

## What happens when coachees explore their strengths?

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### Abstract

Recent research largely focuses on measuring the outcomes of strengths-based coaching but fails to consider coachees' individual experience of the process. This study aims to deepen the understanding of the experience of coachees when they explore their strengths and to examine what insights this provides for the application of strengths-based approaches in coaching. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse data from semi-structured interviews and coaching sessions with six female participants. The findings suggest that strengths-based coaching could be improved by taking account of several key factors that appeared to influence how participants responded to exploring their strengths. These were: the relationship between strengths and key life experiences; the level of comfort when talking about strengths and weaknesses; and the timing and perceived relevance of strengths to the participant's situation. The study concludes that an understanding of the coachee's experience has implications for many aspects of the coaching process including the coaching relationship; structuring coaching interventions; the skills and role of the coach and the issues for which strengths-based coaching may be appropriate.

**Key words:** Strengths, weaknesses, positive psychology; coaching, phenomenology

\* All names used in this article are pseudonyms

### Introduction

Know your strengths, craft your life around them and you will be happier, more productive and reach your goals. This is the message from positive psychology and much of the coaching psychology literature. Studies over the last ten years make the case that working with personal strengths offers the potential for success in personal, educational, organisational and therapeutic contexts (Linley *et al.* 2010abc; Seligman *et al.* 2009; Seligman *et al.* 2005).

Many large organisations understand the importance of this, and have begun to adopt strengths-based practices in recruitment, employee competency and performance management (Cottell, 2010; Stefanyszyn, 2008). Coaches working within the corporate field, such as executive or career coaches, are finding they need to understand strengths-based approaches in order to support their clients. Strengths-based approaches are increasingly being used in coaching and mentoring in such areas as leadership (Rath and Conchie, 2008), self-esteem (Govindji and Linley, 2007), resilience (Hutchinson and Lema, 2009), and also with different groups, particularly women (Centre for Applied Psychology, 2010) and youth (Park, 2009).

Although the interest in, and use of strengths by coaches is growing, the information available is dominated by quantitative, outcome-focused studies from outside the coaching profession. Such research provides data about the impact of strengths-based approaches but gives little sense of the complexities of working with strengths in coaching. Moreover, literature is often written from the practitioner's point of view and there is little indication of what the individual has experienced or what obstacles they had to overcome to successfully apply their strengths to their challenges.

These omissions are important because, despite data supporting the positive impact of building on personal strengths, international surveys suggest that most individuals either do not want to, or are not used to, tackling their challenges in this way, and prefer instead to work on their weaknesses (Buckingham 2007, p. 40). The apparent lack of research to help coaches understand and deal with this disparity, highlights the need to explore what happens in practice when using strengths-based tools and techniques that may not fit with how the majority of coachees prefer to work. I believe that developing a deeper insight into the actual experience of coachees when exploring their strengths may contribute to the coaching profession using strengths-based approaches more effectively.

### **Research aims and objectives**

This study aims to deepen the understanding of the experience of coachees when they explore their strengths and to examine what insights this provides for the application of strengths-based approaches in coaching. I used a phenomenological approach, using interpretive methods to examine how exploring strengths was experienced and given meaning by six female participants undergoing career coaching with me over a three-month period.

The study comprises two broad areas of enquiry into the nature of the participants' experience:

1. ***How participants respond to exploring their strengths through coaching:*** What do they think, feel and notice and does anything change for them? Do any factors help or hinder them when exploring their strengths?
2. ***How participants make meaning when they explore their strengths through coaching:*** How do they make sense of what happens for them? Does exploring their strengths affect how they see themselves or their life-world? Does their meaning-making affect their behaviour or actions?

### **Literature review**

Strengths-related literature appeared to focus on two key areas – defining and then “diagnosing” strengths through the use of psychometric tools (Kaufman, 2006, p. 231) and the impact strengths have on performance. I examine each of these before outlining what the literature revealed about the use of such approaches in coaching.

#### ***Defining and measuring strengths***

On reviewing the literature the first challenge for the coach-researcher quickly became apparent: there is no agreed definition or classification of strengths. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) handbook of character strengths and virtues aimed to establish a universal taxonomy of strengths of character but their work remains one of a number of ways to define and categorise strengths with Linley (2008), Buckingham (2007), Rath (2007) and Clifton (1996) offering alternatives. Currently the words “strengths”, “talents” and “skills” are used interchangeably across the literature.

Buckingham, Clifton and Rath, working with the Gallup organisation, adopt a common definition, defining a strength as the ability to provide “Consistent near perfect performance,” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 76). A strength comprises three elements – talents, skills and knowledge. They believe that you are born with talents, but skills and knowledge can be learnt. Linley's definition builds on this concept of attaining perfect performance but also includes the effect of strengths on the individual's sense of self: He defines a strength as a “Pre-existing capacity for a

particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance,” (Linley, 2008, p. 9).

Despite multiple definitions, some common underlying assumptions emerged which have implications for coaches wishing to adopt strengths-based approaches. These are that working with strengths is about focusing on what is strong and working in people; that strengths are part of human nature; and that strengths can make a positive difference to the person or to those around them (Linley 2008, p.5).

But these common assumptions have not necessarily led to consensus among advocates of strengths-based approaches about how to identify, categorise and measure individual strengths. The debate focuses on whether strengths can be categorised for particular populations or purposes, or whether strengths are so personal, or context-specific, that they can only be identified and defined by the individual. Advocates of strengths-based approaches have developed a wide variety of tools and processes depending on their viewpoint. These include psychometric tests which measure strengths based on specific definitions (Linley, 2008, p. 9; Rath, 2007, p. 20; Seligman, 2007, pp. 134-161;) and processes to facilitate individuals in defining their strengths in their own terms (Linley *et al.* 2010a; Linley 2008, p. 90; Buckingham 2007, p.111). More recently tools have been developed which attempt to combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches towards identifying personal strengths (Linley *et al.* 2010c, pp. 63-70).

This ongoing debate about the best way to identify and categorise individual strengths, or indeed whether one should attempt to do this at all, means that coaches have to decide with which view they agree and then choose between the collection of tools. Research, however, is dominated by quantitative methods using psychometric tools so the data available to make an informed choice is biased towards these methodologies. This moves the focus of attention towards understanding strengths in terms of a limited number of pre-defined categories and away from a deeper understanding that might be gained from looking at the role of the individual in defining their strengths. Research into how coachees identify and define their own strengths and give them meaning could redress the current imbalance and contribute towards improving the effectiveness of strengths-based approaches in coaching.

### ***Why strengths matter to coaching – the impact on performance***

Despite these issues around the definition of strengths and gaps in the coaching profession’s knowledge base, strengths-based approaches are gaining considerable interest within the coaching profession. One of the key reasons for this is the potential link between strengths and individual performance. Findings relevant to executive coaching include successive Gallup surveys which have found that individuals who have the opportunity to focus on their strengths are more likely to be engaged in their job and report having an excellent quality of life in general (Rath, 2007, pp. ii-iii). These findings are supported by other studies, particularly relevant to life coaching, which suggest that people who use their strengths more are happier and more fulfilled (Govindji and Linley, 2007). Research also suggests that strengths can help prevent negative life outcomes (Park 2009, p.43) and other studies suggest that people who use their strengths actually perform better in what they do by achieving their goals more effectively (Linley *et al.*, 2010b).

The bias towards quantitative research methodologies in strengths-based studies such as these has important limitations. Many studies were based on the measurement of complex phenomena such as happiness, depression and strengths via online questionnaires and psychometric tools (Seligman *et al.* 2005). This focus on measurement gives the impression of certainty in areas where there is considerable complexity. Some studies combated this by using other measures to substantiate the link between strengths and performance (Park, 2009, p. 44; Seligman *et al.* (2009, p. 300). However, these studies still concentrate on measuring outcomes and neglect the descriptions of real experience

or the personal changes through which the individuals went. They also omit detail about variations in how different participants responded to strengths-based approaches. As the purpose of much coaching is to improve performance, the link between strengths and performance remains an important area for investigation. Such studies however, would be enhanced by research into the experience of individuals using strengths-based approaches and the impact that individual differences had on outcomes.

### ***How individuals respond to strengths-based approaches and the research gap***

The literature appeared limited in relation to both my research questions. However, research from a Gallup poll in 2006 underlined that individuals do not always favour strengths-based approaches. Respondents were asked whether they preferred to build on their strengths or fix their weaknesses. Only 41 per cent of Americans chose strengths and the results were even lower for the UK with 38%. (Buckingham 2007, p. 40). In order to improve the application of strengths-based approaches in coaching there is a need to understand what lies behind this as what other factors affect how coachees respond to strengths-based approaches and how these might be handled in coaching. Yet, strengths are an integral part of a small number of coaching models such as positive psychology coaching (Biswas-Diener and Dean, 2007, p. 123); authentic happiness coaching (Kaufman 2006, p. 234) and appreciative coaching (Orem *et al.*, 2007). These models often give little mention to potential disadvantages or practical guidance for the coach or the coachee's experience of strengths-based approaches.

In reality, supporting coachees to adopt strengths-based approaches may not be straightforward. The review showed the complexity of the relationship between strengths and weaknesses (Linley *et al.*, 2009, pp. 44-45; Held, 2004, p. 13) Indeed, the distinction can be problematic as illustrated by the work of Nelson and Hogan (2009, p. 9), whose coaching of "dysfunctional dispositions" involves working with executives whose careers have been "derailed" because of the over-use of seemingly positive traits. Although Linley *et al.* (2009, pp. 44-45) admit that overplaying strengths can be as just as damaging as underplaying strengths, their case studies do not contain this detail. They are also written from the point of view of the coach and give little indication of how the coachee felt during the process or what helped or hindered these coachees as they endeavoured to make changes.

In summary, the literature review indicated that strengths-related research is dominated by quantitative, outcome-focused studies from outside the field of coaching which are written from the researcher's or practitioner's point of view. This revealed the opportunity to improve the coaching profession's use of strengths-based approaches by deepening the understanding of coachees' experience when they explore their strengths.

### **Methodology**

The literature review affected my research paradigm in two ways. First, it implied that new insights could be gained by taking a qualitative approach. Second, it suggested that the primary research focus should be based on the coachee's point of view and should contain the richness and complexity of their experience.

A phenomenological research paradigm (Gray, 2004, p. 22) was chosen to fit with the research objectives as it "...is designed to generate rich descriptions of people's lived experience of the world," (Langdridge, 2007, p. 21). Research design was influenced by an interpretivist epistemological stance and ontologically the study is based on the assumption that reality is subjective and experienced by different people in different ways.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, (IPA) was chosen as the research approach as it is idiographic, enabling a deep analysis of individual meaning-making not included in previous strengths studies. IPA seemed particularly appropriate to coaching-related research as it involves “a double hermeneutic,” in which “...the participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; [and] the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world,” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). In keeping with phenomenological methods, I chose not to use a single definition of strengths and my analysis focused on each individual’s definition of their personal strengths and what they meant to them.

The study focused on the experience of a convenience sample of six professional women who identified themselves as having work/life balance and related career issues. Participants were aged from 32 to 44 and had senior professional or middle-management jobs in the London area. The study used Eatough *et al’s* approach to ethics that participants should have “Informed consent, the right to privacy, anonymity, protection from harm and sensitivity and duty of care,” (2006, p.21).

I worked as both researcher and coach for the study – coaching the six participants for 6 face-to-face sessions over a three month period, and conducting a research interview after the second coaching session and an exit interview after the final session. All participants completed the coaching programme.

### ***The coaching programme***

Each participant first had a one-hour coaching session to discuss their challenges and formulate their coaching goals. Before the second meeting, each completed three exercises for homework to facilitate their thinking prior to a strengths-based coaching session with me. These were:

- *Exercise 1: The Gallup StrengthsFinder 2.0 Assessment Survey* – Participants completed this online survey at [www.strengthsfinder.com](http://www.strengthsfinder.com) and received a report outlining their top five talent themes.
- *Exercise 2: The VIA Survey of Character Strengths* – This web-based survey at [www.authentic happiness.com](http://www.authentic happiness.com) provided participants with a report ranking each of their 24 character strengths and a brief explanation of each one.
- *Exercise 3: Reflection Exercise* – Participants were also asked to complete a personal written reflection exercise using a pro-forma which asked them to identify and write about up to five occasions when they were at their best. They were invited to describe what they had done on these occasions, how they felt and what was most satisfying to them about each of the experiences. They were asked to note any observations about when they are at their best; what they had learnt from the examples; and why this was important to them.

All participants completed the homework with the exception of one who did not complete the StrengthsFinder 2.0 survey. The second coaching session involved discussing what strengths had come up for coachees, their own feelings and observations, the relevance (if any) of the strengths to their situation and if they thought that these strengths could be utilised in the challenges they were addressing via coaching. This coaching session lasted between an hour and an hour-and-a-half and were recorded and transcribed. Coachees then went on to have four more coaching sessions with me during a three month period.

### ***Data gathering and analysis***

There were three data inputs which were analysed for each participant in the study. These were transcripts of recordings from:

1. The coaching session in which the strengths-based homework was discussed (the second meeting with the coachee)
2. A first research interview conducted by me directly after the second meeting
3. An exit interview conducted by me directly at the end of the final coaching session (the sixth meeting)

The purpose of the first interview was to deepen or to go beyond themes that had emerged in the strengths-based coaching session. The interview was loosely structured and begun with the question “What has the experience been like for you, working with your strengths?” A draft interview schedule which contained prompts in the form of clean language questions (Sullivan and Rees, 2008) were used and were intended to prevent me from introducing my own assumptions into the interview. These interviews lasted for between half an hour and 45 minutes.

The second research interview was conducted directly after the sixth coaching session using a semi-structured interview schedule intended to elicit the coachee’s experience during the previous months without introducing assumptions about how they might, or might not, have used their strengths.

The setting-aside or “bracketing” of preconceptions by the researcher is a key component of IPA and affects the data collected and how it is analysed. I used Langdridge’s (2007, p.59) process of regularly answering a list of reflexive questions to remain conscious of how my methods, my academic discipline and also myself might have impact on the study as well as a reflexive diary as part of this process.

Transcripts were analysed in four stages: Reading and re-reading; noting emerging themes; grouping themes; and producing a final table of themes in a coherent order (Langdridge, 2007, p. 111). This process was completed for one participant, before using the themes to guide analysis of the second participant, amending the final table of themes if necessary. Previous transcripts were then re-coded to reflect any changes in themes and in this way the table of themes evolved and transcripts were coded iteratively using the evolving coding structure.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***How coachees responded to exploring their strengths***

Two major themes emerged in relation to my first research question, how participants responded to exploring their strengths. These were: Factors and barriers that affected the exploration of strengths; and the experience of strengths tools and processes.

#### *Factors and barriers that affected the exploration of strengths*

The analysis identified several key factors that appeared to affect how participants in the study responded to exploring their strengths. These were: the relationship between strengths and key life experiences; the level of comfort when talking about strengths and weaknesses; and the timing and perceived relevance of strengths to the participant’s situation. Depending on individual meaning-making, these factors either appeared to catalyse thinking and actions or acted as barriers that prevented participants from exploring or applying their strengths. I will discuss each briefly in turn.

For some participants, strengths appeared strongly related to key life experiences and sometimes involved addressing difficult and emotional issues. This was particularly the case for one participant, Kirsty\* who recalled several negative life events when she completed the reflection exercise for homework which asked her to think about times when she had been at her best. Her response suggests that her strengths had become entwined with the negative context in which she had displayed them:

*And I'm not really all that glad that I found out those strengths because I wished the situation hadn't really happened." [...] So they don't on the surface, they don't feel like positive qualities 'cos they're intrinsically linked to negative experiences so it's difficult to actually extricate the positivity from the negativity because they're so intrinsically linked.*

(Kirsty, first interview)

As part of exploring her strengths she had to confront difficult emotional experiences which she described as being in the “danger zone in your brain”. Strengths-based literature often asks the individual to recall moments of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), or “being at one’s best”, but does not prepare the coachee or the coach for the recollection of bad times. These findings illustrate that overcoming adversity can be an important aspect of demonstrating personal strengths. Kirsty’s experiences illustrates that negative events can heighten consciousness and provide proof that a strength is important. Both factors may contribute to the satisfaction of using that strength. Such moments may be more likely to stand out in an individual’s memory than when one attains “consistent near perfect performance” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 76).

At a practical level, both the coach and coachee need to be prepared to address such difficult events and emotions and as this may have a negative impact on the coaching relationship and considerable trust may be needed before using strengths-based approaches. These examples also reinforce the views of Lazarus (2003) and Held (2004), that there is more work to be done to understand how positive and negative experiences work together in the field of developing strengths.

The level of comfort when discussing strengths was a second factor that appeared to affect how participants responded. Coachee responses were some way from the wholly positive pictures painted by Kaufman (2006) and Biswas-Diener and Dean (2007). For some, exploring their strengths was an empowering opportunity to talk about what was working in their lives and for others it represented a major challenge to their thinking and world-view and they remained more comfortable talking about their weaknesses. One participant, Maureen\* described how the reasons for her discomfort went back to childhood:

*I never wanted to be on the stage, I never wanted to be in the school play, I didn't like reading in class. I don't like to be on show and I guess that talking about your strengths is putting yourself on show. Almost 'look at me I'm good.' And it sort of just makes me uncomfortable.*

(Maureen, first interview)

Throughout the coaching programme Maureen remained uncomfortable talking about her strengths and preferred to work on her weaknesses saying: “I would prefer to talk about what I did wrong rather than talk about what I do right 'coz that doesn't need fixing.” It is not possible to surmise what comfort or discomfort meant for participants, as both can be signs of learning and reflection or other meaning-making processes. However, it shows that strengths work is not necessarily an easy or entirely positive experience and implies that this too may affect the coaching relationship.

Although working on weaknesses may be the preferred model for the coachee, this raises interesting questions for how the coach should respond and leads onto the third factor that appeared to affect how participants responded – timing and the perceived relevance of strengths to the individual’s situation. Gassman and Grawe (2006) postulate that timing is important when one talks about strengths or weaknesses and their research suggests that therapists are more successful if they focus on client’s strengths first before moving onto problems. Linley *et al.* (2009, p.40) more recently make

the case for dealing with weaknesses early on in a coaching session. The timing issue is further complicated by the fact that for many participants, the perceived relevance of strengths to their situation appeared to change during the coaching programme. This is demonstrated by Paula\* who spoke positively about using her strengths to reach her goals but also described how “In the beginning I really didn’t think I needed my strengths to move forward or how I could use them.” Other participants also felt that age and experience influenced their ability to know or reflect on their strengths.

#### *The experience of strengths tools and processes*

The tools and processes used in the study may also have affected the way participants responded to exploring their strengths. Some participants related well to the reflection homework exercise while others preferred the external acknowledgement and verification provided by the psychometric tools.

Diane\* described how she had to “dig really deep” when she completed the reflection exercise: “There’s more to me than ticking boxes and achieving things so that was good because it forced me over that line and ask what else is it about your character that makes you?” In contrast another participant, Sadie, described how she had “started tying myself up in knots” about what she was writing and preferred the external acknowledgement of the psychometric tests she completed for homework. Maureen too, preferred the verification the tests provided: “This is easier for me because this is what someone else says are my strengths.” Strengths-based literature propounds that measurement tools provide a common vocabulary (Peterson *et al.* 2004; Kaufman, 2006; Biswas-Diener and Dean, 2007), which leads to a more meaningful conversation. My findings do not fully support this. Although some participants found these strengths categorisations useful, many did not like the terminology and they responded negatively.

These findings suggest that both personal reflection and external acknowledgment may be important factors that affect the exploration of strengths, but that the impact of tools varied between individuals. A more systematic comparison of strengths-based tools and processes with a larger sample size might be a useful area of further study.

#### *How coaches made meaning when they explored their strengths*

The second area of enquiry of this study was how participants made meaning when they explored their strengths. Four major themes emerged from the analysis. These were participants’ perspective of themselves and their sense of agency; self-esteem and self-confidence; identity and authenticity; and the identification and resolution of dilemmas. Each is briefly examined here in turn.

All six of the participants in the study described strengths exploration as a confirmation or a reminder of what they already knew about themselves. However, they all mentioned gaining a different perspective on either themselves or their life-world. One participant, Sadie described how completing the strengths exploration homework had “...made me think in a completely different way about how I deal with things.” In some cases this change in perspective appeared to affect the individual’s sense of agency, (Stevens, 1997, p.19) or their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). For several participants this appeared to contribute behaving differently. Catharine\* (pseudonym) described how she built on her team-working strength to change her role at work:

*I thought how I could really use those strengths, build on them and put them forward, not perhaps be quite so quiet about them, and then in a way that would help me strengthen the weaker areas. So I got myself to a place in the team where everything I was doing I was doing for the team. [I went to] events I didn’t want to do – but I wanted to go to defend my team. So I was seeing things from a different point of view that I hadn’t done before.*

(Catharine, exit interview)



Her strategy reflects Linley's (2008, p. 19) recommendation that building on strengths can be a way of making weaknesses irrelevant appears to support the link between applying strengths, personal agency and improving performance (Seligman *et al.* 2005; Corporate Leadership Council, 2002)

In addition to a greater sense of agency, several participants described how they felt more confident in their abilities after exploring their strengths. However further analysis showed that although strengths approaches may be useful in coaching individuals with self-esteem issues this may be complex in practice. Mruk (1999) describes four types of self-esteem, based on the relationship between the individual's feelings of competence and worthiness. For example one participant, Diane, had described gaining more confidence in her abilities through exploring her strengths, but she later explained how her beliefs around her personal worthiness were also an important factor in her decision about how to use her strengths:

*"[Exploring] strengths has helped me think about what jobs I'd like to do. The worthiness stuff has helped me think about what work I'm entitled to do [...]. It's helped me to go, 'you're entitled to do anything.'"*

(Diane, exit interview)

This excerpt suggests that for Diane, awareness of her strengths was not enough for her to take action; she also needed to resolve the issue around what she was "entitled" to do. This prompted her to explore her beliefs and assumptions about herself and her life-world. Her experience indicates the complex relationship between an individual's view of their strengths and the other aspects of their self-concept. This is not adequately covered in the strengths-based literature where there is a general approach that exploring strengths usually leads to ways of putting those strengths into action (Buckingham, 2007; Seligman, 2007). For the coach, these findings have important implications, as they suggest that strengths-based approaches may be necessary, but may not be sufficient when working with issues of self-confidence. It may also be necessary to work with the coachee to help them reflect on other aspects of their self-concept and life-world that may be affecting their ability to act.

A third theme that emerged in relation to participants' meaning-making was how exploring their strengths had affected their sense of self, or who they felt they really were. One participant, Sadie said: "It just made me feel like I understood myself again. It's all the things I don't think I've been for a very long while." Metaphor was used by some participants in their exit interviews to describe the relationship they felt between their sense of self and their strengths. Paula for example implied a sense of reassuring completeness when in her exit interview she said: "My strengths, they are part of me. They walk right next to me. Before, I was walking alone." In fact all the participants in the study, with the exception of one, said that increasing awareness of their strengths had made them more comfortable with who they were.

The experience of the majority of the participants in this small sample supports the strengths-based literature that greater awareness of strengths may be linked with this greater sense of authenticity (Linley 2008, p.45; Buckingham, 2007, p.90). As a result, strengths-based tools may be useful in helping coachees build self-awareness in order that goals can be set and action can be taken that is congruent with their sense of self. However, the analysis reveals that this can be a complex meaning-making process and implies that these tools are best used as part of a portfolio of coaching tools to build self-awareness and explore underlying beliefs and values.

Many participants identified dilemmas when they tried to make sense of applying their strengths and were often confronted by conflict between their sense of self and their lived life-world. One participant, Sadie, was particularly distressed about how to handle the mismatch she identified between her personal strengths and the use of these in her employer's organisational culture: "It made

me realise that I work in a company that has no interest in empathy being your strongest skill. And I don't quite know what to do with that.”

In order to resolve the dilemma, her meaning-making focused on finding what Linley describes as the “golden mean” where the individual learns to adopt “the right strength to the right amount, in their right way at the right time,” (Linley, 2008, p. 71). She concluded that her combination of strengths, which were biased towards understanding and supporting people, were contributing to her problems at work and decided that she would need to look outside work for opportunities to channel these strengths. However, having rediscovered these important aspects of her self-concept, this process was not easy and in her exit interview she was experiencing considerable emotional turmoil about her decision:

*I think the conflict comes when you take a strength, say the restorative strength, it's still a fundamental part of me to help people and fix people but I've got to give some of that up in the work environment to protect myself and even now I still find that extremely hard. I'm battling with [...] the feelings of anger [...] On the one hand I don't believe it's the right thing to do. On the other hand it's the right thing for me to do. I find that really difficult.*

(Sadie, exit interview)

In this excerpt it appears that Sadie has found a way of protecting herself that involves giving up a part of herself. But she is “battling” with her decision and the significant pauses show the difficulty she has when admitting that she is angry with what she has had to do.

The significance of this for coaching is that it is not a simple matter of encouraging coachees to apply strengths to real situations as if they have a “volume control” which can be “dialled up” or “dialled down” (Linley *et al.* 2009, p. 48). Applying strengths, involves the individual changing their self-concept, and this may involve feelings of anger or sadness as well as happiness. This is not covered in the strengths-based literature, but my analysis suggests that the coach needs to be prepared to support the coachee in handling the emotional as well as practical consequences of applying strengths. Sadie may have identified a coping mechanism but had not yet found her “golden mean”. This also highlights the importance of the ongoing exploration of strengths in which the coach and the coachee work together to adjust how coachees use their strengths over time.

### **Limitations of the study**

The findings are limited by the fact that they only show how a small number of participants responded and made meaning under particular circumstances, within a limited timeframe and with a particular coach, using a small set of strengths-based tools. It is also not possible to separate the impact of the strengths-based approaches from other elements of the coaching. More wide-ranging studies to compare different coaches and other strengths-based techniques would provide a more comprehensive picture of the individual differences between coachees and provide firmer evidence-based insights for coaching practice.

As I acted as coach and researcher in the study, I had a strong influence on both the experience of the participants and the interpretation of how they described that experience. Validity of the findings could have been improved by having different people perform these roles or by soliciting alternative interpretations of data.

## Conclusion

This study set out to deepen the understanding of the experience of coachees when they explore their strengths and to examine what insights this provides for the application of strengths-based approaches in coaching. The findings suggest that an understanding of the coachee's experience has implications for many aspects of the coaching process including the coaching relationship; structuring coaching interventions; the skills and role of the coach; and the issues for which strengths-based coaching may be appropriate.

The findings show that both the coach and the coachee need to be prepared to encounter strong and often painful emotions when exploring strengths which may affect the coaching relationship. The coach therefore should respond sensitively and consider the timing and appropriateness of such interventions, ensuring a high level of trust exists in the coaching relationship before using them, particularly when working with stressed or vulnerable individuals. This also highlights a potential requirement for coaches to be trained and accredited as they are for many other psychometric tools. The fact that some participants remained happier talking about their weaknesses also has implications for the coaching relationship, as although it may be the role of the coach to provide challenge, over-use of strengths-based approaches may have a detrimental effect if the weaknesses and the reasons for "fixing" them is ignored.

The perceived relevance of personal strengths by the individual to their situation also appeared to affect how some participants responded. The perception of relevance changed during the course of many participants' coaching programmes. This was not discussed in the strengths literature and findings from this study suggest that the timing and nature of strengths-based interventions need to take account of factors that may affect coachee perceptions of relevance. For example, individual's coaching goals, progress and where they are in their personal change process. This implies that exploring strengths should not be a one-off coaching event but an ongoing process, led by the coachee's agenda, with the coach structuring interventions accordingly.

The findings also highlighted important differences in the ways participants responded to the strengths-based tools and processes and that the way in which strengths-based tools are used with other coaching processes also affected how participants responded. The wide variety of experience in this small sample underlines the importance of flexibility by the coach to employ tools that meet coachee needs.

The study provides insights into complex meaning-making processes for coachees, not sufficiently covered in previous strengths-based research. It appeared that exploring strengths acted as a catalyst for many participants to question and make new meaning about how they viewed themselves in their current situation. Many re-evaluated their priorities, beliefs and assumptions and for some, this appeared to be linked with identifying disorienting dilemmas and changes in personal perspective and behaviour. Exit interviews suggested that meaning-making was still ongoing three months after the initial strengths exploration. These findings highlight the potential application of exploring strengths to facilitate transformative learning (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009) and personal change for coachees; however more research is needed to investigate this linkage.

The analysis also suggests the importance of ongoing personal reflection to relate strengths to other aspects of the coachee's life-world. This highlights the important role of the coach in encouraging regular reflection by the coachee. The fact that participants drew on many factors as part of their meaning-making implies that the effectiveness of strengths-based approaches may be improved by the coach ensuring that strengths are not explored in isolation but are fully integrated with an examination of other aspects of the coachee's life-world.

Exploring strengths appeared to raise awareness of what coachees already knew about themselves and build additional personal insights by helping clarify or verify their strengths. As a result, the majority described a greater sense of authenticity. For some individuals, exploring their strengths also appeared to affect their sense of personal responsibility, agency or self-esteem. This supports findings from studies in other disciplines (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Seligman *et al.* 2005) and suggests that strengths-based approaches may be useful in coaching to help build these personal attributes or contribute to the coachee's change process and goal achievement. Due to the sample size, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions and further research and comparative studies would be useful to see if increased agency, self-esteem or authenticity, are also linked with other self-awareness-building tools and psychometric tests, or if there something distinctive about the exploration of personal strengths.

Many participants described changes in their behaviour and actions after exploring their strengths. This supports the findings from previous studies that building on personal strengths may lead to positive outcomes for the individual (Rath, 2007, pp. ii-iii). However, due to the complexity of the meaning-making process demonstrated by participants in this study, in which they reflected on many aspects of their life-world before taking action, the direct relationship between strengths, behaviour and actions appears to be tenuous.

The study also showed that participants applied their strengths by increasing or decreasing their usage or by changing the context in which they were used. Many of the individuals who said they had proactively built on their strengths mentioned feeling more positive about themselves or their situation. Although this is in line with previous studies (Linley *et al.* 2010b; Seligman *et al.* 2009; Seligman *et al.* 2005), my findings provide the new insight that some participants who reduced the use of important strengths developed feelings of anger and loss. This reinforces the need for the exploration of strengths to be an ongoing coaching process which considers both the emotional and practical consequences of applying strengths for the coachee.

Importantly, this also suggests that the model propounded by the strengths-based literature – where once an individual has identified their strengths, the next step for success is simply to apply them creatively – is too simplistic for most coaching practice. Instead the findings imply that coaches might improve the effectiveness of strengths-based approaches by helping the coachee to reflect on the relationships between their strengths and other aspects of their life-world rather than purely focusing on the opportunities for action.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest that exploring strengths can provide a catalyst, but not a pathway, for change by the coachee. Such approaches have the potential to offer powerful coaching tools but the analysis shows that personal meaning-making after exploring strengths is complex, with individuals drawing on many aspects of their life-world as part of their change process. Strengths-based coaching could be more effective if the factors influencing how coachees explore their strengths and the different ways in which coachees make meaning is understood in greater depth. The current bias towards quantitative research within the strengths-based literature needs to accommodate more qualitative studies to address these issues otherwise coaches might remain unaware of how challenging an experience exploring strengths can prove to be for both the coach and the coachee alike.

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