

A RATIONALE FOR CONSTRUCTING A STRENGTHS-FOCUSED SELF-IDENTITY

Jerald R. Forster, University of Washington

Presented at the Constructivist Psychology Network Conference
June 20, 2008. University of Victoria, Canada

Introduction

I propose that you will benefit from efforts to construct a self-identity that is more strengths-focused. Before defining terms and providing a rationale, I will cite three sets of experiences that have influenced me to make this proposal.

The first set of experiences dates back to the 1970s when I was first exposed to constructivist theory and practice. George Kelly's two volumes of comprehensive personality theory and related practices provided a framework for construing human behavior (Kelly, 1955). My theorizing and practice during the 1970s and 1980s focused on methods of facilitating the articulation of key constructs to be used when clarifying career interests and formulating goals.

A second set of experiences caused me to focus my attention on the process of articulating strengths. This new focus was stimulated by a working relationship with Bernard Haldane (Forster, 2003). Before we met in the middle of the 1980s, Haldane (1996) had devised a series of practices that helped people identify their strengths and seek work environments where those strengths could be used. In 1987, we initiated the Dependable Strengths Project at the University of Washington. My background of articulating personal constructs to identify goals helped us explain how strengths could be articulated using Haldane's process (Forster, 1989). I also conducted research studies to measure the effects of DS workshops (Forster, 1991). During the last twenty years, hundreds of workshops have been provided to help others identify their Dependable Strengths®. The CDS-Website (2008) provides information about the non-profit organization, the Center for Dependable Strengths (CDS), its programs, materials and research.

The third set of experiences exposed me to the theory, research and practices of the *positive psychology movement*, which came to my attention during the 1990s (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This movement has led to extensive and compelling evidence that people benefit from having a positive perspective (Scheier, Carver & Bridges 2001; Pavot & Diener, 2004; Lyubomirsky, 2007). A positive perspective can be characterized by many different psychological variables, including optimism, hope, subjective well being, experiencing positive emotions, focusing on strengths, and even happiness (Seligman, 2002; Chang, 2001; Hodges & Clifton, 2004).

The results of positive psychology studies showed evidence that people with positive perspectives had better physical and mental health; longevity of life; better grades in school; higher ratings in work performance; better problem solving; more creativity; more flexibility; better marriages; better teamwork; better adjustment; more successful lives.

These results provided support for our work articulating strengths, but there were several questions that needed exploration before a rationale for constructing a strengths-focused self-identity could be developed. The questions and some exploratory responses to those questions are offered below.

Can you make your perspective more positive?

While the research stimulated by the positive psychology movement provided solid evidence that it is beneficial to have a positive perspective, there is also evidence that genetics or biological factors have a strong influence on the level of happiness characterizing a person. Lykken & Tellegen (1996) analyzed data collected from studies of identical twins, some of whom had been separated at birth and some who had grown up in the same household. They found clear evidence that genetics influence the level of happiness demonstrated by people in their adult years. Some researchers (Lucas, et al, 2003) have suggested that individuals have set points for happiness that hold even in the face of tragedy or good fortune. Starting with evidence of the genetic influences, Lyubomirsky (2007) considered various analyses of relevant data and concluded that: “As the pie chart illustrates, your genetically determined predisposition for happiness (or unhappiness) accounts for 50 percent of the differences between you and everyone else.” The pie chart to which she referred, shows that *intentional activity* determines around 40 % of happiness, a genetically-determined *set point* determines around 50 %, and *circumstances* determine around 10 percent (Lyubomirsky, 2007, page 39). She pointed out that being able to determine 40 per cent by intentional activity does provide a solid rationale for focusing on activities designed for that purpose. Her 2007 book, which was praised by participants responding to a Positive Psychology List Serve, includes the following quote by Lyubomirsky: “As I discuss at greater length in Chapters 4 through 9, a massive literature reveals what kinds of attributes, thoughts, and behaviors characterize the happiest people.” She also describes a number of intentional activities designed to obtain sustainable happiness. These intentional activities include: expressing gratitude; cultivating optimism, practicing acts of kindness; learning to forgive; increasing flow experiences; savoring life’s joys; committing to your goals. It is noteworthy that Lyubomirsky does not include the intentional activity of focusing on strengths. This is surprising because other leaders in the positive psychology movement have suggested that strengths are an important aspect of Positive Psychology (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). I will explore questions about strengths in the next section.

How does focusing on strengths contribute to a positive perspective?

In terms relevant to positive perspectives, the word *strength* means: *a strong attribute or inherent asset*. Thus, if a person focuses on strengths, that person would, by definition, be taking a positive perspective. However, the connection between focusing on strengths and a positive perspective depends on a crucial assumption about how you view reality. Is your assumption about reality objective-based or subjective-based? An objective-based reality rests on an assumption that there is a fixed reality out there and your task in life is to discover how things are and how things work. In contrast, if you have a subjective-based reality, you assume that your construction of reality is the best you have right now. You also assume that you need to live and act according to that reality until you change it as a result of more information and/or new insights. If you took an objective approach, you would call for more objective information before deciding if you had a given strength. If you took a more subjective approach you would articulate your own strengths, as you currently understand them. You might try to understand your strengths by reflecting on past experiences when you were using and/or demonstrating those strengths.

The Objective Approach. An objective approach depends on objective information such as might be obtained from inventories and experts who know a lot about abilities and strengths. There are two well-developed inventories that can tell you about your strengths, or at least about those that are measured by the inventory to which you have responded. Two objective inventories are well developed and well known. The VIA Signature Strength Survey is a 240

question survey that has been taken by hundreds of thousands of people. The VIA Signature Strengths Survey measures 24 character strengths that are taken from *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* by Peterson & Seligman (2004). The other well-known objective inventory, the internet-based StrengthsFinder® Profile is the product of a 25-year, multimillion-dollar effort to identify the most prevalent human strengths (Buckingham & Clifton 2001).

The objective approach fits with traditional methods of psychology, including those that emphasize psychometrics and also those in the positive psychology movement. The underlying assumption is that objectivity and other methods characterizing scientific practices are important when trying to understand the way the world works.

The Subjective Approach. The subjective approach fits nicely with constructivist theory, wherein it is assumed that people construct their own realities. This assumption rests on the bigger idea that objective information, validated by objective methods, is useful. However, this usefulness should not be interpreted as necessary and required, since information of this type is seldom available in fields of study such as the social sciences.

When the subjective approach is taken, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, etc., are elicited from or articulated by the individual, because personal meanings can only be truly known by that individual. Kelly's ideas about eliciting personal constructs exemplified a methodology by which personal subjective meanings can be studied (Kelly, 1955).

The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) is a systematic process designed to elicit your positive constructions of yourself. When the DSAP works, it elicits positive personal constructs that can be called dependable strengths. The process starts with memories of significant past experiences and the resultant strengths are anchored in those memorable experiences. The process leads to the articulation of strengths that are personally meaningful.

In comparison, strengths identified via objective approaches are less likely to be associated with personal experiences and they will therefore be less meaningful in terms of self-identity.

A desire to go beyond the positive psychology methods

I have greatly appreciated the efforts and the results of those who represent the positive psychology movement. The results of an extensive number of research studies stimulated by this movement has convinced me that people who have a positive perspective benefit a great deal from that perspective. These compelling results motivate me to do what I can to encourage others to do what they can to be more positive in how they construe themselves and others.

However, I am somewhat dissatisfied with the lack of theoretical complexity, as well as the fragmentation characterizing positive psychology approaches. The studies are mostly correlations between behavioral variables such as optimism and outcome variables such as good health. There is little use of theoretical concepts such as self-identity, which take into account the whole person. Processes such as self-construing are treated as *intervening variables* that are not necessary for understanding changes in behavior. With my background in constructivist theory and practice, I find the variables and methods to be sparse, possibly because they seem to over-emphasize objectivity, in order to meet the demands of rigorous scientific methodology. While emphasizing objectivity, they under-emphasize considerations of personal interpretations and impacts on self-identities.

When I read the positive psychology literature, I am also puzzled by the lack of interventions designed to increase the degree to which people focus on their strengths. Also, those studies that do focus on strengths tend to use objective measures of strengths, which are

less likely to get at self-articulated strengths, which are more likely to serve as personal constructs for the individual. Using objective measures of strengths is somewhat like using supplied constructs in Rep Grids, instead of using elicited constructs. Supplied constructs are not as useful for getting at the personal constructs that the person actually uses in her daily processing.

The reasons cited above cause me to propose different variables and different foci than those included in the positive psychology literature. I propose that we pay attention to the strengths-focused processing of the individual, and study the effects of that focusing on the self-identity of the individual. I will elaborate on strengths-focused processing and self-identity in the next two sections of this paper.

Articulating positive personal constructs that can be called strengths

Using the language and ideas of Personal Construct Psychology, I conceptualize the articulation of strengths as a process similar to the elicitation of personal constructs in a Rep Test process (Bannister & Mair, 1968). Constructs are elicited as a participant compares and contrasts elements or events. If the standard Rep Test process were used, selected people who fit certain roles could be compared and contrasted so as to elicit constructs. The positive poles of constructs could be used as the constructs that would be called strengths. A laddering process (Hinkle, 1965; Fransella & Dalton, 1990) could be used to identify those constructs that might be called core constructs and the positive poles of those constructs could be evaluated to see if they might be called the participant's most significant strengths.

It is also possible to elicit constructs using looser methods of elicitation. You could have the participant compare and contrast events which he or she had identified using criteria such as: You feel you did well; you enjoyed doing the event; you are proud of what you did. Then you can ask the participant to articulate the strengths she used when engaging in those events, which we will call *good experiences*. This task elicits positive personal constructs as the participant compares and contrasts these good experiences from other experiences that do not meet the special criteria. In fact, that is the process used in the DSAP. The DSAP is enhanced by the participation of two or three other participants who listen as the primary participant tells the stories of her good experiences. After hearing the stories, these listeners suggest possible strengths demonstrated by the teller of the stories. The participant follows this activity by considering these possible strengths, as well as other strengths included on a comprehensive listing, and then articulates from four to seven strengths that seem most meaningful and descriptive. After the participant articulates these carefully selected strengths and evaluates them for personal validity and reliability, she goes on to activities, which might help her focus on those strengths. Hopefully, these activities will help her construct a more positive self-identity that has incorporated these articulated strengths into her identity structure. The nature of the identity structure will be the focus on the next section of this paper.

A theoretical framework for constructing and changing self-identity

As Leavy, MacDonald & Tangney (2003) point out in their *Handbook of Self and Identity*, conceptions of self and identity have been created and debated for many centuries. My conceptions of self and identity are heavily influenced by constructivist theory, although the growing literature on Buddhism and meditation practices added some new conceptual possibilities

My primary assumption is that the processing taking place in my brain enables my awareness of stimuli related to phenomena outside of my body and also inside my body. My

brain, which might be called an exquisite processor, creates an awareness of the body and the processes that are going on in that brain. So, I might say that I create my reality and that reality includes my self-awareness.

Recently, I wrote a chapter for the book *On Reflection: Emphasizing the Personal in Personal Construct Theory*, edited by Richard Butler (Pending). Writing the chapter “Differentiating the *I* from the *ME*” (Forster, pending) helped me clarify and communicate ideas that could be useful for showing how a person’s self-identity can be influenced by the articulation of personal strengths. I will now include some of the most basic ideas in that paper.

When reflecting on how my *I* is different from my *ME*, I drew upon ideas put forth by William James in his classic book, *Principles of Psychology* (1890). In this framework, the *I* represents *the experiencing person*, meaning that this aspect of the self is, for the most part, happening in the present. This is not to say, that the *I* is not also aware of the past and the future, but the present experiences are usually in the forefront of the person’s attention. This means that the current focus of the person’s attention is the best indication of what that person is experiencing at any moment. The *I* is really a process, rather than an entity. It is constantly changing, although there are clear-cut patterns in the changing process, thereby giving the impression that my self-identity is a fixed entity, which it is not.

The *ME* component of the self is the version that captures momentary constructions of the self as an object. The *I*-self experiences the *ME*-self as an object or as a snap shot of the *I* during its process. In this model the *ME* is created by the *I* and it is a momentary characterization of the *I*. Actually, there are many *MEs*, but it simplifies the model to treat all of them as one big *ME*. When a self-description is created, it is one of the *MEs* that has been created by the *I*.

As suggested by Hofstadter (2007), the *MEs* and the *I* operate as a strange loop, so that each new *ME* changes the *I* somewhat and this changed *I* influences the construction of subsequent *MEs*. Thus, when articulated strengths are recognized as key characteristics of the *ME*, they influence the *I* by means of the strange loop. When this happens, the *I* is more likely to “own” the strengths that are used to construct the *ME*.

Thus, I am proposing that the strengths articulated as a result of the DSAP create a strengths-focused *ME*, which changes the *I*. Since the *I* is our best representation of the current self and is changed by new *MEs*, it can be hypothesized that focusing on the strengths articulated during the DSAP will result in a more positive self-identity.

The process for constructing strengths-focused self-identities

In summary, I have proposed that you can increase the positive ness of your self-identity by articulating your strengths and focusing on those strengths. I am also proposing that the DSAP, or some variation of this strengths-articulating process, be used to identify the strengths and to encourage ownership of those strengths. I am inferring from the positive psychology research literature that this strengths-focused self-identity will result in a more positive perspective. This positive perspective will increase your chances for experiencing such positive outcomes as: living longer, being more productive and effective in such daily activities as school, work, family relationships and problem-solving situations,

References

- Aspinwall, L. G. & Staudinger, U.M., (Eds.). (2003). *A psychology of human strengths: Fundamental questions and future directions for a positive psychology*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association
- Bannister, D. & Mair, J. M. (1968). *The evaluation of personal constructs*. London: Academic Press.
- Buckingham, M. & Clifton, D. O. (2001). *Now, discover your strengths*. New York: The Free Press.

- Butler, R. (Ed.). *On reflection: Emphasizing the personal in Personal Construct Theory*. West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons.
- Chang, E. C. (2001). *Optimism and pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- CDS Website. (2008). www.dependablestrengths.org, Seattle WA:Center for Dependable Strengths,
- Fransella, F., & Dalton, P. (1990) Personal construct counseling in action. London: Sage.
- Forster, J. R. (1989). Rationale of the Dependable Strengths Articulation Process, *Resources in Education*, September, 1989. ED305573, Ann Arbor, MI: ERIC/CAPS Clearinghouse.
- Forster, J. R. (1991). Facilitating positive changes in self-constructions. *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology*, 4, 281-292.
- Forster, J.R. (2003). Bernard Haldane was ahead of his time. *Career Planning & Adult Development Journal*. Vol. 19: Number 3, 28-38.
- Forster, J. R. (2005). *A summary of selected positive psychology literature supporting strengths-articulation*. A paper presented at the Sixteenth International Congress of the Psychology of Personal Constructs. Columbus, OH. July 19, 2005 (access on CDS Website, 2008)
- Forster, J. R. (Pending). Differentiating the I from the ME. In R. Butler, (Ed.). *On reflection: Emphasizing the personal in Personal Construct Theory*. West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hinkle, D. N. (1965). The change of personal constructs from the viewpoint of a theory of construct implications. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Ohio State University.
- Hofstadter, D. (2007). *I am a strange loop*. New York: Basic Books.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. New York: H. Holt Publisher
- Haldane, B. (1996). *Career satisfaction and success: A guide to job and personal freedom*. Indianapolis, IN: JIST Works, Inc.
- Hodges, T. D. & Clifton, D. O. (2004). Strengths-based development in practice. In Lindley, P. A. & Joseph, S. (Eds.) *Positive psychology in practice*. Hoboken NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Leavy, M. R., MacDonald, G., & Tangney, J. P. (2003). *Handbook of self & identity*. NY: Guilford Press.
- Lucas, R. E., Clark, A. E., Georgellis, Y., and Diener, E. (2003). Reexamining adaptation and the set point model of happiness: Reactions to changes in marital status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84: 527-539.
- Lykken, D., and Tellegen, A. (1996) Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon. *Psychological Science*, 7: 186-189.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. NY: The Penguin Press
- Pavot, W. & Diener, E. (2004). Findings on Subjective Well-Being: Application to public policy, clinical interventions, and education. In P. A. Lindley & S. Joseph (Eds.) *Positive psychology in practice*. New York: John Wiley & Sons. Inc.
- Peterson, C. & Seligman, M.E. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (2001). Optimism, pessimism, and psychological well-being. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Optimism and pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice*. (pp. 189-216). Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Seligman, M. E. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York: Free Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14.