



Papers in

**Strengths
Based
Practice**

Edited by

**Venkat Pulla
Lesley Chenoweth
Abraham Francis
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Introduction

Whatever situation we face, we still have a choice of responses. When adversities strike us, we feel overwhelmed. As these papers were being proof read at the publisher, Cyclone Sandy hit hard, took lives of many in coastal cities in the US and the Caribbean, making the human civilization feel once again, that there is very little that we could do. In fact, our actions do not count at all. That is one way of thinking, sort of fatalist despondency. Strengths based practices offer another.

Those in the growing ranks of helping professions often find themselves at a cross road. One path might despair at the horrific state of affairs of nature, climate, governments, growing apathy in our neighbourhoods, listlessness, powerlessness and continued abuse of our children and elderly in our societies. Another path might bring forth responses of anger and activism and a desire to bring about change. Some may feel that they are 'stuck' without skills, responses and resources to actually make that change happen.

So let us interject with a short story

A long time ago a neighbour found Nasiruddin on his hands and knees near a lamp-post searching for something. The neighbour asked, 'what are you searching for, Nasir?' 'My key', Nasir replied. Now both men got on their knees to search. After a while the neighbour asked, 'where did you lose it?' 'At home', Nasir said. 'Good lord! Then why are you searching here?' the neighbour asked. 'Because it is bright here', Nasir replied.

What does one learn from this story? That, one generally ends up searching for things in the wrong places, or one often looks for solutions in the wrong places, or that solutions are always to be found where problems cropped up.

The kind of response we make and the intrinsic faith we have in our belief systems makes the difference. As editors of these papers, we represent distinctive differences in experience. Two of us have seen more than a quarter century of turbulent times in human services in the west and in the east, amidst the interplay of all kinds of ideologies, bureaucracies, expertises, institutional and de-institutional responses in care of our people with disabilities; those in need of better mental health care and those who require quality of life as they become frail and elderly; and of course our children in need of protection.¹ We have seen days of enlightened leadership in welfare, in small amounts, that allowed us to cherish the darker times when we had to cope more than our clients, as we felt they were being treated unfairly. But, we have not given up. What

¹ Venkat Pulla and Lesley Chenoweth.

about the other two?² Abraham Francis began his career in social work in India, a society with virtually no social security provisions and a society with more collective social obligations towards those in need, and Stefan Bakaj grew up in Slovenia just around the times when balkanisation hit hard and socialism started fading on the canvass. These two had more to cope with and as a result of which have even more to offer today and to the future. Four of us join the rest of the writers in this volume, to appreciate their effort and to salute hope.

These papers confirm our overall perspective that our world is still one of beauty, with a potential and capacity to flourish and proffer in raising a discourse in strengths based approaches. Our focus now has been to see how we strengthen ideas to support our intentions to bring change, to act to play the best part and put the right foot first, what ever form and shape it may be.

The history of strengths approach and its philosophy is certainly longer than the last two or three decades. This is not something that has germinated in one country or society. People have always looked to alternatives, self reliance on one's own strength and to which one could even add at a philosophical level—looking within, one self, one's family, society and nation for solutions.

Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore in India and educators like Heinrich Pestalozzi Maria Montessori and Friedrich Froebel in Europe have been pioneers in reliance on self, communitarian philosophies and recognising the learner's strengths and aptitudes. There are a number of writings in the field of Psychology from the mid 19th century that of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Virginia Satir. In western social work, strengths based practices certainly provided a new impetus to understanding the inherent power within the client and questioned the role and seating of expertise in the counseling practices.

This volume entitled "*Papers in Strengths Based Practice*", offers a selection of writings that are refreshingly different and begin to explore how we can respond to such challenges especially through strengths based practice. This selection is an endeavour to raise the question of how to keep hope and move beyond mere survival to proactive positive change. Within the practice of social work and human services, these papers to explore some challenges in the broad social and economic contexts, globally.

The authors have addressed similar questions and themes but enriched the discourse through their diverse perspectives and brought us to the understanding that all kinds of obstacles and threats can arise from all kinds of situations for all of us as individuals, groups, communities and nations. If we let these deter or overpower us, we cannot move, we would not see alternatives. It is this quest for solutions that

² Abraham Francis and Stefan Bakaj.

humbles us to seek solutions from a variety of perspectives, and raise questions such as how do we dream about alternative futures? How to envision new patterns of social organization that are better than what we have currently or may never have experienced them before? Is there a methodology that allows us to talk about 'how things could be' when previously no one has ever actually contemplated about these things? How can our practice in what ever vocation that we belong to be strengthened by the difficult situations that we encounter, just as a bonfire in a strong wind is not blown out, but blazes even brighter.

Our ability to be connected and to continue to draw on personal strengths and desire to conquer the demands placed on oneself brings with it an opportunity to think beyond the individual needs and to generate collective thinking about humanity. This world privileges and exposes human services professionals to challenges and actions in social justice and human rights arena. Common concern of individual and social good in various countries is influenced by theoretical frameworks, cultural and political histories. That diversity is also reflected in the idioms, tools and practice frameworks of the current authors in this collection. Social work and human services colleagues have reflected on their current practices and brought forward inspiration.

Our Methodology

The "*Papers in Strengths Based Practice*" have been double blind peer reviewed by colleagues and experts from around the world. We are grateful to colleagues in social work practice and in academia for having given their time to assist with abstracts and peer reviewing the papers. It is after this process, the editors assumed the responsibility to bring forward a modest selection of papers that support, celebrate and or suggest alternative strengths based approaches that either supplement current conventional approaches or replace them for better results.

This volume is cross cultural and collaborative and has papers from a number of scholars describing various native traditions, indigenous experiences, case studies and research outputs around strengths approach. Scholars who have reflected, and whose papers have been included here, come from Uganda, Philippines, Kenya, Lapland, India, Australia, Slovenia and Nepal.

Beyond this Volume

We recognize that the world is changing fast. With vast development in science and technology that has heralded quality of life for the mankind, there is an ever increasing gulf between the poor and the rich in every nook and corner of this world. Wars, terrorisms, conflicts, tensions and economic crisis have slowed down the process of advancement and deepened the wounds of injustice and exploitation

among nations and communities. Putting 'humanity' into our humanness today is not that easy. Materialism, greed and overexploitation of nature and of the fellow humans perhaps are the obstacles that we need to confront. The recipe that we would like to promote is "meeta bhavana" an understanding that the delicate interdependence on one another is crucial and that finding a meaningful relationship in our interactions will not only foster the strengths based practice but will perhaps pave a way for world peace.

Although we are all working for this cause but Venkat Pulla has shown extraordinary passion and yearning, and with him around there is certainly no looking back.

*22 November 2012
Kathmandu, Nepal*

Venkat Pulla
Lesley Chenoweth
Abraham Francis
Stefan Bakaj

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22 November 2012

Venkat Pulla
Lesley Chenoweth
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