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Using a Strengths Perspective for Social Work Practice with Abused Women

Susan E. Roche, PhD, MSSW

ABSTRACT. Recently, a strengths perspective for social work has gained burgeoning interest as an empowering guide for working with clients. While others have led the way in conceptualizing the strengths perspective for social work practice, there is a need to consider its application to different groups. This article describes the significance of using a strengths perspective for social work with women who have been abused by their male partners and how social workers might apply this perspective to multiple levels of intervention with the women. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]*

Recently, a strengths perspective for social work has gained burgeoning interest as an empowering guide for working with clients (Cowger, 1994; Saleebey, 1992; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989). This perspective comprises a view of people as capable, motivated, resilient and respectable (Cowger, 1994) and “assumes that clients have a number of competencies and resources that may be used to improve their situation” (Saleebey, 1992, p. 15). Although it does not ignore the problems or pain people experience, the strengths perspective guides social workers to identify, build on and mobilize clients’ personal and environmental resources.

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The strengths perspective is especially relevant for oppressed and marginalized client groups because it counteracts their devaluation and makes their standpoint central to the social work process. By placing clients in the role of authoritative partner, the strengths perspective leads social workers away from negative stereotyping and toward eliciting and heeding clients' own explanations of their realities and aspirations. Legitimizing clients' personal and collective resiliency, wisdom and contributions convey profound respect for their human dignity and self-determination in keeping with the historic promise of social work ethics.

While others have led the way in conceptualizing the strengths perspective for social work practice, there is a need to consider its application to different groups. To date, most reports apply to social work with clients diagnosed with persistent mental illness and/or substance abuse (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt, 1989; Kisthardt & Rapp, 1992; Rapp, Siegal, Fisher & Wagner, 1992). The utility of applying the strengths perspective with other groups is less certain. This paper focuses on its application to one such group: women who are abused by their male partners. The complexities of the issues faced by these women would seem to represent a formidable challenge to the strengths perspective. Thus, if a strengths perspective can be applied to social work practice with abused women, its generalizability will be enhanced.

In the remainder of this article, the significance of using a strengths perspective for social work with abused women will be examined. In addition, examples of how social workers can apply the strengths perspective to multiple levels of intervention with abused women will be described.

ABUSED WOMEN AS A SOCIALLY AT-RISK GROUP

The right to life and the security of person are considered two of the most basic entitlements of humanity (United Nations, 1948), yet for many abused women remaining alive and secure requires constant effort. The most acute effort is that which women must expend to deal with the abuse itself. Research and specialized practice have revealed that women who are abused by their male partners are at increasing risk the longer the abuse continues, whether they remain with or separate from them. In fact, many men escalate their violence toward a female partner after she has left and many women are killed by their

male abusers after leaving them (Langan & Innes, 1986; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988).

Dealing with the abuse is further complicated by the identity of the abuser as an intimate who has access to one's person, social network and property. Such access adds to the danger through its ever-present threat. Under this intimidating condition, abused women expend exhaustive effort remaining vigilant for signs that harassment or assault are imminent.

After women separate from their abusive partners, it often takes continuous effort to obtain enough material and social support to remain safe and meet other basic needs. In the process, professionals can come to occupy influential positions as potential providers (or withholders) of needed resources. Women who seek formal support are often the most at-risk, given that abused women's efforts to secure assistance increase as their abusers' behavior becomes more dangerous (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). Despite social workers' potential to be of assistance, however, abused women are often disillusioned by the failure of social workers to respond directly to the violence and/or its consequences and for their attempting to change, reframe or distort women's narratives of their situations (Eisikovits & Buchbinder, in press).

Even when abused women do receive assistance from professionals, their safety remains compromised by the sheer reality that there is no absolute protection from those who are determined to cause them harm. This is one of the reasons that some abused women take matters into their own hands and defend themselves by killing their abusers (Browne, 1988; Browne & Williams, 1989). At the very least, the professional alliances, social entitlements and other resources which social workers may provide can act as buffers without which abused women and their dependents would be even more vulnerable. By applying a strengths perspective social workers provide women with a view of their own courage, wisdom and resilience and right to community-wide and professional accountability for their safety and autonomy.

APPLYING A STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE WITH ABUSED WOMEN

Applying a strengths perspective to social work with abused women serves to guide the focus, methods and ultimately, the impact of the work. This can be understood by considering the implications it holds for how social workers engage abused women and for the level

of change at which social work interventions are aimed, as the following case example reveals.

Case Example. Donna is a 19 year old pregnant Native American woman and mother of a two year old daughter who moved to a state in the Northeast in order to escape an abusive former boyfriend named Keith. Three months after she moved, Keith also moved to the same state in order to reconcile with her. By the time he had arrived, her meager savings had run out and she was unsure how she would pay for all of her next month's expenses. She had become despondent about her financial crisis as well as the loneliness of starting her life over in a new community. Although she did not want to reunite with Keith, she perceived herself as having no other options, and agreed to allow him to move in with her and the baby on a trial basis.

The trial did not last long; in a fit of rage a week after he moved in, Keith severely beat Donna on her face and kicked her multiple times in the stomach. Neighbors who had heard the attack called the police, who in turn, arrested Keith. The next day at a corner store, Donna saw a female social worker whom she had met at the health center where she went for pre-natal care when she first moved to town. Although she attempted to avoid the social worker, ashamed by the bruises on her face, the social worker asked her if she would like to sit down somewhere and talk. Donna agreed, and they walked over to the social worker's office together.

The social worker asked Donna how she and her daughter were getting along in making a new home for themselves. Donna explained that her daughter really enjoyed visiting their next-door neighbor and that her occasional visits with the neighbor gave Donna more freedom to explore the community than she had had when they had first arrived. The social worker asked if her daughter was at the neighbor's apartment right now, and Donna confirmed this.

Having reassured herself of the child's safety, the social worker gently commented to Donna that the bruises on her face looked painful. Donna began to cry and the social worker remained quietly attentive, allowing Donna the uninterrupted time she needed to cry. In response to this unobtrusive human contact, Donna, gradually told the social worker what had happened and how stupid she thought she was for having fallen for Keith's promises again. She expressed the anger and shame she felt toward herself for having endangered both her child and herself and the fear she felt about Keith's imminent release

from jail. The social worker listened carefully to her descriptions and asked questions that conveyed to Donna that she did not think her stupid or to blame for Keith's behavior.

Donna became even more open and self-reflective as the social worker demonstrated that she believed what Donna described and that she was genuinely interested in hearing what she had to say and uncritically concerned about her well-being. Together, they planned for Donna's and her child's immediate safety and agreed to meet again in the morning to consider her desires and options beyond the women's crisis services she would use that night. They agreed they would explore Donna's financial, legal, health care, and social options, as well as her safety. Donna was visibly relieved that the social worker would meet her again the next day and that she had not tried to push her to do anything that she did not feel able to do. Upon leaving, she shyly expressed gratitude that the social worker had asked her about her bruises and had recognized the seriousness of her situation without being "too pushy."

Engaging Abused Women. As the case example demonstrates, strengths-based engagement involves establishing a working partnership in which social workers and abused women mutually identify, assess and build on the values, hopes, competencies and relationships which have enabled the women to cope, resist and survive (Kelly, 1988). For women who are, or have been, frequently and severely abused by an intimate, engaging in this partnership is not spontaneous. Choosing to rely on a social worker can be like blindly choosing between stepping out on a weak bough or taking hold of a life line. Therefore, it is most likely that they will disclose their abuse, its consequences and their hopes only to those whom they can trust to believe in them and to do them no further harm, physically or psychically. To earn this trust, it is simply not enough to mean well; social workers must demonstrate their reliability. This is the key to the engagement process.

Demonstrating reliability requires understanding that any woman can be abused, not only those who fit a particular personality type or social class, and that women who are being abused may be anywhere on the experiential continuum of defining the abuse as such. This recognition is expressed through gently and openly asking women about their safety and well-being in language that does "not presume shared definitions" (Kelly, 1988, p. 140). At least initially, this lan-

guage must be free from the use of terms like "abuse," "battering" and "victim," because these may not be labels that women apply to their own experience (Kelly, 1988). When women indicate that their partners are controlling, coercive and/or assaultive, social workers should ask about their everyday experiences. Applying an ethnographic approach to facilitating the ensuing discussion enables social workers to explore the nuances and unfamiliar terms which the women use. Learning the women's language is a way of honoring their experience and what it means to them. In responding to the young woman in the case example, the strengths-based social worker offered her this type of congruence. The focus was on the social worker's developing understanding of Donna's needs, meaning and abilities, not the fact that she had allowed Keith to move back in with her.

"Suspending disbelief" (Saleebey, 1992) is another element of demonstrating reliability. Doing so entails accepting women's narratives even though they may change over time as the women reassess and redefine the meaning of various events and options. Such acceptance involves conveying to women that their ebbs and flows of understanding and certainty characterize a universal process of personal transformation; they are not representative of their incapacity or their lack of credibility. As Kelly (1988) writes, "the process of redefinition involves women focusing on their own feelings rather than on stereotypes, limited definitions, or the perceptions of others" (p. 156). Through listening attentively and non-judgmentally to Donna, the social worker contributed to her ability to focus in this manner and to allow herself the time that this legitimately takes, including the week that Keith lived with her again.

Donna had serious self-doubts as a consequence of her relationship with Keith. Despite the fact that she had actually moved from another state to get away from him, he followed her, and at his insistence, she had reconciled with him more than once. He constantly monitored her whereabouts. He interrogated her about where she had been and with whom. Even when she just went to the corner store and came right back, he would demand to know why it had taken her so long to return. The threat of his violence was hanging over her whether he actually hit her or not. By the time he was arrested for severely assaulting her, she viewed herself as a failure for not being able to end the relationship. She interpreted her agreements to reconcile with him as indicative of her inability to manage the loneliness of her situation. Her strengths-

oriented social worker suspended disbelief in her desire to be free from abuse and helped her to expel her self-doubt by taking her desire for a better life seriously and continuously, demonstrating this with words and actions.

Given the traumatic associations that abused women have had with coercive power and its dynamics in the family and other institutions, strengths-oriented social workers must also apply an acute consciousness regarding their own uses of power in demonstrating their reliability. Both by what they say and how they say it, social workers must show their faith in abused women's ability to determine for themselves what is dangerous and what is desirable, while keeping pace with their timing in exercising their options. This does not prevent social workers from conveying their concerns for women's safety, nor does it relegate them to a passive, token role in their work with abused women; it entails acting in concert with them.

To illustrate, in applying this consciousness to Donna, an older, white male strengths-based social worker would have scrutinized the gender, age, ethnic and professional authority differences between them. He would have worked at minimizing the controlling effects these had on Donna. To do this, he might have considered with her the more subtle means of intimidation which her partner had used and monitored his own use of such mannerisms. He would have demonstrated his reliability in the way that he listened and responded to her as a respectfully whose words and actions are safe and unencumbering.

Using Multi-Level Strengths-Based Interventions. Social work practice guided by a strengths perspective leads to a variety of multi-level interventions which assist abused women to "(re)discover their own abilities, choices and opportunities" (Goldstein, 1992, p. 35), obtain needed resources from their families and communities and gain control over their own lives as full participants in their families and communities. In the process of working toward these goals and monitoring the safety of women, personal, collective and environmental strengths are identified and enhanced. Obstacles are removed or circumvented.

At the individual practice level, women's own assessments provide social workers with intimate understanding of the meaning that they make of their situations, the imminence of their risk, the quality of their various relationships and the possibilities for increasing their safety and autonomy. Listening carefully to their assessments also

reveals how "elements of the environment eventually pervade individual identity and energy and how the individual has managed to survive, perhaps thrive in, an oppressive, even catastrophic environment" (Saleebey, 1992, p. 7). In listening to Donna's assessments of her situation, the social worker heard and reflected her will to live, her survival, her dedication to giving her daughter and unborn child a better life, and identified new members of her social network. In this way, she conveyed Donna's personal courage, resilience, caring and social support.

Strengths-based intervention with abused women occurs through dialogue and through co-facilitation. Dialogue between abused women and social workers is personal and political. Both dimensions are important to the social work process because of the personal intimacy of the abuse of individual women and the centrality of coercive and unequal gender power to its interpersonal and sociocultural pattern and context (Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Wood & Middleman, 1992).

Personal dialogue encourages a woman "to share aspects of her daily life as she experiences it . . . how these activities came into being" (Rose, 1994) and how they affect her. The social worker in the case example reflected and responded as precisely as possible to Donna's descriptions, foregoing temptations to reinterpret her reality into something "more believable" or her language into something more professional. In itself, this open attentiveness was interventive in that it provided her affective and cognitive support. Such support counters the emotional maltreatment which disinforms abused women of their value and blames them for the abuse (Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Pence, 1988). For Donna, it brought relief, gratitude and hope.

Political dialogue explores the social, economic and institutional contradictions in the women's situations. It assists them to jointly consider the possibilities the contradictions embody for taking action and transforming oppressive realities into something more liberating (Freire, 1978). For example, Donna's depleted savings, pregnancy and lack of local employment experience had implications for her freedom to separate and live independently from her abusive partner. A political dialogue would assist her in establishing a safety plan for herself which takes such contradictions into account. As the social worker implied, for Donna, a strengths-based safety plan would include social, economic and institutional (e.g., education, social services and

employment) options, as well as her individual abilities and potential. For them to forge an adequate safety plan will require creative thinking in this time of widespread and deep federal cuts to social welfare programs. Nevertheless, Donna and her children cannot be safe without the requisite resources.

Co-facilitation between abused women and strengths-oriented social workers is the process by which they act in accordance with their assessment of the contradictions and possibilities to fulfill the women's goals. In co-facilitating, their combined strengths are applied to create, utilize or enhance informal and formal environmental resources and reduce informal and formal obstacles. The informal domain includes a woman's culture, relatives, friends, neighbors and casual acquaintances. The formal domain includes laws, institutions and professionals (e.g., domestic violence, divorce and child abuse statutes; shelters, hospitals, civil and criminal courts, and mental health centers; advocates, emergency room personnel, psychiatrists, judges and social workers).

Applying a strengths perspective to abused women's environments provides a view of potentially resource-rich communities rather than automatically resource-scarce communities (Sullivan, 1992). Social workers and abused women actively co-foster interprofessional, para-professional, friendship and kinship activism and alliances. These alliances act to improve the interpretation, enactment or actual content of private or public sector customs and procedures to protect and promote women's safety. For example, Donna and the social worker in the case example might co-lead a house meeting of her neighbors and develop a safety plan which would involve all of them in a variety of ways. She and the social worker might facilitate a cooperative arrangement among neighborhood women in which they collectively shop for groceries, go to the laundromat and do errands. This arrangement would serve to prevent her from being isolated and vulnerable to the acute loneliness of having separated from Keith and to his harassment.

Abused women have cultural as well as locational communities which can sustain them and shape the interventions which they co-facilitate with their social workers. As Compton and Galaway (1989) point out "failure to identify strengths is likely to occur with minority groups by a worker unfamiliar with the culture who may fail to recognize the cultural supports and traditions available to the client" (p. 180). However, strengths-oriented social workers whose racial,

ethnic, religious or other social identities are different from those of abused women will turn to the women as their bi-cultural teachers. For example, Donna's social worker will request her guidance in learning about her culture and will explore with her how traditional values, patterns of helping and other customs might be directed toward increasing her safety.

Strengths-oriented social workers and abused women might also co-facilitate a culture-specific safety planning discussion with members of their cultural communities. For example, the participants in a workshop on developing community interventions for violence against women in refugee communities were asked to identify values, norms and customs of their cultures which might be used to confront and stop woman abuse in their community. During the ensuing discussion, Afghan participants analyzed why they did not remember wife abuse as such a large problem in their country-of-origin. Suddenly they began to share stories of the controls which extended families who customarily lived under one roof had applied to prevent husbands from striking their wives. Planning then took place regarding how to institute the same process in a form which was adapted to the nuclear family households of their host country.

Similarly, Donna and her social worker might explore values and norms of her tribe that might be used to increase her safety and that of her children. They also might consider how tribal values inform the practices of various Native American anti-violence organizations, such as the White Buffalo Calf Woman shelter in South Dakota, the Circle of Life Group in Minnesota and group work with Native men who batter women (e.g., Minnesota Program Development, 1995).

Regarding the formal resource network in women's communities, social workers and abused women can co-facilitate intra-organizational and inter-organizational processes to improve institutional level responses to woman abuse. At the intra-organizational level, they might: train personnel about the substance, significance and application of using a strengths perspective; create opportunities for abused and formerly abused women to develop their own services congruent with their lived realities and to shape agencies' policies and practices; and develop organizational structures and processes which serve as alternatives to social institutions which promote sexism and professionalism over the safety and freedoms of women. In applying a strengths perspective, Donna's social worker might promote such con-

sultation with women who had been abused by male partners while in their late teens. These women might address the specific issues of the case in question as well as more general issues about how the health center staff might contribute to the safety of young women-of-color in the future.

At the inter-organizational level, abused women and strengths-oriented social workers might also facilitate collaboration among organizations which do not specialize in serving abused women and those which do. Their appeal to both might be based on the developing recognition that all organizations serve abused women directly or indirectly (e.g., the women's children or parents) whether or not the abuse is identified. It might also be based on the complementarity of organizations' missions vis-à-vis overlapping client populations and shared commitments to safety and well-being.

Having reinforced common ground, they might bring organizations and funders together. One goal for doing so would be to transform resource-scarce and uncertain, turf-bound and competitive dealings with each other into commitments to more stable, shared funding to broadly support abused women. They might even interest new types of funders by instituting abused women's ideas for how to improve their safety and increase their resources as did CEFEMINA, an organization which serves abused women in Costa Rica. CEFEMINA took seriously poor women's assertion that only a "barrio" of women could make them safer. The members obtained international development funding and built an abused women-designed "neighborhood" for women and their children to reside in (A. Carcedo, personal communication, June 10, 1991).

A meeting between the agency in the case example, the local battered women's shelter and a funder in common, or a new source of funding, might be convened to develop or enhance their collaboration. In such a meeting the participants might consider their complementary roles in the community and their differential understanding, expertise and approaches to working with the same population of women. In the process, they might develop a new initiative for a more coordinated response which would include abused women as key members of the network.

At the societal level of practice, the strengths perspective might lead social workers and abused women to participate as comrades in social action campaigns, such as the international Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender Violence (Roche, Biron & Reilly, 1995). It might

influence social workers to prepare abused women to testify at non-governmental tribunals and legislative hearings on violence against women or on women's need for more economically adequate and just social policies (Center for Women's Global Leadership, 1993, 1995). It might inspire abused women to see themselves as social activists in solidarity with other women and marginalized groups, which in turn might lead them to organize for fundamental sociocultural, institutional and statutory change or to run for public office. As Donna's safety issues become less acute, she might gain a fuller sense of her own agency, value and interconnectedness by walking with her social worker and others in a "take back the night march," or participating in a speak-out for women's economic justice.

CONCLUSION

The strengths perspective is compatible with social work's distinctive commitments as a profession and with abused women's safety needs and strengths as survivors and activists. It is a perspective which assists social workers to heed and respond with acuity to the particularities and complexity of abused women's capacity and struggle. Consequently, it runs much less risk of rashly endangering them than do cultural and professional frameworks which negatively stigmatize them, trivialize or redefine their descriptions and disregard the social and material resources requisite for their safety and autonomy.

The strengths perspective for social work has utility for practice with abused women as long as social workers remain aware of the dangers and contradictions of their situations, as well as their capacity and potential resources. For abused women's perceptions of themselves, the strengths perspective serves to contradict the psychological mistreatment which accompanies the physical harm (Edleson & Tolman, 1992, p. 5). For the social and material dimensions of woman abuse, the strengths perspective orients social workers to uncover untapped environmental resources and to build more fully on underdeveloped ones. In the process, it also leads social workers to create new options with abused women and to rely less on formal resources or on resignation when these do not exist.

Although applying a strengths perspective with abused women can reduce their risks and increase their options, its full expression in the real world of practice faces significant challenges at this time. This perspective allots women's individual narratives, timing and decision-

al authority precedence over categorical diagnoses, preformulated treatment plans and practitioners' preferred methods. Therefore, it may contradict provider and funder-driven agency practices (Rose, 1994; Rosen & Livne, 1992). With the rise of managed care and its attendant medical model as a mode of funding social services, challenges to the strengths perspective are likely to become even more pronounced. However, consideration should be given to how strengths-oriented social workers can respond to the funding pressures on them to redefine abused women's own descriptions according to deficit-oriented reimbursement categories. Indeed, this analysis gives specific attention to ways to strategically resist these and other pressures to mechanistically homogenize abused women as mentally disordered. While it is the case that some women have been so badly tortured that they may experience extreme mental confusion and emotional anguish, applying psychiatric labels to all abused women who seek services can only reify the pattern of blaming women which is so embedded in woman abuse.

As Saleebey (1992) conceptualizes it, the strengths perspective is both "... a counterweight to the prevalent deficit model [and] ... an imperative of the several values that govern our work and the operations of a democratic and pluralistic society ... " (p. 169). In the final analysis, these two functions of the strengths perspective are what make it so highly relevant to social work practice with abused women.

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