



Placing strengths into storylines:

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN STRENGTHS-BASED AND NARRATIVE APPROACHES

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This article is dedicated to my (KI) grandfather, Canon Raymond Scantlebury (1905-1958), and my 'uncle', Bishop Oliver Allison (1908-1989)

Could narrative inquiry enliven strengths-based practice through returning stories to strengths? This paper tells the story of the composition of 'narrative of strengths' interviews and their use with students, within a research project utilising the Clifton Strengthsfinder at Unitec, New Zealand. It moves on to explore possible seeds of connection between strengths-based and narrative practice, taking the paradigm of life as story and the reclaiming of the territory of the past as starting points for this inquiry.

Keywords: Strengths, strengths-based, narrative therapy, narrative inquiry, Clifton Strengthsfinder,

Narratologists have repeatedly pointed out that narrative is impossible when no meaningful connections link a sequence of events. Think of all those medieval chroniclers recording random events thought noteworthy. 1023: Prince Vasily began to rule in Tver. 1-24: A two-headed calf was born. Later in 1024: Saint Pstislav of Perem cured a beggar of leprosy. These entries do not constitute a story. They are at best material for one or many stories ... Narratologists then proceed to offer a 'minimal story', something like this: 'The queen grew ill, and so the king died of grief'. And so: there is a connection and so there is a story. The narratologists will go on to say that, of course, this is not much of a story, but it is still a story. We have crossed a great divide from incidents into narrative ... The sense of process, the activity of tracing possible futures from a given past, is essential to narrativeness, though not, as this example shows, to narrative. 'The queen grew ill, so the king died of grief' is a narrative without narrativeness. (Morson, 2003, pp. 59–73).

Strengths-based approaches and narrative therapy share a mission to shift social work and therapeutic practice away from the dominant problem-based paradigm. The two approaches have ethical compatibility and perhaps a family resemblance. Strengths-based approaches have drawn attention to potential points of unity with narrative therapy (Rapp & Goscha, 2006; Saleeby, 2008; Anderson, Cowger & Snively, 2009; Blundo, 2009), however, for the most part the two approaches have remained largely within their own domains. Is this as far as it goes? We propose that there are fruitful territories of practice that could be explored; that the compatibilities between the approaches could mark the beginning rather than the end of the story.

Arthur Frank's work helped us to articulate some dormant possibilities encased in a strengths-based practice. Frank writes:

People grow up being cast in stories, as actors are cast into their parts in a play – but that is too deterministic a metaphor. People are like actors cast into multiple scripts that are all unfinished. (Frank 2010, p. 7)

Strengths-based practice emphasis on strengths qua strengths can be extremely one dimensional in the same way in which narratologists refer to incidents in contrast to stories or to 'minimal' storying. Within the practice of counselling and social work, the stories that people bring to practitioners can be left on the shelf, 'unread', and new storylines may remain unexplored. This might be because

the stories that bring people to us as practitioners are stories of problems. These problem stories can be seen as indications of what Frank, referencing Bruner, describes as 'some breach in the expected state of things ... something goes awry'. Problem stories are about trouble with a Capital 'T' (Frank, 2010, p. 28). In strengths-based work, it could be said that the 'trouble' of stories is understandably bypassed in a bid to escape the stultifying grip of problem-focused practice. At the same time, the potential within them is left behind. If storytelling could be returned to strengths' discovery, then new possibilities for people and their identities might emerge. 'Stories can animate' (Frank 2010, p. 2), and that 'after stories animate they instigate' (Frank, 2010, p. 3). Frank (2010, p. 17), quotes Cruikshank when she says 'good stories can create' (Cruikshank, 1998). If people's strengths are 'animated' through the telling of them as stories, then what might be created and instigated that would not have been created and instigated otherwise? It was these ideas that led us to begin our enquiries into a possible engagement of strengths-based and narrative approaches.

Our explorations began inside a research project¹ that incorporated narrative therapy inquiry in the form of 'Narrative of Strengths interviews'² into the strength descriptions that result from the Clifton StrengthsFinder^{®3}. Although the Clifton StrengthsFinder originated in positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006), the results of the narrative of strengths interviews led us to envision possible bridges between narrative therapy inquiry and the strengths-based approach popularised within social work.

The first focus of the research project was on StrengthsFinder; the second was on StrengthsFinder coaching, and then the project took on a twist when it moved onto the third stage by interviewing 5 of the 24 students in the study about 'the narratives' of their StrengthsFinder strengths. This third stage was prompted by wanting to find a way to 'narrativise' strengths in the hope that placing 'strengths' into storylines might contribute to new insights and possibilities for students' identities and actions. We called the semi-structured interview formats that we devised 'narrative of strengths interviews'.

The first part of this article tells the story of how the narrative of strengths interviews were invented and in doing so highlights features of narrative therapy inquiry. The second part illustrates the outcome of the narrative strengths interviews by telling the story of one student's experience. The third and final part explores the beginnings of some ideas for bridging strengths-based approaches and narrative therapy inquiry.

PART ONE: DEVISING QUESTIONS TO BRING FORTH STORIES: NARRATIVES OF STRENGTHS INTERVIEWS

David, (DE) had the idea that we could apply narrative ideas to the process of the research itself by inventing the research questions through narrative therapy inquiry. We agreed that we would do this by David (DE) interviewing me, (KI) about one of my StrengthsFinder strengths and that we would invent the questions as we went along. Then we thought we would use my position as an 'insider' mock interviewee and David's (DE) 'outsider' position as a 'research interviewer' to help us enquire into how we might develop the interviews themselves.

One winter's day in 2009, David and I began to compose questions and trial them inside a conversation about the first of my 'top five strengths' that had been elicited through the process of answering the StrengthsFinder questions. Termed 'connectedness', this strength is described to respondents in its generic form. It is expressed as an almost 'spiritual' strength which is not typical of the other 34 StrengthsFinder descriptions:

Things happen for a reason. You are sure of it. You are sure of it because in your soul you know that we are all connected. Yes, we are individuals, responsible for our own judgements and in possession of our own free will, but nonetheless we are part of something larger. Some may call it the collective unconscious. Others may label it spirit or life force. But whatever your word of choice, you gain confidence from knowing that we are not isolated from one another or from the earth and the life on it. This feeling of Connectedness implies certain responsibilities. If we are all part of a larger picture, then we must not harm others because we will be harming ourselves. We must not exploit because we will be exploiting ourselves. Your awareness of these responsibilities creates your value system. You are considerate, caring, and accepting. Certain of the unity of humankind, you are a bridge builder for people of different cultures. Sensitive to the invisible hand, you can give others comfort that there is a purpose beyond our humdrum lives. The exact articles of your faith will depend on your upbringing and your culture, but your faith is strong. It sustains you and your close friends in the face of life's mysteries. (Clifton, Anderson & Schreiner, 2002, p. 38)

With this as our starting point, David began to try out questions which we hoped would first lead to the uncovering of the stories behind this 'strength' of connectedness and lead us towards a series of questions which would become the backbone of the narrative of strengths interviews.

As it evolved, we developed a series of questions around the following four themes:

- Experience-near names
- History of the narrativised strength
- Legacy of the narrativised strength
- Future of the talent

SHAPING THE INTERVIEW FROM THE 'INSIDE'

What follows are the questions we arrived at, interspersed with illustrations from the interview and commentaries. David's responses to my responses are not typical of a narrative interview. Many avenues are simply set to one side since the intention of this interview was not to fully describe my experiences but to use my responses to craft the questions for the interviews with the students.

This 'draft' interview shifted throughout from being 'inside' the interview, to outside the interview as we stepped back to reflect on the questions themselves. To make this easier to follow, we have indicated with italics and indentation when we were inside this embryonic narrative of strengths interview and when we were reflecting upon it from the outside.

EXPERIENCE-NEAR NAMES

The first thing that David commented upon was how we could take what were essentially 'foreign names' given by StrengthsFinder and translate them into more experience – near terms (Geertz, 1983, p. 57). The first set of questions evolved from this intention:

"Did anything within this description resonate strongly with what you would tell a trusted friend about yourself, or a trusted friend would tell someone else about you?"

David describes this question as 'a self-narrative question' (personal communication 10th October, 2011). Our hopes for this question were that by situating strengths within the intimate territory of friendship, interviewees would get an immediate sense of whether or not this strength has resonance within their everyday lives.

The answer to this question provides an entry point into the ways in which this strength speaks to who the person knows themselves to be (or are known to be).

This enquiry then becomes a sociological exploration which relates not specifically to the world of StrengthsFinder, but instead to the world of the person being interviewed. In doing so, it conjures up less foreign, more experience-near names for this 'strength'.

My response to the question above was:

KI: I found the description uncanny. Over the last few years, I had found myself describing myself to myself as an aspiring 'bridge-builder' and then that exact term appears in the StrengthsFinder results.

David's next series of questions derived from my response above.

DE: Did you already have a way of thinking about yourself that sounded a lot like the StrengthsFinder description? If so, how did you think about it? What name did you call it? Would you prefer that we stick with your name rather than the StrengthsFinder name? Or would you now like to make up a new name altogether?

Questions such as these give people the right of naming. This series of questions creates a composite between insider knowledge and outsider knowledge, a foreign name and a native name. It privileges insider knowledges (Epston & Maisel, 2000) over psychological knowledges. My response to this series of questions was:

KI: I didn't have a name for this as a 'strength'. Even although I aspired to build bridges I didn't see this as an ability I already had. If anything I think I saw my impulse to 'bridge build' as a flaw, as sometimes attempting to bring others together has backfired. This sullyng of strengths is something that many of the students I have worked with comment upon. Many find that their strengths as defined by Gallup (2008) have been previously defined by themselves and by others as weaknesses. I see this chance to 'reclaim' strengths as one of the most helpful outcomes of StrengthsFinder. Since 'connectedness' or bridge-building became a strength for me when I took the StrengthsFinder, I have entered into a revisiting of my past and rather than seeing myself as misguided for having embarked upon certain bridge-building endeavors, I now see myself as inspired but untrained⁵

The purpose of the next question is to ascertain that the conversation we are embarking on is of interest to the interviewee. Consulting in this way is an expression of the 'non-expert stance' embodied in narrative practice.

DE: How drawn are you to pursuing bridge-building in a conversation with me? Would this be in line with your interests?

Questions such as this provide the person with the opportunity to evaluate whether this description would be one they wish to associate themselves with or whether another description needs to be identified either from StrengthsFinder or somewhere else.

HISTORY OF THE NARRATIVISED STRENGTH

Key to generating any narrative is the exploration of its history. From this exploration, the 'strength' comes to be known inside a person's life rather than extracted from a person's life and reified. Below are a range of historicising questions composed for the purposes of this mock interview. We do not propose that all of the following questions are asked but we offer them as reasonable facsimiles from which to choose.

DE: When you look back over your life, when would you guess you first became aware that you sought to 'build bridges'? Can you tell me a story that stands out from your early memories of bridge-building? About how old were you then when you first remember this 'strength' or has it been present even longer than you can remember?

K: Several memories stand out. They all involve 'attacks' on others or myself and my urge to bring both sides together. I was about eight and my family had just moved to Yorkshire after moving to the UK from Canada and I found myself being bullied. I had a Canadian accent and wore long dresses as was usual in Canada at the time. I looked a little different and certainly sounded different. The bullies excluded me from playing with the other children at playtime. Rather than telling anyone I decided to talk to the ringleader. I thought in my naivety that if we could just talk the bullying would stop. I remember approaching her as she came out of the dinner dining hall one day and asking her if we could sort it out. She laughed.

DE: Do you consider that either by chance or design you grew this practice into something more useful or stronger?

KI: I guess you could say that a yearning to build bridges is what first drew me to sociology, politics, issues of social justice and then to social work. So it was more like following a yearning than by design.

DE: At any point, did you consciously go into some sort of training, even if you trained yourself all by yourself?

KI: No, but the impulse didn't go away. Having said that my enthusiasm for sociology and politics and also development studies was spurred by my passion for uniting people. And then I went on to train as a social worker and therapist. So there was not a conscious training to build bridges but nevertheless it's a common thread that runs through all I have trained myself in.

DE: Okay I will add some other possible questions here: 'Did you find yourself by trial and error becoming more skillful as you grew older? If so, do you remember a specific trial and error that led to you becoming good at bridge-building?'

KI: Well, actually when I think about it, I did go into training and yes, I have got more skillful. Funny, I had never thought about it as training ...

DE: That's why I picked the phrase 'trial and error'.

KI: ... Now that I think about it, it's taken me a long time to develop the kind of skills I've wanted ... and I am still in training. My work as a family therapist and counsellor has been all about learning to bridge build. That is where it has been simplest because this is what people are asking me for, although I would not say it has been easy. In my personal life I am extremely proud of the bridges I have built and what it has taken to build them.

Another option for a question in this section would be 'how did this become more familiar or commonplace in your life?' I (KI) could easily have missed that I have been in training and I think others being asked this question may not relate to the 'training' metaphor.

DE: Okay ... If so, how long was it before bridge-building became commonplace for you?

KI: I would say only relatively recently in a way that has really worked.

DE: Let's go back one step. Was there an incident whereby someone drew your attention to this strength of bridge-building or did this remain pretty much private?

KI: You know, I don't think strengths ever remain private as they are striking. Someone always draws attention to them although the attention may be negative.

DE: Yes, sooner or later someone will draw your attention to it. You find something useful so you do it, and then you become adept at it. A 'strength' is not usually something new that you have but something people inform you that you have. So perhaps the next sequence of questions should concern itself with the history of its social acknowledgement.

DE: Do you consider that, either by chance or design, you grew this practice into something stronger or more useful? Was there an incident in which someone drew your attention to this skill?

KI: I can't think of one ... I think it remained hidden for a long time. That may be because of my disappointing early experiences with this 'talent'.

DE: How long do you think bridge-building remained hidden before you came to know it as a talent?

KI: I think it is something I named retrospectively because I saw that that was what I was doing. I remember when I first started my social work training that I moved into this house of 'characters' in York, (United Kingdom), to live. It was in transition to become a Buddhist centre and there were Buddhists and non-Buddhists in the house. Although I wasn't interested in becoming a Buddhist, I was drawn to the people who lived there. I remember the landlord telling me later on that he knew I would make a difference to the house the day he met me. I am not sure what he saw but I think that he picked up on this thing we are calling bridge-building.

DE: Okay, so this landlord recognised what you might now call 'bridge-building' well before you had a name for it ... How long was it until you recognised it as something that could serve you well?

KI: I think this is really fairly recent, although in my work with people I've been aware of it as a strength for a long time. I guess building this strength is a little hazardous given that bridges only need to be built because of conflict and distress. It usually involves sticking my neck out. Before a bridge can be built you have to see that a bridge is needed. I have often drawn attention to difficulties in the connections between people or within families or organisations. This has been far from easy at times.

KI: You know I am beginning to think that as good as it is to have something specific like 'bridge-building', it also helps to be able to refer to the strength in a more general way as

well. It's more like wanting to unite people, bringing people together. It's more like that original expression of it ... recognising 'the links between all things'.

DE: Okay. We need to check then at each stage along the way ...

Do you think that now that we are talking, is it worth re-considering bridge-building as the name for your talent? Should we think about something larger and more inclusive?

KI: I think it's fine to continue with 'bridge-building' but with an understanding that it is an expression of something larger

LEGACY OF THE NARRATIVISED STRENGTH

Legacy questions go back a long way in narrative therapy practice (White & Epston, 1992) Such enquiries are a kind of genealogy of the 'strength' in seeking its sources or inspirations by referencing parents, grandparents, family and cultural traditions, etc. The following is a classic query of Michael White's which seeks to locate those who either 'could have predicted the strength', or 'would not be surprised at all by the strength', and usually this search turns up some likely sources.

DE: Of all the people who have known you over the course of your life, who could have not have been surprised that you would develop bridge-building into a 'strength'?

KI: My parents and also my Uncle Oliver.

DE: What did they know about you that would have allowed them to predict 'bridge-building' would become a strength of yours as time went by?

KI: This might sound a bit vague, but my mother and my father cultivated my love of philosophical ideas, fairy stories, literature and poetry, and I think maybe that is where I sense this feeling of unity or bridge-building comes from.

DE: Did your parents and your uncle foster the beginnings, the roots of your talent for bridge-building or 'linking between all things'? Did you, when you think about it now, fall in to any of their possible footsteps?

KI: I am sure it came from my grandfather, or so my mother always says although she doesn't call it bridge-building. She tends to call it 'drive, ideas, energy'. I love ideas that build bridges and I find myself driven to act on them.

DE: And how do you now understand how bridge-building was passed down to you from your grandfather through your mother?

KI: I think it was passed down in the form of a kind of vague spiritual belief.

DE: Was that spiritual belief connected with any institutional form of religious belief?

KI: I think it has taken on the clothes of religious belief but isn't religious for me. My grandfather was a Residential Canon in the Church of England at Carlisle Cathedral. He died eight years before I was born. As a Residential Canon he had to be there a few months a year but for the rest of the year he ran parishes in the Lake District and elsewhere. He was certainly ahead of his time. Nowadays I expect he would be seen as a community developer and social worker. He opened a youth centre at St John's in the Vale in the Lake District and people came from all over. My mother says that he was 'famous' within the church because of his innovations and flair. So I think his legacy is a combination of spiritual belief and commitment to social service.

Then there was my 'Uncle' Oliver who was one of my grandfather's closet friends. I met him in my early teens and we corresponded for some years until he died when I was in my early twenties. He had been the Bishop of the Sudan. When we first met I felt that he saw something in me and felt greatly respected by him. He himself was a builder of bridges amongst the people and communities of the Sudan to whom he devoted his life.

DE: If your 'uncle', or your grandfather was able to listen in on this conversation, what do you think they would say about how you have embraced this way of prioritising 'building bridges' of connectedness?

KI: I am sure they would both be very proud of me and I expect that they would think that I was following in their footsteps although in a very different way. I realise now that my 'bridge-building' has quite a history and I hadn't realised that until now!

FUTURE OF THE TALENT ('STRENGTH')

This section forecasts the 'future of the talent'. Within it, the person concerned is invited to predict where this strength might be applied in various domains of their (work) life and relationships. This line of enquiry

may assist interviewees to consider how their various strengths might be expressed in their fields of practice.

DE: Has knowing about this talent in this way led you to think differently about yourself as a person or social practitioner?

K: Yes, definitely. Thinking of myself as a bridge builder has given a frame for what I am doing. With each person that I meet in my work I try to find ways to express this. I guess bridge-building is what distinguishes for me what my family therapy is about. In my work with young people who have been referred for individual work, we almost always end up bringing parents into our work and often friends and other family members. My intention is to build bridges between young people and their communities. Just as importantly, I am building bridges between people's past identities and who they would prefer to know themselves to be. Working narratively has given me the permission to extend my work in this direction. It has also changed the way in which I teach. Taking time to build relationships with my students within classes is now my first and foremost concern. I used to doubt whether this was really using teaching time 'properly' and now I see it as the cornerstone of effective teaching for me given my 'connectedness/bridge-building strength'.

HOW STRENGTHS GO FROM BEING PRIVATE TO PUBLIC

When 'connectedness' was defined as 'strength' for me (KI) for the first time through answering the questions in the StrengthsFinder, I began to have a language to describe myself that I had not had previously. More particularly, this process resurrected the concept of 'bridge-building' and this has now become an emblem for my life. Taking part in crafting the narrative of strengths interview with David sited this strength within my life and within my genealogy. In narrative terms this could be called a 'thickening' of a life story. 'Bridge-building' now exists for me no longer as a one-dimensional and isolated characteristic, but as a passion that has been passed down to me. When I think of 'bridge-building' now, I don't see myself; instead, I see a line stretching back which, while passing through me is not mine. There is a bridge between me and those who have come before me. It is my legacy and I take pride in that. My cultural supervisor, Russell Smith, once said to me that it is important to acknowledge those who walk with us. We do not and need not walk alone (personal communication 5th March 2012).

Once David and I had undertaken this first crafting of the interview, I gave some thought to how it might need to be adapted from my insider's perspective for use with others. The most important thing that came to mind was the way in which 'bridge-building' had previously come to be seen as a weakness rather than as a strength because of my lack of experience and skill in applying it.

In an email to David (personal communication, 10th October 2009), I suggested that we build a question about this into the interview to see if others also found that what StrengthsFinder had identified as strengths had been misclassified as weaknesses through the particular circumstances of their lives. In recognition of our finding that for some the 'strength' may not have been storied as a strength but rather a weakness, we decided to make some changes to the questions in order to invite a more tentative relationship to the strength as strength. We also made changes to the wording of the interview inquiries based on my experience of each question. The adapted interview is at the end of this article.

PART TWO: PUTTING THE NARRATIVE OF STRENGTHS INTERVIEWS INTO PRACTICE

What follows is an illustration of the outcomes of using the narrative of strengths interviews within the research project, and some thoughts about how narrative of strengths interviews could be used in future.

We had hoped that in these interviews students might discover a rich legacy for the presence of their 'strengths' and might also reveal what had impeded, compromised or aided the development of these up until now. These 'stories of strengths' were also intended to feature the perceived impact of wider influences such as poverty, gender, and culture.

The students' experience of the interviews seemed to mirror my (KI) own, inasmuch as they discovered historical and genealogical contexts for their strengths that had not previously been apparent to them. In identifying strengths within the context of their life histories, it seems that these strengths became more identifiable and hence easier for those interviewed to utilise. What follows are two extracts from one student's interview (Lelei) about her strength of 'harmony'. The first extract is about the story of Lelei's relationship with her grandmother with whom she links the history of this strength.

I was blown away by the interview as 'harmony' opened up a door for me which led me to my grandmother who had died 12 or 13 years ago. So beautiful! I felt she was close to me right then and there. I would be reminded of her every so often at home because she had given me this special pot. In the interview we talked about the ancestral mat she gave me before she died. Now every time I or my children see that mat I always think of her. Every day now when I open my drawer of my dresser I see it sitting there and it reminds me of her. And now when I go in to my kitchen and see her pot, I go: 'That's Nana's pot!' And my kids are aware of that too. The interview brought her back to me and is keeping her alive. In that interview I became aware of how proud my grandmother was of me. I have been a much happier person in the last couple of months as a result. Now I know that I am better than I thought I was. (Lelei)

The second extract is taken from Lelei's final interview. It provides an example of how, since the narrative of strengths interview, Lelei was able to bring the strength of 'harmony' to bear in her life in her relationship with her nephew. She instigated a particular action that she informed us would not have taken prior to the interview:

Since doing the StrengthsFinder, my 'harmony' strength led me to be concerned about my nephew who lives next door to me. I used my strength of 'harmony' to help him to find harmony within himself and within the family. He tried to commit suicide because he was suffering from depression and no-one knew. He hadn't got out of bed for three days and I went to see him with his mother. I asked if I could help and he said 'no' and pulled the blankets up. I wrote his mother a note and passed it to her then and there. I said 'you need to talk with him and see what's wrong with him and you need to say sorry to him if you have done anything. You need to make peace'. In Samoan families, parents have authority over the children and I think this is what was causing the problems. And then his mother, my cousin, started to apologise to him and to tell him that he is important in our family and that he is loved. That was my strength of harmony. The next day he got up and started eating. He is much happier. Much happier.

A FUTURE FOR NARRATIVE OF STRENGTHS INTERVIEWS?

My own experience, and that of four of the five students interviewed, was that the narrative of strengths interviews embedded what had been previously one-dimensional strengths inside our life histories. This siting

of these strengths within our lives linked these strengths with the lives of others.

My (KI) hope at the start of the project was that either separately or alongside the StrengthsFinder, narratives of strength interviews could be used to help social practitioners see more clearly what it is they bring to their practice that is uniquely rewarding to them, and to do so in a way that brings new life and meaning to these strengths. This hope has been realised. The interviews led the students to insights in relation to their professional and personal lives that in turn led to changes in their career directions and increased confidence in pursuing the paths they chose. Two reported that the interviews confirmed their career directions, and two others reported that the interviews had expanded their vision of their professional futures. One of these students, Gloria, talks about how she might apply her 'restorative' strength to community development, and another student, Mere, informed us about how her strength of 'includer' had been applied during her placement in a social work agency and led her for the first time to consider social work management.

It may also be that narratives of strengths interviews could be used within social work and counselling agencies to better contextualise strengths-based work within people's life histories, and in so doing to open up richer opportunities in work with clients. As an external supervisor for support workers within a peer-based mental health agency, I (KI) have developed an appreciation for the value of strengths-based work but have also found my supervisees end up in cul-de-sacs within their practice when they reach the end of their repertoire of strengths-based inquiry. The conversational territory of strengths can be very rich, and the opportunities to begin conversations about stories of strengths with clients are evident. Practitioners may have gleaned lists of strengths backed up by multiple examples, yet no matter how colourful these examples may be, strengths based practice does not invite practitioners to harvest the stories that sit within the strengths that they find.

PART THREE: BEGINNING TO BUILD BRIDGES BETWEEN NARRATIVE AND STRENGTHS-BASED PERSPECTIVES

Having explored the potential of the narratives of strengths interviews, we turned our thoughts to possible bridge-building between the two approaches. Strength based practitioners appreciate the importance of story (Saleebey, 1990; Anderson, Cowger & Snively, 2009),

while narrative practitioners practice within the paradigm of *life as story*. There are other connections. Blundo (2009), a strength-based practitioner, advocates for a practice known as 'de-centring' which was borrowed by narrative practitioners from Derrida (1993). Blundo (2009, p. 40), also talks about how 'exceptions' from solution focused brief therapy, and 'unique outcomes' from narrative practice can be incorporated into strengths-based work.

But perhaps the most significant way to build a bridge between the approaches may be to look at their relationship to working with the past. It may be that strength-based practitioners have been understandably nervous of exploring the historical territory that strengths have come from because, within psychotherapy and mental health services, the examination of the past has predominantly been problem-focused and it is exactly this that strengths-based approaches have departed from. As Saleeby, the best known proponent of the strength based approach within the social work domain describes, 'It is far more important to set one's gaze towards a better future, to traffic in possibility, than it is to obsess about the disappointments and injuries or a dank, dark past' (Saleeby as cited in Dybicz, 2011, p. 248).

Dybicz (2011, p. 248), brings a version of Aristotle's idea of mimesis to support the strengths-based emphasis on the present and the future. The concept of mimesis suggests that causality in human action arises from people creating two images of themselves: who they currently know themselves to be based upon the past, and who they envision themselves to be in the future. This image of the future motivates people in the present. Dybicz argues that it is this version of causality to which strengths-based practitioners subscribe and that this justifies their disinterest in the past. The past is the territory of stories that have been told again and again. Stories of identity obtain their strength from the past. These stories do not stay in the past, however, they also trespass into the present and the future. So, is it possible for strength-based practitioners to journey to the past but to engage with stories of the past in a different way than is typical of modernist practitioners?

Narrative practitioners have had no hesitation in visiting the past, but they do so with very different intentions from problem-solving practitioners, or practitioners who search for the cause of psychological problems in a pathological past. Narrative practitioners visit the past to hunt for the seeds of new stories and to grow the beginnings of counterstories found in the present

(Hilde Lindeman Nelson, 2001). In this light, a strength can be seen as a possible starting-point for excavation of a story, and this story of strength could be seen as a counterstory or at the very least as the beginnings of one. Returning to Frank (2010, p. 2), in such a process, *strengths as story* become 'animated'.

Rapp and Goscha (2006), known for their groundbreaking advocacy of the strengths-based approach within mental health, come close to engineering a bridge between the approaches when they suggest questions intended to bring forth stories in strengths assessments:

Are there any stories that have been around for years that you strongly connect with?

Do you know any stories that your parents may have told you?

(Rapp & Goshcha, 2006, p. 261)

These questions are like stepping stones towards the narrative of strengths interviews. Our hope is that this paper, with its emphasis on the storying of strengths and the re-visiting of the past to do so, forges further connections between strengths-based and narrative practitioners.

CONCLUSION

Strengths-based paradigms have made an immeasurable contribution to the worlds of social work and counselling, as have narrative therapy ideas and practices. We hope that an engagement of strengths-based practice with narrative interviewing could offer interesting pathways for practice. The narrative therapy interview format which we have provided in this paper was designed for use alongside StrengthsFinder with students, but other 'formats' for interviewing to bring narrative inquiry into strengths-based work within social work and counselling agencies could easily be devised. And if the age of story has indeed arrived for psychology and psychotherapy (McAdams, 2008, p. 248), then maybe it is also due in social work? If so, strengths-based social work practitioners may well wish to explore ways of re-inventing self through story. In this brief review, we have only begun to explore the 'storying' of strengths. However, we hope we have proceeded some way to allow for further discussion on bridging two worlds of practice.

The interview questions

Establishing the importance of the strength to the person and negotiating an experience-near name

- Did anything in the StrengthsFinder® descriptions resonate strongly with what you would tell a trusted friend about yourself or a trusted friend would tell someone else about you?
- Did you already have a way of thinking about yourself that sounded a lot like the StrengthsFinder® description?
- If so, how did you think about it? What name did you call it? Would you prefer that we stick with your name rather than the StrengthsFinder® name? Or would you like to make up a new name altogether?
- How drawn are you to pursuing 'bridge-building' in a conversation with me? Would this be in line with your interests?
- **History of the narrativised strength**
- When you look back over your life, when would you guess you first became aware you could bridge build? About how old were you then? What grade/form were you in school? Or has this 'strength' been present for as long as you can remember?
- If this strength has been around for a long time, did it ever have other name/names?
- Could you tell me a story about (name of the strength) that stands out in your early memories as significant?
- Can you think of any stories that have ever been told by your family or people close to you about you and this strength?
- Do you consider that either by chance or design, you 'grew' this practice of (name of the strength) into something either useful to you or stronger, or has it remained more as a potential that you are aware of much like a seed or seedling of 'strength'?
- At any point, did you consciously go into some sort of training of this 'strength' even if you trained yourself without telling anyone else about it?
- Did you have to climb over any hurdles? Did anything or anyone stand in your way for a while?
- Did you, by trial or error, find yourself becoming more skillful at (name of the strength) as you grew older, or has it remained under wraps?
- If so, how long was it before bridge-building became characteristic of you and the way you live your life?
- Was there an incident whereby someone or other drew your attention to your (name of the strength)? Or did it remain pretty much private to you?
- How long did (name of the strength) remain latent before you recognised it as something that seemed there to stay?
- Did you at any point realise that you had been exercising the skills of (name of the strength) to the point where you had built up knowledge of bridge-building?
- Now that we are talking, is it worth reconsidering (name of the strength) as your talent? Should we think about something larger that (name of the strength) is a part of? Or would you prefer to scale down (name of the strength) to something more particular or specific?
- Are you looking forward to your future with the knowledge of this talent in your hands? If so, what do you now think you might be able to look forward to that you mightn't have been able to look forward to before?
- **Legacy of the narrativised strength**
- Of all the people who have known you over the course of your life, who would not have been surprised at all that you would develop (name of the strength) into a 'strength'?
- What did s/he know about you that would have allowed her/him to predict (name of the strength) would become a strength of yours as time went by?
- Did she/he foster any of the roots of your talent for (name of strength)? Or did you, when you think about it now, follow in any of her/his or her/his forebearers' footsteps?
- How do you understand how (name of strength) was passed down to you from 'x' (maternal grandfather) through 'y' (mother)?
- Do you now wonder if 'x' or 'y' had to keep her talent to herself/himself as there was no place for it to show up in her/his lifetime?
- How significant is it to you to know that you are carrying this talent forward in your life time and perhaps will pass it on to someone in the next generation?
- What do you think those who bequeathed this legacy to you would think about the fact that you have picked up this legacy and are carrying it on?

- **Future of the talent**
- How much difference do you think it will make to your future knowing that you have this talent and can put it to some use?
- From this conversation, can you now see any ways you might put this talent to work in your studies, your placements, or your future work?
- Have you had any thoughts about this talent of yours that were completely new to you? That may have even bowled you over?
- Has knowing about this talent in this way led you to think differently about yourself as a person? In your family/workplace, etc.?
- By living according to this talent of yours, do you wonder if anyone else might come to think differently?

NOTES

1. This article is one of the fruits of the 'The Narratives of Strengths' research project at Unitec, Auckland, New Zealand which took place from 2009-2010. The project itself had two parts. The first part was an exploration of how attention to students' strengths rather than deficits as defined by the Clifton StrengthsFinder® could help guide them to a more detailed understanding of what they uniquely had to offer their respective professions: community development, counselling, social work or nursing. The second part of the project was concerned with finding a way to bring forth the territory from which strengths have originated, and the histories of how they were inspired, and fostered.
2. A semi-structured interview process informed by narrative therapy inquiry.
3. The Clifton StrengthsFinder® is an established and standardised online tool for identifying and expanding individuals' strengths that has been used within business, educational and community organisations (Rath, 2007). StrengthsFinder helps participants identify their top five talents (as themes) and learn how to use them to their best advantage by refining them into strengths through the application of skill and knowledge (Clifton, Anderson & Schreiner 2002). 278,256 possible unique combinations of Signature Themes, and 33.39 million different permutations with unique order can exist (Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005). These signature themes are complemented by 'personalised strengths insights' that describe in detail how each theme is likely to express itself for individuals

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