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## **Cognitions, Emotions, and Applications: Participants' Experiences of Learning about Strengths in an Academic Library**

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## **Cognitions, Emotions, and Applications: Participants' Experiences of Learning**

### **about Strengths in an Academic Library**

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## **Cognitions, Emotions, and Applications: Participants' Experiences of Learning about Strengths in an Academic Library**

Positive psychology, a field of academic psychology that focuses on studying positive behaviors and experiences, rather than mental disorders, has been heralded as a potentially beneficial paradigm for academic library administration.<sup>1</sup> Empirical studies of positive psychology-influenced management techniques in libraries are rare, however. The purpose of our study is to expand this research base by investigating *strengths-education*, a process during which library employees learn about their strengths via a Gallup inventory, the Strengths Finder 2.0. Strengths-based development of employees has been advocated by Gallup for its potential to increase employee engagement. Rath states: “[O]ur studies indicate that people who *do* have the opportunity to focus on their strengths every day are *six times as likely to be engaged in their jobs* and more than *three times as likely to report having an excellent quality of life in general.*”<sup>2\*</sup> We recognize that many factors complicate the understanding of the effects of strengths interventions on employees. While correlational studies such as Gallup’s indicate statistically significant relationships between the variables under study, we utilize a qualitative semi-structured interview approach in order to describe the effects of strengths training in the library. When we use the term “effect”, we mean subjects’ own statements on the ramifications of learning about their strengths. This internal personal response to strengths-based interventions in academic libraries has not yet been investigated. Describing the personal ramifications of strengths-education may have implications for academic library administration, as it could provide a rich understanding of employees’

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\* emphasis original

responses to this kind of positive psychology intervention. In addition, we discuss potential implications of the experience of strengths-education (or the process of learning about one's strengths) for employee engagement and teamwork.

Our research questions were refined during the course of the study, as sometimes happens in qualitative inquiry<sup>3</sup>, but after several passes through the interview data, we decided to focus on subjects' statements about the intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of knowing about strengths. We were interested in subjects' statements about themselves, and their statements about others, vis-à-vis the strengths-training process. As the Method section describes, we developed the categories of *cognitions formed*, *emotions experienced*, and *applications envisioned* related to strengths education. Before turning to a description of our study, we review some of the relevant literature on strengths-based development.

## **Literature Review**

### *Positive Psychology*

Positive Psychology is a fairly recently developed branch of psychology that changes the focus of psychology from a disease/ healing perspective to one where strengths are built upon and made stronger. Dr. Martin Seligman is one of the earliest and most prolific academic psychologists promoting positive psychology. As Seligman states, "The aim of positive psychology is to catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life."<sup>4</sup> Negativity leads to a narrow view of the world that focuses in on threats and prepares us for a fight or flight response. It leads to a self-protective reaction. Positivity, on the other hand, allows us to take in a wide view of the world around us,

increasing our awareness of new ideas.<sup>5</sup> Positive emotions can also increase our personal development. Frederickson states that positive emotions lead to the temporary expansion in thoughts and actions, which in turn leads to an increase in development of personal resources, which then leads to growth and transformation through the upward spiral of emotion, cognition, and action.<sup>6</sup>

For example, joy, through play, can strengthen social support networks and through creativity can lead to the production of art and science or to creative problem solving in day-to-day life. Increased social support, artistic and scientific productions, and successful problem-solving experiences are all relatively enduring outcomes of joy and may contribute to personal transformation and development. This, in turn, may lead to more positive emotions.<sup>7</sup>

Increased productivity is associated with positive emotions.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, working is associated with positivity; employed people are happier than unemployed people and skilled workers are happier than unskilled workers.<sup>9</sup> In jobs where people report a high level of satisfaction, distinguishing features are that there is a good fit between the individual's strengths and their job duties, they have some autonomy in their position, and their job is doing some social good.<sup>10</sup>

It has been noted, however, that being positive isn't always a good thing. Happy people tend to overestimate their own abilities, whereas "depressed realists" often view their abilities more realistically.<sup>11</sup>

### *Strengths Development*

Positive psychology has led to the development of the sub-specialty of strengths-based psychology. A strength is defined as "the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect

performance in a given activity”.<sup>12</sup> Strengths development is based upon the idea that rather than trying to develop what an individual performs poorly, that individual should focus on developing his or her natural strengths. It decries the notion that everyone should be well rounded, saying instead that we all have innate talents around which we can focus on developing our knowledge and skills, becoming extraordinary in that area. This is contrary to what the majority of people in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, China, and Japan believe. In a Gallup poll, people were asked if they would be more successful if they improved on their weaknesses, or if they improved upon their strengths. Most felt they should work on their weaknesses in order to be more successful.<sup>13</sup> Research has shown, however, that knowledge and the development of strengths leads to higher levels of success. A study in a high school compared 2 groups of students over a 4-year period. One group had strengths training, while the other group served as the control group. The strengths group had fewer absences per student, fewer tardies per student, and higher GPAs than the control group.<sup>14</sup> A similar study among college students showed that strengths training improved retention and GPAs.<sup>15</sup> In the workplace, strengths training also shows positive results. A study conducted at the Toyota North American Parts Center California (NAPCC) showed that employees who underwent basic strengths intervention increased their productivity by 6%, where those who underwent intensive strengths training improved their productivity by 9%.<sup>16</sup>

Employee engagement is also improved through strengths development. The Employee Engagement Metric asks 12 questions, one of which has the employee state if they have the “opportunity to do what I do best.” According to a meta-analysis conducted by Harter and Schmidt, “work units scoring above the median on the ‘opportunity to do

what I do best' item have a 38% higher probability of success on productivity measures and 44% higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention".<sup>17</sup>

Donald O. Clifton, widely known as the father of strengths-based psychology, partnered with Gallup to study and measure the factors instrumental in success. They created the StrengthsFinder measure, which is a 177 paired item survey designed to identify the areas where a person has the most potential to develop their strengths.<sup>18</sup> Now known as Clifton's StrengthFinder, Gallup cites several studies that have tested the validity and reliability of the measure.<sup>19</sup>

### *Teamwork*

One application of strengths development is the creation of teams. They take individuals with varied strengths and place them together to accomplish a unified goal. Teams are often formed "to achieve collectively what could not be achieved individually".<sup>20</sup> This is a perfect environment for a strengths approach, since each individual's strengths can complement the strengths of the rest of the group to create a more effective work environment.

### *Library Related*

There is not much literature on strengths within a library environment; however, a 2010 article in Library Journal gives an overview of strengths training in a public library system. In this article, Jacobsen discusses the reactions and the enthusiasm that their workers experienced when participating in strengths development. They used the official StrengthsFinder Training, which included a Gallup trainer, and administered the test to middle and upper management. The results were so positive that Jacobsen's library found the money to administer the test to all library employees, although they used peer

training instead of the Gallup trainer. Solana County Library administrators and supervisors have used the strengths information learned to appoint employees to appropriate committees and working groups where their strengths would be used effectively. They have also used it to reassign duties of unfilled positions, so employees are working in their areas of greatest strengths.<sup>21</sup>

## **Method**

### *Subjects*

We recruited 23 subjects from two public services departments in a large Southern university for strengths-training, of whom eleven people agreed to be interviewed. We determined that this number was sufficient since most qualitative interviews have 5-25 subjects, and since this number seemed enough for the purpose of our study and the data had reached a point of saturation where no new themes were appearing.<sup>22</sup>

The strengths-training procedure consisted of administering the Clifton Strengths Finder to the voluntary participants and giving each participant a copy of the book, *The StrengthsFinder 2.0*, and then providing a group informational session about strengths. During the informational session, we defined what a strength was, asked participants to share their strengths on a grid, and led a discussion. In the discussion, we asked participants if there were any surprises in the strengths listed in their strengths reports; what the grid revealed about organizational strengths; and how strengths knowledge could help people to work together. We espoused ideas that were aligned with those of the developers of the Strengths Finder. For example, we repeated Rath's assertion that the Strengths Finder has a positive approach, rather than a negative one.<sup>23</sup>

We did not record the strengths profiles for this study, nor did we record what was said during the informational session, owing to confidentiality concerns. For those participants who agreed to be interviewed, we gave a semi-structured interview, which consisted of 9 questions and follow-up questions. Because we were interested in subjects' statements on the effects of strengths-education, we asked questions about outcomes, such as, "Has learning about strengths changed your view of yourself?" and "Do you anticipate that knowing about your strengths will be useful?"

The questions were open-ended in form, but no doubt presupposed that there were likely to be outcomes or effects of strengths training. We believed that this trade-off between focusing and presupposition would be acceptable due to the purpose of our study, which was to capture participants' statements on the effects of the process of strengths-education. We hoped that our process would provide insight into how participants viewed strengths training in its role as an intervention. The interview protocol is given in the Appendix.

After transcribing the interviews, we coded them using the process of developing categories described by Dey. We went through several iterations, beginning with a general survey of the data and eventually created broad categories of processes present in subjects' statements about effects of learning about their strengths. These were *forming cognitions*, *experiencing emotions*, and *envisioning applications*. Dey's description of category formation includes the processes of splitting (dividing broad categories) and splicing (forming broader categories from smaller categories).<sup>24</sup> To illustrate an instance of splicing, we formed the broader emotions category after noticing individual emotions such as surprise and disappointment. After we noticed the emotions category, we

realized that there were also analagous cognitions and applications categories. All three broad catagories represent sub-categories of “processes engaged in as a result of strengths-education”.

As mentioned in the introduction, in alignment with our research questions, we focused on intrapersonal and interpersonal effects of strengths education.

## **Analysis**

### *Cognitions*

Learning about strengths triggered a number of *cognitions* in participants about themselves. We define cognitions as products of intellectual processes or the processes themselves (e.g, learning, investigating, confirming, critical thinking, etc ). One type of intellectual process that participants engaged in when considering learning about strengths was wondering. Participants wanted to investigate further about their own strengths. “View of self , um the Strategic, that was only fifth, but still there has made me wonder a bit about that. That’s an area I could investigate more.”

Some participants experienced new awareness. They learned they had strengths that they were surprised they possessed. “I guess it’s made me more aware. I didn’t know that one of the (I don’t remember which strength is was) sort of conflicted with a lot of the feelings we were having with the [reorganization], so that was something that sort of stood out to me. I don’t think I would have noticed it otherwise.”

A similar kind of new learning was present in participants who said they gained an enhanced view of themselves. “ Not really, hasn’t changed it [the view of the participant’s self], but maybe enhanced it, you know. I already felt like I was strong in

those areas, but then reading what the interpretation is, maybe broader interpretation of that kind of strength than I would have had.”

Another process participants experienced was understanding—they had an explanation now for behavior they engaged in. “It explained to me why I have this compulsion to get information and get it together and present it and keep it up to date. That was good.” Or, “I think it has helped me to perceive that you can be intellectual and still have different styles within your thinking. I do see the differences now that I’ve read about it and thought about it.”

Similarly, some participants confirmed strengths they already knew they possessed. However, when participants did not see strengths in the list that they expected, or when there were strengths in the list that did not match up with their view of themselves, they experienced cognitive dissonance accompanied by the emotions of confusion and surprise, discussed below in the section on emotions. “Um, well actually it’s confirmed some things that I thought, but uh a few things were surprising in that they didn’t show up. And the thing is that some of the categories that the strengths were in, I’m not sure that section applied to work cause you can interpret the words in different ways.”

Perhaps due to the presupposition implied in our question, “Has learning about strengths changed your view of your self, and if so, how,” all participants mentioned some cognition they had as an effect of the strengths-education process.

There was one other kind of cognition participants described, that is, critical thinking about strengths. Participants were aware of a typecasting or pigeon-holing potential of learning about strengths. “I guess if you focus too much on what those top

five were, you can pigeonhole your self and think that maybe I won't try this cause that wasn't one of my strengths. So I think you could be self-limiting if you chose to look at it that way. I think that could be a disadvantage."

Other cautions about learning about strengths that participants gave were that people might be over-confident; they might use their strengths in an unethical way; and that they should not pass off work; and that they should not let themselves be totally defined by their strengths profiles. "Any of this has to be taken with a grain of salt. You can't ignore the other characteristics of your personality. You want to focus on strengths maybe, but you don't want to do that so exclusively that you don't develop any of those other skills. ... If you think about that too much, are you pigeon-holing your self and not letting yourself explore areas that may be outside of those strengths that you might find really stimulating and grow into." Also, "you don't want it to totally define you. It's just one way of looking at your personality."

Participants' cognitions were similar when participants discussed other people. For example, participants gained new awareness of others' strengths from the process. Some learned that many in the group shared strengths.

Others confirmed either traits of other individuals or shared traits of the group as a whole. "I would have been shocked if the reference professionals had not had Input and things like that. I would have been shocked, but I wasn't shocked. It reinforced what I expected." Or, "I knew one of my coworkers is very strong in people skills. I knew [that person] was, but now I know for sure that [that person] is. That's big for me. It has let me know that others, my coworkers, some of my coworkers also have that same strengths that I do. That's kind of nice."

Also, similar to above, a theme was understanding others as a result of learning about strengths. For example, the presence or absence of a trait in other people “explained” to some participants why they found relationships with these others difficult.

The participants engaged in active analytical thinking in attempting to understand others after learning about strengths. They philosophized about or critically analyzed strengths in relation to other people, making the following sometimes different philosophical assertions: people sometimes think they have strengths that others are unaware of; people have different strengths; people share strengths; there is sometimes a departmental mentality; strengths have to do with individuals, not departments. Overall, there were fewer instances of cognitive dissonance when participants considered the strengths of others. There was only one instance where an individual was surprised by the strength of another. In addition to the category of analytical thinking, one participant described thinking actively about strengths during many interactions after the strengths training.

### *Emotions*

Pleasure was a common emotional theme in many interviews. The interviewees frequently said that they were pleased with their strengths, regardless of whether or not they were expected. Almost all participants felt a sense of positivity and increased self-confidence. “ I think it was a nice positive for me personally to think that I have strengths. I guess I could say changing my perspective gave me a positive boost.” Also, “...it makes me think that potentially someone will give me the chance, or if I got the chance that I could fulfill that role, and that I generally underestimate myself.”

In many instances, the strengths also validated the participant in some way, either through justifying their work or behavior, or both. “So, behind the scenes, I am a representative of the library, and I appreciate the fact that I have been trusted with tasks like that, which aren’t completely normal at my level.” Another participant said, “I feel more justified in reading. Sometimes our annual reports look like they’re based on activity and you can’t really say reading and gathering information” but now I know that it’s one of my strengths.

Some employees who participated expressed feeling encouraged by knowing their own strengths, and even the strengths of others. “I think it helped me see some talents that I really wasn’t aware of . And how I could build on those talents. It was encouraging.” However, some participants expressed disappointment that expected strengths weren’t in their top five. “There are some talents that I probably wish I had that didn’t come up on this.”

Participants also expressed pleasure in knowing the strengths of their coworkers. “I was very pleased that Input showed up as being there on so many people who work here, because I think it’s almost a pre-requisite for libraries.” Participants were also pleased with the fact that people were willing to share their strengths, and participants enjoyed getting to know one another. There was a general feeling of positivity associated with knowing the strengths of fellow employees; for example, learning about strengths confirmed one person’s “high opinion” of his colleagues. One interviewee said that knowing others’ strengths would benefit coworker relationships. “You get closer to the coworker. ... if there is a wall between you, it breaks it.” One however, expressed

surprise at others' strengths, expecting to find a different combination of strengths more in line with their opinion of the person.

### *Applications*

In addition to having cognitions and experiencing emotions about learning about strengths, participants described potential applications of knowing about strengths. Some of the envisioned applications were personal in nature. First, participants saw strengths as a way of making contributions at work, such as participating more in group meetings or taking on more responsibility. "Hmm. I guess that uh wanting to have of to seek a role that takes on more responsibility. Say, Hey I have this piece of paper that shows I can take on problem-solving responsibilities. ... You know, I don't know, it kind of makes me think that potentially someone will give me the chance or if I got the chance that I could fulfill that role and I generally underestimate myself."

Others saw learning about strengths as being useful for personal activities, such as long-term career planning, participating in job interviews, and life activities outside of the job. On the other hand, other participants saw learning about strengths as not having resulted in actions based on a change in their view of themselves. "view of self, well it has, some of the results were surprising, so in that way it changed, but I don't know that I've employed any of the other than the "look at that. What? Look at that, or Think about that."

Participants also described interpersonal applications of learning about strengths. Knowing about strengths could provide a quick way of understanding others, and it could also allow tailoring of interactions with others. "If I am meeting someone new who has taken the test it could be a quick way of assessing where we have similar strengths and

where we might have different viewpoints. It might be a quick way of understanding a new person and allowing that person to understand me a bit better, so I can see where it could be very useful. Or I say new people, but someone in another department, but I don't interact with that person. It could allow us to perhaps empathize with each other and a bit faster in the way of how we scored on the test. I personally thought it was great fun to see how other people did, and I was very pleased that almost everyone was willing to share." Or, "It's given more insight into the coworker personalities than I maybe had before from just interacting with them, by thinking about their strengths you kind of say, well maybe I could interact in a way that would be more effective with that person."

Some participants said that learning about strengths also could facilitate teamwork and helping one another. "I think talking more about strengths... could be a very positive thing. I think it's a good idea to help people build on their strengths instead of focusing on their weaknesses... I think it makes sense and it can really help get the work done in a more positive way, but create an atmosphere of helping each other and growing together. That could be important."

Participants saw the potential of using either similar strengths or complementary strengths to achieve a work project goal. "it was interesting to see where we all overlapped, so where we could come together as a really, really strong unit in some ways, but it was also interesting to note where the differences were and who had them because I think that maybe when you're working on a project...you might know who's going to bring what different types of things to the table in a larger group like that. So I would say, yeah, probably it's giving you more insight into the individuals in the group." Or, "just knowing ahead of time, maybe the complementary strength [may be useful]... knowing

that not everyone has the same strengths or the same combination of strengths, so really having an eye to that where we can work together as two people or as an entire team on something.”

## **Discussion**

Interpretations of our data suggest that strengths education has potential implications for employee engagement and teamwork. For example, the emotion of disappointment, associated with the cognitive dissonance of not finding strengths one expected in the strengths profile, would be expected to decrease employee engagement. By contrast, positive emotions about themselves associated with seeing ways they could contribute more on the job would be expected to increase engagement in participants. Since the literature supports the role of positive emotions for employee engagement, the fact that participants generally found strengths education to be a positive experience suggests that engagement will increase as a result of strengths education.<sup>25</sup>

The data also offer various insights into how strengths education might impact teamwork. First, participants described two ways in which knowing about strengths could foster teamwork: insight into complementary or similar strengths could assist in doing projects together; and the positive approach of strengths education could foster teamwork. Also the generally positive feelings participants expressed about their colleagues as a result of learning about their strengths, or because of the process of sharing strengths, would seem to indicate a positive effect of strengths education on teamwork. However, strengths education might also conceivably result in activities not related to teamwork, such as using the strengths profile when engaging in job interviews

outside the library. In general, we view the use of strengths education for personal purposes as not necessarily detrimental to teamwork, but not supportive of it, either.

### **Limitations**

As with any qualitative case study, our results may not be generalizable to all strengths-education interventions. Our study is limited to one large, Southern university library. In addition, we sampled only from public service library departments. It is possible that studies of other types of units would have yielded different data.

### **Future Directions**

The scope of this study was intentionally small, but given the results, it could be useful to expand strengths training to include all employees in our academic library. A number of participants even made that suggestion in their interviews! Additionally, the strengths awareness could be more intentionally integrated into the workplace. Having supervisors be aware of their employees' strengths could drastically affect the workplace. It would also be useful to conduct strengths training on an ongoing basis, to maintain enthusiasm and enhance the continuing awareness of strengths.

### **Conclusion**

Participants expressed a number of cognitions, emotions, and applications about effects of strengths-education in this academic library setting. Ultimately, our exploratory study gives insight into participants' internal experience in the process of learning about their strengths. While clearly research into strengths interventions in academic libraries is in its infancy, this study delineates some important aspects of the experience of learning about strengths from the perspectives of public services employees in one Southern university. Time will tell whether the effects of strengths interventions upon employee

engagement and teamwork correspond to the interpretations that we bear upon our findings.

## **Appendix**

### *Interview Questions*

1. Has learning about strengths changed your view of yourself? If so, how?
2. Has learning about strengths changed your view of your job activities or duties? If so, how?
3. Has learning about strengths changed your view of your co-workers? If so, how?
4. Are there ways that you can anticipate that knowing about strengths will be useful? If so, how?
5. What are some disadvantages of knowing about strengths?
6. Has learning about strengths changed your view of your department? If so, how?
7. Has learning about strengths changed your view of other departments? If so, how?
8. Are there other ways that learning about strengths has changed your perspective?
9. Do you have any interest in participating in further short workshops on strengths?

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