant practicalities ... thus making it impossible to be explicit about the breach of major social norms' (1989:215).

CONCLUSION

Whilst the concerns raised in this paper may sound harsh, I wish to emphasise that I believe there is genuine usefulness in strength based approaches, particularly in the tools offered. As mentioned, I have not yet found the 'perfect model' that fits all situations in this work. When using a strength based approach with this client group, I feel it is a matter of timing and knowing when to use this approach, and why. Where there are current safety concerns and risks, I would still advocate the need for naming the abuse as unacceptable and revisiting the past as part of the process of prevention. It is important and honest, I believe, to allow time and space for the child's voice and pain to be heard in a way that ensures the impact of the abuse is not minimised. That said, there are real benefits in incorporating the family strengths approach into our work, to encourage things families are doing that are working, and to attempt to strike a balance between safety, accountability, risk and optimism. About one thing I do remain optimistic – that the challenges of unpacking any approach, when carefully considered, can only serve to enhance our work with families. ❖

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