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**What's in a name? Strengths-based  
Supervision – Reality or Rhetoric:**

An Analysis of Supervision in an Organisation with  
a Vision of Strengths-based Practice

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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Christine Thomas

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## Abstract

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The aim of this research was to explore the impact of a transition to strengths-based practice within a social service organisation. The central consideration within this study was the participants' conceptualisations of what strengths-based practice and supervision might look like; how this connected, or collided with their views around traditional approaches to practice and supervision and whether strengths-based supervision is a distinct model or approach to supervision or a repackaging of traditional approaches to supervision. This research also sought to locate the significance of the transition to strengths-based practice within the participants' experiences of supervision and the nature of the relationship between external supervision and the change process.

The research was informed by participatory action-research methodology, which was utilised because of the requirement that the researcher join a change process being undertaken within the agency and the compatibility between this research methodology and the principles of strengths-based practice.

The need to be clear about what strengths-based practice and the importance of developing shared understanding about what this actually means beyond the rhetoric has been highlighted in this research as a fundamental task for the Organisation, Supervisees and External Supervisors. The research findings presented a variety of constructions and meanings associated with strengths-based practice and continued to highlight the debate in the literature about the validity or otherwise of distinguishing strengths-based practice as a new approach to practice. This research offers a view that continuing to dichotomise strengths and deficits approaches may be less helpful in the long run as this has the continuing potential to alienate and engender defensiveness.

Supervision as one of the critical places for workers to reflect on the fit between their actions and their view of these actions was reinforced within the findings. Although the research question about the existence of strengths-based supervision as a distinct supervision model was not addressed definitively within the research findings a clear theme has emerged within the participants' responses that supports a supervision framework that is clearly linked to the principles of strengths-based practice. The

narrative of the supervisee participants in the research strongly supported the notion of a supervision environment where supervision focuses on strengths and competency and a safe transparent and clearly contracted relationship that encourages supervision to be a supervisee-led and focused process. This research supports the greater ownership of supervision by supervisees and the development of the supervisee voice within the supervision literature.

The importance of engaging external supervision processes in a change process and also the value of connecting up and establishing clear and well-structured three-way contracts between supervisees, external supervisors and the organisation have been highlighted within the research. The findings related to the nature of the relationships between the participants lend weight to the argument for supervision as an important and central tool and resource in a change process and point to the value of ongoing clarification of the expectations and roles of all those involved in supervision.

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## **Chapter One - Introduction**

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### **Research Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this thesis is to explore the impact of a transition to strengths-based practice within three sites of a social service organisation from the perspective of Supervisees within the Organisation, External Supervisors and Management. The primary objective is to explore the participants' constructions of the transition to strengths-based practice and their perceptions of the implications of this for supervision. The central consideration within this study is the conceptualisation of what strengths-based supervision might look like and the implications of this in terms of how strengths-based approaches may connect, or collide with traditional approaches to supervision. Is strengths-based supervision a distinct model or approach to supervision or is it a repackaging of traditional approaches to supervision? These areas are considered from the perspectives of employees within the organisation receiving and providing supervision (including those with management responsibilities) and External Supervisors who are not employees within the Organisation, but contracted by the Organisation specifically to provide professional supervision.

### **Researchers Interest in the Topic**

The impetus for this research comes from my experience of being both a supervisor and a supervisee and from teaching in the social work practice and supervision areas. My interest in strengths-based supervision has arisen out of my practice as an external supervisor working with a range of social service workers and in my teaching of supervision and social work practice. These experiences alerted me to the language and practice of strengths-based practice and concretised and provided a framework for my views about social work practice and my beliefs about what being a supervisor means to me and to the people that I work with in supervision. My own views about strengths-based supervision had developed from a belief that it is fundamental to have an optimistic and hopeful view about change. I had also become aware from my experience as a supervisee and a supervisor that the position adopted in relation to the

people we call 'supervisees' appeared to have a direct impact on the experience of supervision. It had also become evident to me that supervision was more effective when it focused on the strengths and resources of the supervisee and what was working as a means to dealing with issues and problems. It was also a great relief to me to come to the conclusion that supervision worked best when I was not operating from a position of 'expert' in the relationship and where the supervisee was participating as an active and fully engaged participant in the process.

The idea for this study was thus generated from my own experience as a supervision practitioner and recipient of supervision. These roles enabled me to reflect on how I have constructed strengths-based practice and the implications of this within my practice as a supervisor and supervisee. I was particularly interested in engaging in research that was focused in the connections between strengths-based practice and supervision. In the course of this reflecting about this, I identified the Organisation as one that was also engaging in reflection about strengths-based practice. Contact was made with the Clinical Manager of the organisation to explore the possibilities of becoming involved with the organisation in some way to explore the impact of strengths-based practice on the experience of supervision within the organisation and support was subsequently obtained within the Organisation for undertaking the research.

### **Research Questions**

The key research questions are:

What is the participants' understanding of strengths-based practice?

What have been the implications of the transition to strengths-based practice for supervision and how has this been experienced by workers within the Organisation and by External Supervisors?

What is strengths-based supervision – how is this defined and experienced by participants?

What are the implications of the transition for the relationships between External Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation?

## **Thesis Structure**

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter Two discusses the major themes related to the literature around strengths-based practice and strengths-based supervision. The development of strengths-based practice and its connections to traditional conceptions of social work practice are considered. The second section of the chapter explores the literature around strengths-based supervision and the implications of this for the study are considered.

Chapter Three discusses the research methodology: its philosophical underpinnings; the rationale for the choice of methodology, ethical considerations, a profile of the research participants and a description of the data collection process. The way in which the data was collated and organised is discussed in the last section of the chapter.

Chapter Four is the first of three chapters that present the research findings. This chapter explores the participants' experiences and understandings around strengths-based practice and their perspectives on the transition to strengths-based practice that has been undertaken in the Organisation. Implications for practice as the change process has occurred are explored and the different perspective on what this change process had meant for each of the participants is considered.

Chapter Five discusses the participants' experiences of supervision and the implications of this experience with respect to their views about supervision and what might constitute strengths-based supervision.

Chapter Six considers the implications of the transition with respect to the current and future relationships between External Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation and the significance of these supervision relationships in the development of strengths-based practice.

Chapter Seven presents a review of the research questions, the methodology and the key research findings. It also discusses the implications of these findings and the significance of the relationship between professional supervision and the development

of strengths-based practice. This chapter offers suggestions regarding the opportunities for supervisor and supervisee development/training and how to make the most of supervision relationships and to construct these relationships from a strengths-based perspective. The thesis concludes with a discussion of areas for future research.

## **Chapter Two – Review of Literature on Strengths-Based Approaches and Supervision**

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### **Introduction**

The key research questions relate to the participants' constructions of strengths-based practice and strengths-based supervision and how an organisational change process involving a move to strengths-based practice impacted on the experience of supervision from the perspective of the participants. In this chapter there is an exploration of the major themes found in the literature relating to conceptualisations of social work practice; the supervision literature and literature that focuses on concepts related to both strengths-based practice and supervision. This chapter includes three sections: The first section considers the debate regarding the legitimacy of strengths-based practice as a distinct approach to practice. This discussion is located within the history of social work and the development of its core values alongside the ideas and debates regarding strengths-based practice. This discussion focuses on the ways in which strengths-based practice is defined and differentiated within the literature. In defining strengths-based practice questions are considered regarding the newness of strengths-based practice or as a dressing up of the traditional values and key ideas of the profession. As Reid (2002) questions, is strengths-based practice a practice movement or does it represent a fundamental shift in practice knowledge and values? This leads into the second section, which discusses the development of supervision within the social work and counselling literature as two aligned areas of professional practice (Hancock 1998) and the links with the development of social work practice values and knowledge. The third section then considers conceptualisations of strengths-based supervision and how this links with the broader supervision literature.

### **Strengths-based Practice – a paradigm shift?**

The strengths-based approach or strengths perspective is one receiving a good deal of attention currently both overseas and in Aotearoa/New Zealand as evidenced by the number of training workshops focusing on strengths-based practice and policy and

practice directions in agencies such as the Department of Child Youth and Family Service and the James Family (Presbyterian Support Services). It has also been common for me in my practice as a supervisor to hear workers assert that they work in a strengths-based way. What implication if any does this have for the social work profession's traditional values and principles?

Allan (2003) locates the strengths perspective as emerging from a post modern, social constructionist discourse that is connected to critical approaches to social work focused in empowerment of the oppressed and utilising an analysis of power that sees this embedded in every relationship:

*Postmodern perspectives highlight the importance of recognising power is present in all relationships using knowledge to foster just and humane practices through respect, sharing information, openness and clear communication; instead of pretending rapport in an equal relationship. (Allan 2003: 43)*

Allan (2003) considers that the constructive approach evident in the work of Parton and O'Byrne (2000a) has created an acceptance of solution-focused, strengths-based and narrative approaches within social work practice. Within the literature on strengths based practice two opposing views emerge however, one that legitimises and advocates for strengths-based practice as a paradigmatic shift in the nature of relationships between workers and clients and the opposing view that considers that strengths-based practice is what has always occurred within practice. McMillen *et al* (2004: 317) considers that the central concerns in the debate has lead to dichotomous positions that conceptualise this debate as a 'grudge match' between problems and strengths:

*In one corner in black spandex, we can find the social worker therapist with a keen focus on his client's psychopathology, waving above him a copy of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In the other corner, with her white flowing robe, and olive branch in her teeth, stands the social work partner ready to work as an equal with her disempowered neighbours to create sustainable change. (McMillen *et al* 2004:317)*

Writers in the strengths-based 'corner' which include Weik (1983), Goldstein (1997), Rapp (1998), Saleebey (1997), Munford and Sanders (1999), Early and GlenMaye (2000) and Blundo (2001) argue that the strengths approach is a radical departure from how social work has historically been practiced. Rapp (1998:1) contends that

strengths-based practice “represents a paradigm shift in mental health, social work and the other helping professions” where the shift is away from a problem and deficit focused paradigm to an optimistic strengths-based one. The current writing around strengths-based practice (Saleebey 1996, Rapp 1998, Blundo 2001, McCashen 2001) urges practitioners to review and change the lens through which they see the world if they are to be truly strengths-based in their personal and professional lives. Blundo (2001) supports Rapp’s (1998) view describing a paradigm shift that requires awareness, understanding and action:

*For a professional practitioner to fully appreciate the implications of the strengths perspective, it is necessary that they engage in a personal analysis, just as if attempting to shift ‘automatic thoughts’ or to engage ‘unique outcomes’, as alternative narratives to the dominant professional perspective. It is only in the de-centring or recognition of the traditional frame that any shift can be made. (Blundo, 2001:303)*

Early and GlenMaye (2000:123) support Blundo (2001) in their assertion of the strengths approach as encompassing much more than the “positive reframing and identification of strengths” than has been part of social work practice previously. In the opposing ‘corner’ Staudt *et al* (2001:19) consider that the strengths approach is not a unique practice model but rather a value stance that is consistent with social work values and the “profession’s long-standing recognition of clients’ strengths and resources”. Staudt *et al* (2001) further assert that the strengths perspective “has served the profession well by reminding us of social work’s long-standing values and helping us to keep them at centre-stage of the helping process” (Staudt *et al* 2001:19). McMillen *et al* (2004) while supporting Staudt *et al* (2001) go further in their argument using a detailed analysis of the history of social work practice that in their view supports a long-term dual focus on problems and competency and that the notion of a paradigm shift is not helpful or even real. The central tenet of McMillan *et al*’s (2004) position is that problem focused and strengths-based practice are not dichotomous and have historically existed together within social work practice:

*Just as there has always been a strengths-based, capacity oriented aspect to traditional problem-solving social work, there has always been a practical, problem-solving orientation hidden among the empowerment-based approaches to practice. (McMillen *et al* 2004: 323)*

Carpenter (1996) in his discussion of the constructivist approach, agrees with Staudt *et al* (2001) that constructivist approaches including the strengths-based approach support the traditionally held values of the profession, in particular the principle of client self-determination. Carpenter (1996) however attributes constructivism with providing added meaning to these values and the ethical aspirations and principles of the profession and thus differentiates constructivist approaches from 'traditional approaches':

*The principle of client self-determination has been held as a major, if not the major value in social work from the beginnings of the profession. It is supported not only as a value in constructivism, but is identified as a "natural state of the person by virtue of his /her structure-determined nature and exists whether or not it is valued. (Carpenter 1996:158)*

Cooper (2001) also supports Carpenter in his view of constructivist approaches as offering a restructuring and reframing within the client worker relationship where the client's meaning and understanding of their situation is central:

*Service users are hypothesis testers as well and will be undertaking their own active synthesis and interpretation of the social work intervention. (Cooper 2001:724)*

Margolin (1997), in his critique of the intention and practice of social work, rejects the analysis by Staudt *et al* (2001) and McMillen *et al* (2004). Margolin in his compelling, if somewhat depressing, discussion traces the history of social work practice as a profession in the United States of America (USA) that has used a "cloak of kindness" and the language of empowerment to maintain 'power over' relationships with clients and that social workers have been trained (not necessarily consciously) to use empathy as a tool to gain entry into and power over the lives of the people that we have called clients – typically the poor and marginalised in our society:

*People from one social class go into the homes of people belonging to another; they write biographies of these people, they judge what is normal and abnormal; they call it doing good (Margolin 1997:9)*

Margolin (1997) views the persistence of social workers to engage with so called 'resistant' clients as one of the hallmarks of social work practice and that the diagnostic tools and labels that social workers have adopted have provide reinforcement for the authority of social workers to intervene and to keep persisting:

*Client resistance is not a reason to discontinue visitation. To resist is to announce one's need for a visit. Resistance makes social work necessary.*  
(Margolin 1997:96)

The cloak of kindness according to Margolin (1997) is that social work claimed the work of social reformers such as Jane Addams however they have continued to practice social control via the casework practices developed by Mary Richmond (1917):

*Social workers may claim Jane Addams as their source of inspiration but they 'do' Mary Richmond. To put it in a nutshell – social workers attempt to change individuals and families, while social reformers such as Jane Addams aim to change institutions and culture.* (Margolin 1997:4)

Margolin's (1997) analysis of the history of social work in the United States of America leads him to construct patterns of ways of being that have forced social workers into unintentional hypocrisy, denial and double binds, despite rhetoric in the literature about the developmental journey of social work. He sees no real difference between the practice of social work in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and that of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and contends that the language of empowerment has been used since the 1970s; However the practice has served to maintain the same kinds of power relationships and practices that were inherent in the beginnings of social work practice. Brookfield (2000) in writing around the principles of transformational learning offers a useful analysis of the subtle and seeping way that oppression occurs and the way that the dominant view of knowledge remains dominant. This analysis supports Margolin's (1997) construction of social work and the notion of social work as part of the conspiracy of the 'normal':

*One cannot peel back the layers of oppression and point the finger at an identifiable group or groups of people whom we accuse as being the instigators of a conscious conspiracy to keep people silent and disenfranchised. Indeed the ideas and practices of hegemony become part and parcel of everyday life – the stock opinions, conventional wisdom, or commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that people take for granted. If there is a conspiracy here it is the conspiracy of the normal*  
(Brookfield in Mezirow and associates 2000: 138)

Pray (1991) continues the themes presented by Margolin (1997) asserting that latent outcomes of our practice are not connected to intentional behaviour but rather have arisen out of a belief in our ability to help without necessarily questioning what this actually means in the way that we engage with clients. In her analysis of how social

work has honoured the uniqueness of the individual as one of the cornerstones of its philosophy and guiding principles, Pray (1991) asserts that social work practitioners have not always been rigorous in their assessment of how this key principle is lived within their practice while at the same time espousing this as a core concept in the way that they work:

*Sometimes in their haste to subscribe to something that is absolutely positive, social workers subscribe blindly, without questioning to what the concept means. They fail to examine how they came to accept the concept as central to their professional value base, and they do not explore trends that have influenced the shaping of the concept. Social workers may give the impression of upholding the value while failing to evaluate carefully the ways on which their organisations, their work and their treatment inhibit, if not obstruct, the actual application of the value of their day-to-day practice. (Pray 1991: 80)*

Reid (2002) provides support for the idea that the strengths-based approach and other empowerment-based approaches do represent a shift in the nature of the construction of power within the client-worker relationship. Reid (2002) uses the example of the decline in the literature regarding the view of difficulties in the client-worker relationship as being the result of client resistance being replaced with the notion that these difficulties result from the worker not understanding the client's needs or beliefs that is their construction of the issue. The number of articles in the literature focusing on a strengths-based approach across a wide variety of practice settings and contexts also lends weight to Reid's view of a shift within the nature of the client-worker relationship (Chapin 1995, De Jong and Miller 1995, McQuaide and Ehrenreich 1997, Saleebey 1997, Munford and Sanders 1999, Russo 1999, Moxley and Washington 2000, Elliot *et al* 2000, Berg-Werger *et al* 2001, Blundo 2001, Cox 2001, De Jong and Kim Berg 2001, Early 2001, Rowlands 2001, Saleebey 2001, Munford and Sanders 2005). Reid (2002) also makes the key point also that although the literature may be reflecting a change in the power relationships between workers and clients we may yet not have seen this change firmly embedded in practice as the reality may not yet meet the rhetoric. Moreover referring to a study undertaken by Johnson and Renaud (1997), Reid (2002) argues that Johnson and Renaud's findings that the social workers interviewed were "less family friendly" than either the psychologists or psychiatrists interviewed in the study is evidence of the rhetoric of change without a corresponding change in professional behaviour:

*Despite professional statements about compassion, empathy, non-judgemental posture, egalitarianism, and consumer empowerment, the data consistently shows this sample of clinical social workers to fare least well among the three disciplines in their beliefs on dimensions of a family friendly perspective. (Renaud 1997:159 cited in Reid 2002: 13)*

Early and GlenMaye (2000) and Blundo (2001) also agree with Margolin's (1997) analysis about the impact of Mary Richmond's (1917) commitment to the need for careful documentation of the "facts" and use of "diagnosis" as having a long term and far-reaching impact on the nature of social work practice and the relationships between social workers and clients. Early and GlenMaye (2000:121) describe this process as "a problem-solving process utilising a disease metaphor". According to Early and GlenMaye (2000) the use of Freudian ideas in social casework served to reinforce this and has encouraged the development of the place of the expert social worker. This has continued on through the psychosocial approach and is evident in the language around problems and multiproblem and dysfunctional families that can be found within the social work literature (Dadds 1995, Ballew and Mink 1996, Turner 1996, Whiteside and Steinberg 2000 and Knauer 2002). Texts such as Turner's *Social Work Treatment: Interlocking Theoretical Approaches*, which was published as a fourth edition in 1996, reinforces even in its title the notion of diagnosis and treatment and mandates these as central to the social work role and tasks.

Early and GlenMaye (2000) offer a divergence from Margolin's (1997) analysis in their view that the development of social work has occurred from two competing strands. The functional strand of social work that can be identified with Virginia Robinson and Jesse Taft in the 1930s, according to Early and GlenMaye (2000), has emphasised the notion that change was centred in the client not the social worker in direct opposition to the "diagnostic school":

*Functionalism ... is part of a philosophical thread that winds its way through one aspect of the social work profession- the abiding presence of schools of thought advocating for social change, social justice and the search for meaning and purpose in human endeavours. The other major aspect of social work has focused on treatment and cure, and problem identification and problem solving. (Early and GlenMaye 2000:122)*

This analysis is useful in considering the dichotomising that can be observed in the debates in the literature around strengths-based practice versus 'so called' pathologising or deficits approaches.

This begs the question and reinforces the complexity of the debates where workers may profess to the ideals of social justice and empowerment and yet be held captive by the requirements of diagnosis and treatment. An interesting example of this is provided by Lipchik (1997) in her discussion of her approach as a collaborating professional within the solution focused school where despite a focus on the client as the person with the knowledge and expertise she stills refers to "treatment" indicating the pervasiveness of the diagnostic school purporting to lie within strengths-based approaches. Margolin (1997) asserts that the language of diagnosis has mandated the use of aggressive social work practices where social workers have used pathology to reinforce their actions:

*The more foreign and perverted clients can be made to appear, the more authority social workers have to visit and keep visiting. Aggressive social work, a social work at war, is so much easier with families defined as psychotic, sadomasochistic, rapidly multiplying, polymorphic, perverse.* (Margolin 1997:98)

Fisher and Karger (1997:18) assert that the focus on the individual with regard to diagnostic tools focusing on pathology and individual focused strategies have served to reinforce the individual as the source of problems and have "distanced clients from the collective social world". Goldstein supports Fisher and Karger (1999) in his review of the film "Joe the King" in his invitation to consider the way that social work language around diagnosis has been utilised as a 'frame' that has continued to stigmatise, marginalise and limit the meaning the people we call clients, attribute to their lives and has served to support the power of the social worker over the power of the client, often in subtle and indirect ways:

*What we hear in that moment if we really listen, is not a well-structured, chronologically ordered case history, but a tangled strand, a jumble of hopes and desires, tragedies and blunders, and conflicting motives, all shot through with moral snares of all kinds... the client's life as he or she envisions it, is a morass of goods and bads, rights and wrongs, evils and virtues, bearing little resemblance to the diagnostic labels or the balance sheet that the client inevitably earns. The latter are the professional devices we use primarily for our sense-making purpose that tend to omit the puzzling moral essence of the client's circumstances.* (Goldstein 2000: 349)

The assumptions within the 'pathology'-focused approach result in a particular kind of relationship between the worker and the client where the worker is accorded expert status and the client is the passive recipient of services. Power relationships are at the heart of this construction and understanding of the use of power in the worker client relationship is a key aspect of the exploration of the meaning of social work. Hartman (1992) encourages social workers to consider and take serious account of the impact of the role that they have as "expert" on the lives of clients:

*Social workers must reflect on the extent to which we may unwittingly and well disempower our clients through our role as the expert through the authority of our knowledge. (Hartman 1992: 1)*

Pray (1991) and Fook (1996) locate the difficulties around the (unwitting) use of power as being connected to a lack of reflection and understanding of the connections or disconnections between espoused theory and theory-in-use. Fook (1996) explores the connections between inductive and deductive processes in the making of links between theory and practice; workers may express a belief in the concept of empowerment for example and yet may not be able to connect this with the actual use of empowerment in their practice or when opportunities are available to explore the fit between espoused theory and theory in use may be surprised about what they actually observe as occurring within their practice. Fook (1996) makes a strong argument for opportunities for workers to develop frameworks for the critique and reflection of the connections between espoused theory and theory-in-use so that the use of power can be understood in all its subtleties within the client-worker relationship. Saleebey (1996) offers a useful comparison of strengths-based and pathology-focused approaches and this is offered in Table 2.1:

### Comparison of Pathology and Strengths: Saleebey (1996:298)

Pathology Focused Approaches	Strengths-based Approaches
Person is described as a "case"; symptoms add up to a diagnosis	Person is described as unique: traits, talents, resources add up to strengths
Therapy is problem focused	Therapy is possibility focused
Personal accounts aid in the evocation of a diagnosis through reinterpretation by an expert	Personal accounts are the essential route to knowing and appreciating the person
Practitioner is sceptical of personal stories, rationalisations	Practitioner knows the person from the inside out
Childhood trauma is precursor or predictor of adult pathology	Childhood trauma is not predictive; it may weaken or strengthen the individual
Centrepiece of therapeutic work is the treatment plan devised by the practitioner	Centrepiece of the work is the aspirations of the family, individual or community
Practitioner is the expert on clients' lives	Possibilities for choice, control, commitment and personal development are open
Possibilities for choice, control and commitment and personal development are limited by pathology	Resources for the work are the strength, capacities and adaptive skills of the individual, family or community
Resources for work are the knowledge and skills of the professional	Help is centred on getting on with one's life, affirming and developing values and commitments, and making and finding membership in or as a community

Table 2.1

#### Strengths-based Practice - Key Concepts and Principles

When the literature around strength-based practice is considered some key principles and concepts emerge that are at the heart of strength-based practice. These have been clearly articulated by Saleebey (1996) in his comparison of pathology and strength based approaches and three key ideas flow from this comparison and which direct strengths-based practice, namely:

1. A belief that all people and environments possess strengths which can be mobilised
2. People are experts on themselves
3. Workers need to suspend their beliefs and assumptions in order to truly hear clients and enable their strengths to be present in the work

It is helpful to use these principles as the defining themes within the literature relating to strengths-based practice for example De Jong and Miller (1995), Hubble et al (1999), Elliot et al (2000), Early and GlenMaye (2001) and McCashen (2001), have discussed the translation of these principles into practice. McCashen (2001) articulates this as a process of revisiting the principles and values personally, in our work with clients and the community and within our organisations.

1. *A belief that all people and environments possess strengths, which can be mobilised*

Saleebey (1997) has articulated the strengths-based approach that encapsulates a view of the world that demands that workers base their work with clients in a framework that encompasses concepts of strengths, competence and resilience and that no matter how difficult a situation there will be signs of the solution in people's previous experiences and responses to troubles:

*At the very least...the strengths perspective obligates to workers to understand that, however downtrodden or sick, individuals have survived and in some cases thrived. They have taken steps, summoned up resources and coped. We need to know what they have done, how they have done it, what resources inner and outer were available in their struggle to surmount troubles. People are always working on their situations, even if just deciding to be resigned to them; as helpers we must tap into that work, elucidate it, find and build on its possibilities. (Saleebey 1997:171-172)*

Saleebey (1996) acknowledges that people experience "ordeals" or difficulties in their lives but also asserts that a strengths-based approach does not accept that ordeals become problems that necessarily lead to psychopathology or permanent incapacity. Ordeals within Saleebey's (1996) framework are considered within each person's cultural context and personal experience and used as a focus for understanding strengths (individual, family and community resources) that can be mobilised to overcome the current difficult experience or challenge. The notion of resilience is a strong feature of Saleebey's (1996) analysis and connects with the work of Werner and Smith (1992), whose longitudinal studies of children growing up in poverty and Wolin and Wolin's (1993) work on resilience support the idea that children can overcome adverse circumstances without developing psychopathology. Walsh (2003) in her review of

studies related to the development of resilience considers that a focus on resilience offers a fundamental shift from a deficit-focused approach:

*This approach fundamentally alters the deficit – based lens from viewing troubled parents and families as damaged and beyond repair, to seeing them as challenged by life’s adversities, with potential for fostering, healing and growth in all members. (Walsh 2003: 2-3)*

Hubble et al (1997) describe how to honour the people we call clients and their theory of change asks workers to disengage with the worker as hero and reengage with the client as hero. This is also explicit in Wolin and Wolin’s (1993) description of survivors and Goldstein’s (1997) conceptualisation of clients as victors not victims. Curtis McMillen (1999) offers support for the ‘victor’ perspective with his research of how adversity can also provide benefit for people from the experience if they can ascribe meaning to that experience. These conceptualisations are important within the strengths-based framework and lend support to the notion of the ability to self heal as people and for the way that ‘problems’ are categorised and worked with.

## 2. *People are experts on themselves*

The relationship between the worker and the client is a fundamental arena in which strengths-based practice can be defined. The literature around strengths-based practice calls for a repositioning of the client relationship so that the client is viewed as an expert on themselves and the worker an expert on themselves not the client. Hubble *et al* (1999) reinforce the means to achieving this repositioning in the client-worker relationship as being related to listening more to the narrative of the client and becoming less focused on expert intervention by the worker:

*We have learned to listen more, turn off the intervention spigot, stay still and direct our attention to them (the client) recalling as Ram Dass once said “the quieter you become the more you will hear. The greater success we have experience in doing this, the more room clients have had to be themselves, use their own resources, discover possibilities, attribute self-enhancing meaning to their actions, and take responsibility. (Hubble et al 1999:207)*

Lipchik (1997) asserts that clients experience their relationships with friends, family and most helping professionals, including social workers, as relationships that are not collaboratively focused and that the solution focused collaborating professional offers something that could be considered unique:

*The solution- focused brief therapy relationship approach almost automatically provides difference, not only because of its almost unconditional regard, but because of its assumption that people have resources to help themselves. Friends, family and most helping professionals and criminal justice personnel tend to be either too helpful or offer diagnoses or social control. (Lipchik 1997:169)*

3. *Workers need to suspend their beliefs and assumptions in order to truly hear clients and enable their strengths to be present in the work*

Hartman (1991) offers support for Hubble *et als* (1999) view and a concrete way forward in the repositioning of the client worker relationship that encourages the client knowledge that has often been subjugated by professional viewpoints to surface. This approach acknowledges the worker's knowledge but does not value this above that of the client:

*We need not discard our knowledge, but we must be open to local knowledge, to the narratives and truths of our clients. We must participate with them in the insurrection of subjugated knowledge. We must listen to and honour and validate our client's expertise. We must learn to bracket our knowledge, to put it aside so it will not shape our questions and our listening and cause a barrier between us and the people we would not understand. Further more, we must not privilege our professional knowledge and we must let ourselves hear information form our clients that would challenge our views. We must attend. We have been mistaken before and we will be mistaken again. But we are only wrong when we continue to cling to our mistaken truths. (Hartman 1992: 3)*

Lipchik (1997) offers a concrete and detailed description of how to achieve this and the link between positions, attitudes and approach is clearly evident:

*So my goal for the relationship with clients is to establish a climate, or a context, in which they regain some sense of control and comfort. My assumption is that the moment they experience themselves as having room to manoeuvre in they will feel relief, hope and motivation to keep trying to find a solution...I need to make sure I am concentrating on understanding their reality more than mine. I must also make sure that I am focusing on just a bit more on hearing clients correctly than on what questions I should ask or what feedback I should give. (Lipchik 1997:162-163)*

Much of the literature around the strengths-based approach focuses on the importance of the repositioning of the client- worker relationship and Hubble *et al* (1999) also explain the use of the way that a worker uses their expertise to highlight and encourage the client's story to surface and dominate the helping process:

*...We listen and then we amplify the stories, experiences and interpretations that clients offer about their problems and their thoughts, feelings and ideas about how those problems might be addressed. Honoring the client's theory of change is a process-determined synthesis of ideas that evolves from listening and engaging the client's participation. (Hubble 1999:432)*

The challenge thus within a strengths-based approach is to hold a belief in change that is focused in hopeful, optimistic and respectful enquiry where the clients story dominates.

### **The Problem of the Problem**

Early and GlenMaye (2000) provide a comprehensive comparison between a problem solving and a strengths approach. The problem solving approach developed from the work of Perlman (1957) and can be observed in the Task-Centred Model developed by Reid and Epstein (1972). Early and GlenMaye (2000) argue that the problem solving approach is still deficit based, focusing on deficit's in the client's motivation, capacity or opportunity. One of the major differences between problem based and strengths-based approaches is the amount of time spent on the understandings or definition of the problem, for example problem specification within the task centred framework.

Munford and Sanders (1999) articulate the contradictions and environmental considerations that encourage social workers to individualise social problems and to focus on the source of problems as being located within individuals:

*While there may be a willingness to by social service workers to challenge intervention practices that frame the worker as the 'expert' and the client as an 'object' and a 'problem to be fixed', the current discourse of individualism that operates in society more generally still functions to locate the cause of social problems within the individual. (Munford and Sanders 1999:88)*

Early and GlenMaye (2000) support Munford and Sanders (1999) and Blundo (2001) and in their argument that the language of strengths is used within social work practice however the focus remains on identifying and addressing "the most critical contributing factor to the problem" (Early and GlenMaye 2000:124). Within strengths-based approaches the problem is seen in relation to the client's vision or goal for their future and an emphasis is focused on engaging with hints of possibility or times of exception when the problem is not present rather than when it is. The strengths-based approach invites clients and workers to understand the problem in regards to strengths,

competencies and resources that can be mobilised to address the problem and that within every problem there is some sign of the problem being overcome that can be highlighted and amplified. This is an alternative to traditional problem solving approaches that consider the problem with respect to deficits. Proponents of strengths-based approaches consider that solutions to problems are more likely to be found when considered in relation to strengths as opposed to deficits and that there is a stronger connection between problems, strengths and solutions. This is conceptualised in the following way in Figure 2.1:

### The Location of the Problem in a Strengths-based Approach

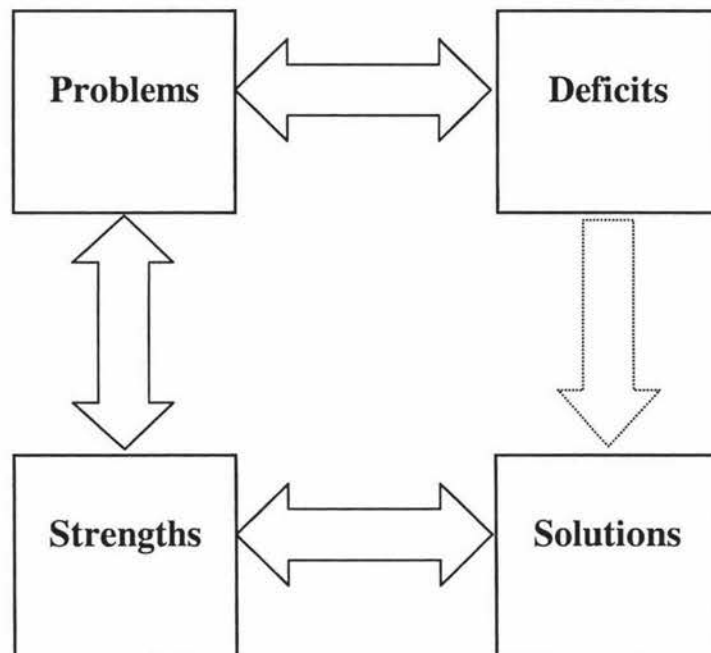


Figure 2.1

Strengths-based approaches tend to use externalising approaches seeing the problem as the problem as opposed to the person as the problem.

### Strengths-based Practice as an Approach to People/Way of Life

Edwards and Chen (1999) summarise the notion of strengths-based practice as underpinning a number of approaches to be found within the literature and which impact on helping professions beyond their origins:

*Called by a variety of names - second ordered family systems, resiliency, solution focused/oriented, social constructionist, competency based, narrative,*

*linguaging systems – these strength based therapies (Krauth 1995) are now employed in counselling settings beyond the marriage and family field from which they emerged. (Edwards and Chen 1999:351)*

McCashen (2001) in describing the journey undertaken by St Luke's Anglicare in Bendigo, Australia in becoming a strength-based organisation is very careful to acknowledge the diverse and broad range of contributing theories and approaches that have supported and provided inspiration for this journey:

*This has been a long, challenging and sometimes complex journey; one that still continues. Others have undertaken journeys like our and from time to time we have crossed paths. I want to acknowledge the sources of so much of learning: the people who live the principles of social justice, the women's movement, leaders in narrative therapy and solution focused therapy, the intensive family services movement, feminist social work, and radical and structural social work. (McCashen 2001:2)*

Hubble *et al* (1999) in their comprehensive and far reaching analysis of what works in therapy, postulate successful outcomes for clients as being connected to three key elements, which appear to dominate the literature around strength-based practice:

*The common factors research suggests that successful outcomes occurs largely by (a) creating a space for clients to use their resources and (b) ensuring clients' positive experience of the alliance... and (c) what we called the 'clients' frame of reference', namely the clients' theory of change. (Hubble *et al* 1999: 433)*

These themes run through the literature on strengths-based practice and provide a unifying framework for the development of practice methodologies. A review of the literature (Saleebey 1996, Edwards and Chen 1999, McCashen 2001) around the development of strengths-based practice illustrates that there is movement towards this as being a way of life as opposed to a treatment methodology or model. Lipchik (1997) in describing her work as a 'professional collaborator' from a solution-focused perspective advocates for strong connections between the relationship workers have with clients and the models that they utilise. Lipchik advocates strongly for seeing a strong connection between the philosophical underpinning and the technical skills that workers utilise. Lipchik describes this in terms of not seeing the work as technique and that the relationship between the worker and client provides the context and framework for practice:

*Many people interested in becoming solution-focused collaborating professionals begin to feel that they are not doing 'the model' correctly or that 'the model' is limited and/ or ineffective. My own view is that we should not really be talking about the collaborating/professional relationship and the techniques separately. They are intimately related and interdependent. (Lipchik 1997:161)*

Strengths-based practice is thus conceptualised within the literature not a technique or model but rather an approach to life and to people. Margolin's (1997) 'cloak of kindness' image can be reframed within the strengths-based approach within the principles of transparency and congruence. Strengths-based practice is not something that is put on when required but is part of the person of the social worker. The strengths perspective is as much about attitudes, philosophies and positions as technical skills and tools (Saleebey 1997, Lipchik 1997, Munford and Sanders 1999, Early and GlenMaye 2001, Blundo 2001, Goldstein 2001).

### **Aotearoa/New Zealand Context**

Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context the development of strengths-based approaches can be seen in development of social constructionist approaches (Allen 2003) as found in the writings of the Just Therapy Movement (Waldegrave 1990) and from the narrative tradition in the work of writers and practitioners such as Michael White and David Epston (1990) and Jonella Bird (2000). Munford and Sanders contribute a substantive strengths-based framework in their text *Supporting Families* (1999) and within their other writing (Munford and Sanders 2005). Other writers for example, Pitt (1999) and Jack (2001) and Ritchie (2001) and Thomas and Davis (2005) have contributed to the framework. Within practice the commitment by the non-governmental organisations such as the James Family (Presbyterian Support, Northern) and Methodist Social Services among others to introducing the Strengths-based Approach as developed by St Lukes in Australia is evident. Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the founding document on which the relationship has been based between Tangata Whenua and Tauwiwi also offers this perspective with its key principles of protection, partnership and participation. Ruwhiu (2001) identifies the key principles and tasks that must be undertaken in understanding this relationship and the implications for social service development.

- Te Tiriti O Waitangi has become influential in realigning the helping services to meet the needs of Maori users by legitimating Maori conceptual, theoretical and practical wisdom/experience as the basis of social work action with whanau/hapu and iwi Maori
- An overt challenge for non-Maori to participate fully as Treaty partners
- Understanding the overt and under the surface interactions – how meaning is ascribed
- Respect for self-management – self determination
- Notion of mana-enhancing practices – empowerment, positive self worth, service to others, collective responsibility, wellness, interrelatedness, interconnectedness, love for others, commitment (Ruwhiu 2001:58-63).

These principles and tasks are congruent with the principles of strengths-based practice and provide a contextual framework and requirement for the approach as part of a paradigm shift. If the key to strength-based approaches is in a paradigmatic shift to respectful, hopeful and solution-focused as opposed to deficit-focused, problem solving approaches then the place of supervision becomes a central ingredient in this paradigm shift to redefine the client-worker relationship. Strengths-based supervision has arisen out of a view that if strengths-based practice is to develop and thrive in working with clients, it must be experienced and modelled within supervision relationships and within the broader agency contexts in which practice is located (Cohen 1999, Michael 2000). This next section in the chapter now seeks to provide a discussion of the supervision literature and the notion of strengths-based supervision

## **Strength-based Supervision**

### ***Relationship between Casework and Supervision***

Munson (1993), Tsui (1997a), O'Donoghue (1999), Davys (2002) Kadushin and Harkness (2002) and O'Donoghue (2003), have reflected on the history of supervision in the helping professions and identify parallels between the practice of casework and the practice of supervision.

O'Donoghue (1999:24) in his analysis of the history of supervision concludes that over

time there have been “shifts in emphasis occurring between the administrative and professional aspects of supervision” with the current situation being that professional supervision is suffering at the hands of new public management that values managerial supervision and accountability over professional aspects. This serves to reinforce a supervisor dominated and accountability focused process.

Mainstone (1998) and Cohen (1999) compare the traditional elements of supervision as defined by Kadushin (1992) that is, administration, education and support with the strength-based perspective and come to the conclusion that the traditional model has paralleled the deficits-based models prevalent in client work. It is my contention that in the climate of new public management that this focus on deficits is fuelled by the responsibility supervisors feel for issues around risk management and safe practice (Morrison 2001) in social service contexts that are becoming increasingly more complex.

Beddoe (2000) discusses the need to hold the client material at arms length and explore the impact on the worker. The current climate and culture of risk and blame is not supportive of this holding of the client at arms length and reinforces the responsibility of the supervisor for the social worker. This view parallels the analysis and reinforces the view espoused by Margolin (1997) with regard to the worker- client relationship. Alan Aplin, the grandfather to two children killed by their stepfather commented in the media in support of the actions of social workers involved with his family. This small but telling quote nevertheless reinforces the notion of the supervisor’s role in risk assessment and accountability functions or casework by remote control:

*They did their job and took notes and went back to the office and would have put them in front of supervisors and they make the decisions.* (Dominion Post November 14, 2003)

An example of the issues around the responsibility of the supervisors for risk assessment that is inherent within traditional models of supervision is provided by Proctor (1994), a leading writer and trainer in supervision who describes the problem of grappling with these issues and the impact that this has on the supervision relationship:

*It is this ultimate responsibility which makes it hard for supervisors to work respectfully and empathically while remaining aware that they may have to challenge and confront really toughly at some point in time. (Proctor 1994:313)*

Cohen (1999) contends that traditional supervision needs to undergo a major process of transforming if it is to be based on strengths-based practice. This transforming process is consistent with that viewed as fundamental by Blundo (2001) if strengths-based practice is to be more than rhetoric. Cohen (1999) sees strength-based supervision as a bridge between the academic writers around strength-based practice and the ownership of these principles by the profession; a place where the practice of strengths-based practice can be supported and nourished. Munford and Sanders (1999) acknowledge the centrality of supervision as a place for the transmission of values and beliefs and thus the kind of work that occurs with families:

*The way in which family workers interact with each other and their supervisors reflected the messages that staff gave to families about the way in which constructive relationships take place. (Munford and Sanders 1999:16)*

Anderson and Swim (1995) conceptualise this as a process that encourages the supervisor and the supervisee to learn and develop together in a mutually crafted way:

*The art of therapy, and thus the art of supervision, is the art of conversing in a multiplicity of meanings simultaneously. This is a difficult art to learn. We believe therapists and supervisors gain from sharing their work with each other as part of mutual learning and continued professional growth. (Anderson and Swim 1995:6)*

### ***Writings Around Strengths-based Supervision***

In reviewing the literature on the strengths-based supervision some important themes emerge. There has been one specific text on constructionist approaches to supervision, O'Donoghue (2003), in which the writer makes the point that despite the expansion in the practice literature regarding working with clients from a social constructionist perspective there is very little parallel writing with regard to supervision. This literature review has had a selective focus in its orientation, that is strength-based supervision and it has been fascinating to discover that only three articles focusing specifically on strengths-based supervision (Cohen 1999 and Edwards and Chen 1999, Goscha and Rapp 2003) could be located. Munford and Sanders (1999) in their text *Supporting Families* discuss the importance of supervision in the supporting a strengths-based

approach to client and assert the role of supervision as a key support for the development of practice. Brashears' (1995) definition of supervision as an aspect of social work practice reinforces this. There are a number of articles focusing on solution-focused supervision (Wetchler 1990, Thomas 1994, Selekman and Todd 1995, Juhnke 1996, Triantafillou 1997, Rita 1998, Prestbury *et al* 1999, Lowe and Guy 2002) in the counselling and mental health arena and two solution-focused articles that consider fieldwork education from a solution-focused perspective (Mainstone 1998 and Bucknell 2000). Carroll (2000) in developing the links between strengths-based supervision and his notion of 'inside out supervision' is also describing supervision that can be considered to be consistent with a strengths-based approach:

*Supervisors live the supervisory life, not just do something to others. The values of supervision are the value of life, the position and stance taken, the belief system and underlying behaviour. Supervisors supervise themselves first of all before being supervisors to and of others. Living the supervisory life precedes being a supervisor of others in much the same way as spiritual directors have lived and been involved in what they are helping others find and discover for themselves. (Carroll 2000: 13)*

Anderson and Swim (1995) offer an article that considers collaborative relationships in supervision and a translation of the concepts of these kind of relationships from the worker-client arena to the supervisor-supervisee arena. Michael (2000) describes the kinds of supervision required in the postmodern era that encourages multiple constructions of meaning or "truths" and supervision processes that focuses on the development of meaning in supervision that is "understood as a journey, that the supervisor and supervisee share together" (Michael 2000:9).

Very little writing in the literature is supervisee focused thus reinforcing the notion that supervision is a supervisor-dominated process. Hawkins and Shohet (2000) and Bond and Holland (1998) have chapters in their books that focus on the needs of supervisees and Knapman and Morrison (1998) offer an a "workbook" approach to consider how to make the most of supervision from a supervisee perspective. Carroll and Gilbert (2004) have also produced a workbook approach for supervisees however these types of publications remain few in a sea of material directed at a supervisors.

### ***Relationships Between Supervisors and Supervisees***

The writings on strengths-based supervision including the literature describing solution-focused supervision (Wetchler 1990, Thomas 1994, Anderson and Swim, 1995, Juhnke 1996, Mainstone 1998, Rita 1999, Edwards and Chen 1999, Cohen 1999) discuss the parallel between strengths-based practice and strengths-based supervision. Much of this literature focuses on the nature of the relationship between supervisors and supervisees as being based in respect, collaboration and optimism. Anderson and Swim (1995) provide a succinct and useful definition of collaborative supervision:

*Supervision as collaborative conversation that is generative and relational, through which supervisees create their own answers, and in doing so experience freedom and self-competence. Our approach to supervision implies a postmodern philosophy and places heavy emphasis on the roles of language, conversation, self and story as relational. (Anderson and Swim 1995:1)*

The focus in strengths-based supervision thus is to engage the supervisee as an expert on himself or herself. Michael (2000) redefines supervision in the postmodern arena as co-vision or shared vision. Edwards and Chen (1999) also discuss the process of strengths-based supervision as co-vision rather than supervision and detail a process for engaging the supervisee as the expert. The role of the supervisor is to use their expertise in engaging the supervisee with their strengths and competencies:

*For supervision these premises imply that the supervisor is an expert in an exploratory conversational process, in which she or he engages collaboratively with the supervisees in the telling, enquiring, interpreting and shaping of the supervisees narrative. Such a supervisory position implies that the supervisor is not an expert on the supervisees, but that the supervisee is the expert on his or her own life and on his or her narratives. (Edwards and Chen 1999:213)*

### **Expertise without being the expert**

Learning to support an 'un-knowing' stance in work with clients where they are viewed as being the experts on themselves must be supported in supervision if the paradigm shift that Cohen (1999) and Blundo (2001) see as fundamental is to occur. Supervision relationships and processes are a key place to learn about and experience unknowing as supervisees and to have this modelled by supervisors. Anderson and Swim (1995) concretise this as a process that occurs slowly and is experienced as a journey from the

need to understand (diagnose) to an acceptance of multiple meaning and constructions of the “truth”:

*The shift from a need for certainty and predictability through general psychological language to an acceptance and comfort with the uncertainty and randomness of human experience occurs slowly. It evolves as supervisees experience a collaborative and connected way of constructing meaning, and thus learning with others. As they experience and recognise their own voice, “power” and “authority” to generate knowledge, certainty becomes a non-issue and the need for it dissolves. Supervisees often experience this shift and an acceptance of uncertainty long before they have the words to make sense of it. In a paradoxical way, there is considerable certainty and freedom in needing not to know with theoretical certainty, and to accept the richness of the many ways to know. (Anderson and Swim 1995:6)*

The writings around strengths-based supervision parallel the literature around strengths-based practice with regard to the way that the supervisor utilises their expertise in the relationship. Edwards and Chen (1999) describe this as a process of non-action where the supervisor offers their ideas not as a compensation for deficit in the supervisee but to contribute to the resources available to the solution to the issue brought to supervision:

*We give suggestions, reflections, thoughts or ideas from our past experiences; however they are given within the context of a wei-wu mind. We do not expect that they must make changes or corrections, as we believe that our supervisees are the ones carrying out the counselling, and thus are in the moment with the clients. If we wish for them to be non-hierarchical, to co-construct meaning and solutions, and to enjoy the moment with their clients, we must do the same with them. (Edwards and Chen 1999:209)*

This not knowing or non-action stance fits with the non-normative approach promoted by Mainstone (1998). Mainstone (1998) has conceptualised strengths-based supervision as a means of dealing with anxiety and power issues within the supervision relationship and views strengths-based supervision as being predicated on a non-prescriptive and non-interpretative collaborative, anti-oppressive relationship that is focused on what the supervisee brings to supervision, particularly around their strengths and competencies. This also requires supervisors to suspend their disbelief as discussed by Saleebey (1997) in his writing about work with clients. Cohen (1999) redefines the strengths-based supervisory environment as one that is focused upon the joint evaluation of the worker’s successes rather than a joint struggle with questions, problems and frustrations. The focus in strengths-based supervision thus considers that supervisees know what they want from supervision even in their beginning development as practitioners (Thomas

1994, Mainstone 1998). The emphasis is thus on creating opportunities where the supervisee's strengths competencies and resources are encouraged to support the building of further competencies.

Strengths-based supervision is thus conceptualised in the literature as a process that parallels and supports strengths-based practice with clients. Strengths-based supervision is offered as a process that mirrors a focus on respect, competence and collaboration and is a place to discover the "hints of possibility" and times of exception where the problem is not present as a framework for the way the worker then works with the client.

### **Strengths-based Supervision and Reflective Practice**

The importance of reflectivity and self-supervision within and outside of supervision is highlighted in the literature as a support for process of not knowing (Anderson and Swim, 1995, Fook 1996 and Munford and Sanders ). Brookfield (2000) supports this in his analysis of the differences between critical reflection and transformative learning. This is connected to the collaborative model inherent within a strengths-based model of supervision.

*.... Just because critical reflection is occurring does not mean that transformative learning inevitably ensues. An episode of critical reflection on practice does not automatically lead to transformation. As Mezirow acknowledges, the assumptions that one holds can be exactly the same after critical reflection as they were before... the foundational premises that govern one's thoughts or actions would have to be fundamentally changed.*  
(Brookfield in Mezirow and Associates 2000: 142-143)

This is linked with the parallel process idea and the centrality of supervision relationships in redefining the work with clients. Supervision is a key place where the power to enact and be supported in transformative learning is essential. In his analysis of transformational learning processes Mezirow discusses the concept of "cultural activists" and the writer contends that this is what strengths-based supervision is inviting supervisors and supervisees to engage with. Mezirow (2000) offers the idea of educators as cultural activists who have the following principles as their guiding framework:

*Cultural activists are ...committed to support and extend those canon, social practices, institutions, and systems that foster fuller freer participation in reflective discourse, transformative learning, reflective action and a greater realization of agency for all learners. (Mezirow 2000: 30-31)*

This kind of reflection and cultural activism addresses the issues raised by Fook (1999) and identifies the place of reflective practice in challenging “technicist approaches to social work practice” (Fook 1999:191) and is an opportunity to reflect about the framework from which one is operating. Supervision that encourages this kind of reflection will encourage supervisors and supervisees to be able to evaluate if their work together is truly strengths-based.

Carroll (2000) offers six propositions that are necessary if supervisors are to live the ‘supervisory life’ and to meet the conditions necessary for transformational learning to occur within themselves and within their practice as supervisors:

1. Becoming reflective
2. Learning, and learning how to learn
3. Becoming process oriented
4. Establishing healthy relationships
5. Learning connectedness
6. Becoming an interior person (Carroll 2000: 19)

The propositions appear to offer concrete and useful reflective tools for the ongoing evaluation of the congruence of the supervisory process from a strengths-based perspective. Allan (2003:69) discusses the notion of reflexive practice within a critical social work framework and her notion of reflection within an environment of uncertainty supports the principles identified within the literature of strengths-based supervision and its value in supporting work with clients that is truly critical.

## **Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to discuss the major themes in the literature regarding the key principles and ideas underpinning strengths-based practice and strengths-based supervision. One of the key considerations within this chapter is whether or not strength based practice is offering anything other than traditionally held social work practice principles.

This chapter has explored constructions of the client–worker relationship and the parallels in the literature regarding the supervisor–supervisee relationship. The strengths-based literature defines this approach as a paradigmatic shift in the relationships between worker and client and views supervision as a central ingredient in supporting this paradigm shift. There is a large body of literature discussing the principles and means to working in a strengths-based practice, however the literature regarding strengths-based supervision is sparser. The vast majority of the supervision literature is directed toward supervisors with very little writing that is offered that speaks directly to supervisees reinforcing a supervisor-directed process and encouraging supervisee passivity.

The literature on strengths- based supervision offers the opportunity for supervisors to have a clear framework for the development of supervisee-focused and directed supervision. Strengths-based supervision can be seen as a means to getting under the cloak of kindness (Margolin 1997) and supporting the worker to identify and make concrete links between their attitudes, values and positions. The fundamental contention within the literature on strength-based practice and strength-based supervision is that if supervision is mirroring these values, attitudes and positions then this will support and encourage congruence in the actions, behaviours and positions adopted by workers. This requires congruence on the part of the worker and the supervisor in the mutual facilitation of a collaborative strength-based process in supervision.

## **Chapter Three - Research Methodology and Research Process**

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### **Introduction**

The key research questions relate to the participants' constructions of strengths-based practice and strengths-based supervision and how an organisational change process to incorporate strengths-based practice within the Organisation impacts on the experience of supervision from all participant perspectives. A key aim of this research was to provide an opportunity to reflect with the Organisation on their transition to becoming a 'strengths-based organisation'. Within this aim was a specific focus on the impact of this transition on supervision processes and functions. One goal of the study was to develop with the participants an understanding and analysis of what strengths-based supervision is and strategies that support the development of strengths-based supervision.

In order to answer the research questions a research methodology informed by participatory action research was employed to consider the impact of a transition to strengths-based practice on the process, content and focus of supervision within the organisation. This chapter discusses the research design and explains and justifies the method utilised to gather, collate and analyse information. There is an exploration of the process, the profile of the participants, the focus of the data collected and the means by which this data was collected. The process of data analysis is described and the impact of limitations on the research is considered. The ethical issues and limitations of the study are reviewed and analysed.

### **Strengths-based Practice and Participatory Action Research Methodology**

The identification of "sensitising concepts" (Patton 2002: 289-290) that is, the theories, concepts and ideas which implicitly and explicitly shape the direction taken by the researcher and thus shape the way the research is undertaken are important. The need to model the process and philosophical underpinnings of the strengths-based approach became highly evident when designing the research process and is an important sensitising concept underpinning the research. In this study the researcher invited

participants to reflect on their experience of an organisational change with specific consideration of the impact of this change process on supervision practice. The purpose of this study was to bring to the consciousness of the participants their views of the objective and subjective processes at work with regard to their experience of supervision.

Concepts underpinning qualitative and participatory research (McTaggart 1991 and Hart and Bond 1995) appear to be well aligned with strengths-based practice. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) reinforce the importance of understanding the objective “externally given” and subjective “internally understood and interpreted” elements of practice. They see both these aspects as fundamental if practice is to be understood in terms of how it is really practiced and how it is constituted historically and socially and how it can be transformed. It was critical that the process of the research made it safe for all the voices of the participants to be heard within the research as this study was asking supervisors and supervisees to expose themselves and their practice. It was fundamental for example, to use a methodology within the research processes that was collaborative such as the focus group meetings and semi-structured individual interviews. It was important that the focus groups and interviews encouraged the narrative of the participants to be heard within a respectful process that did not marginalise the participants or subsume their views within my views as the researcher and also encouraged the participants to dialogue together about their perspectives and experiences.

The following table considers the principles of participatory action research alongside the principles of strengths- based practice.

## Comparison of Participatory Action Research and the Strengths-based Approach

<b>Participatory Action Research</b>	<b>Strengths-based Approach</b>
1. Participatory action research is a social process which deliberately explores the relationship between the individual and the social	1. Constructionist view of the world. Practice is an intersection where the meanings of the worker, the client and culture intersect
2. Participatory action research is participatory in that it engages people in examining their knowledge (understandings, skills and values) and interpretive categories (the ways they interpret themselves and their actions in the material world.) It is participatory in that people only do action research on themselves, individually and collectively. It is not research done “on” others.	2. Individuals, family or community are the experts on themselves. Power with relationships as opposed to power over. As workers we add to the resources strengths and abilities of those we call clients not as a compensation for deficit. Personal accounts are the way to appreciating and knowing the person
3. Participatory action research is practical and collaborative	3. We collaborate with our client, stakeholders in the process together
4. Participatory action research is emancipatory	4. Strengths-based practice is solution and possibility focused
5. Participatory action research is critical	5. The focus is on a belief that possibility is always present and that we need to have a healthy disrespect for the impossible. Seeks to address social, personal cultural and structural constraints to people’s growth and liberation
6. Participatory action research is recursive (reflexive, dialectical). It does not take an armchair view of theorising, it is a process of learning with others, by doing-changing the ways we interact in a shared social world	6. Power with, change focused, interactive process – develops a picture of the future, change is not change unless its noticed
7. Participatory action research aims to transform both theory and practice	7. Emphasises people’s ability to be their own agents of change by creating conditions that enable them to control and direct the process of change

Saleebey (1994), Hart and Bond (1995), Saleebey (1996), McTaggart (1991), Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), McCashen (2001)

Table 3.1

## Reflective Practice and Participatory Action Research

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) identify different approaches to the study of practice within the action research arena and their view of practice as reflexive to be studied dialectically appears to fit with the approach utilised in this study. Kemmis and McTaggart go on to define practice in this sense as:

*Political in an even more unconscious sense: It understands that to study practice is to change it, that the process of studying it is also "political", and that its own standpoint is liable to change through the process of action- that is a process of enlightenment about the standpoint from which one studies practice as well as about the practice itself. (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000:578)*

Fook (1996) in her writing about reflective practice provides a strong justification for the use of participatory action research in social work practice as a means to clearly link theory and practice. Fook (1996) in her support of an inductive approach to research sees this as a means of affirming social work practice as a key arena for the integration of theory and practice. Fook *et al* (1999) provide further support in their conceptualisation of action research as a key aspect of practice:

*The field of social work practice becomes an integrated site at which research is conducted, and where changes indicated by the research process are enacted. This view is essentially an enabling one for practitioners, in that it locates the responsibility for, and source of research, squarely in the field of practice experience. (Fook *et al* 1999:166)*

Argyris and Schon (1978) provide an important argument for the approach embodied in action research that relates to theory and practice integration and development, via their model of critical reflection as a tool for the analysis of practice. This framework is based on the notion of improving practice via reflection on the consistency or otherwise, between the theory (ies) practitioners say they are using (espoused theory) and the theory (ies) actually used in practice (theory in use). Understanding the connection or disconnection between espoused theory and theory in use is an important feature embedded within participatory action research methodology.

The study meets these criteria in that the research has potential use and utility to the participants and also the possibility of being generalised to other organisations contemplating a transition to strengths-based practice. Participatory action research is

change focused, with change embedded in the process and not something that just comes out of the recommendations at the end of a project (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998). The nature of the research question requires this of the research as the participants are already engaged in a change process.

### **Engaging the Participants**

Sanders and Munford (2003) identify the importance of clarity about the roles and responsibilities that research participants have in the shaping of the research methodology and the process of the research. This study, although linking in with a change process within the Organisation, was generated from outside the Organisation with the impetus for the research coming from my experience as a supervisor and interest in the impact of strengths-based practice on supervision. This necessitated careful consideration of what was being asked of research participants and clarity about the ownership and use of the research and the commitment required from the participants. Securing the support of the Organisation in creating time for participants to be involved was also fundamental to the research. The benefits of ensuring that these issues are addressed is clearly stated by Sanders and Munford (2003):

*The achievement of effective research outcomes requires skills in the management of complex relationships. These include relationships between team members and between researchers and participants. Research also requires a significant commitment from all parties. These parties need to feel that the research is worthwhile and that it will make a contribution the development of practice and organisational knowledge. (Munford and Sanders 2003:159-160)*

The success of this research was dependent on the securing of the participants' confidence and commitment within the process and engaging them as researchers in their own experience of supervision in this process. The use of the information generated by this study clearly has two purposes, one that is linked to my interest in strengths-based supervision and the completion of this thesis and the interest by the Organisation in the broader use of the study with respect to the particular sites and possibly other branches of the organisation. It was imperative that the participants were clear about these purposes and the implications for them in taking part in the study.

## **Research Design**

The research data in this study was gained through focus groups and individual interviews with Supervisees and individual interviews with the External Supervisors and Clinical Manager for the organisation.

### **Selection of the Research Participants**

#### *Theory-based/operational construct sampling*

The potential participants for the research were originally to be drawn from one site of the organisation where all potential participants were directly involved to some degree with the transition to strengths-based practice and were all either supervising or being supervised. This sample meets the criteria of theory-based or operational-construct sampling as defined by Patton (1990:183) as “finding manifestations of a theoretical construct of interest so as to elaborate and examine the construct”.

Initially I sought to answer the research questions from data gathered from participants drawn from one site of the organisation or who were associated directly with the site as external supervisors. The total number of potential participants available from this site was 15. This figure initially included the Clinical Manager, one Internal Supervisor who was also receiving supervision, eight Supervisees, and six External Supervisors (one of whom was also a training consultant to the organisation).

There was also use made of “opportunistic or emergent sampling” (Patton 2002:240). During the gaining of informed consent it soon became apparent that the one site approach was going to prove to be too limiting in terms of sample size as only three external supervisors, the clinical manager and three supervisees initially agreed to participate in the study. One of the supervisees was agreeable to an individual interview however was not willing to consent to participation in the focus group process. This thus created a focus group of two participants, which was not considered a sufficient number for the effective running of a focus group process. The scope of the research was then broadened with the approval of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee to include two further sites of the organisation that were also involved in the

change process. Information regarding the research study was sent to a further four potential participants with consent being obtained from one person. This then allowed the construction of the focus group process with three participants. After receiving consent back from this additional participant in the second site it then became apparent that the external supervisors contracted to this site had not had the initial request for information sheets sent out to them. A further three sets of forms were thus sent out resulting in one further external supervisor consenting to participate in the study.

Emergent sampling was also utilised at the first focus group meeting when a participant attended the meeting who had not completed the expression of interest forms.

Colleagues who were participating in the research brought this participant to the meeting. One further participant who had not completed the expression of interest or consent process, by coincidence happened to be at the site of the focus group meeting and also expressed interest in joining the focus group meeting. Consent forms were given to both these participants prior to the focus group commencing. At the conclusion of the focus group both these participants expressed an interest in participating in individual interviews and consent for these was also secured. I explored the rights of these new participants to decline to participate and received assurances that they were taking part freely and without 'coercion'. The following table illustrates the potential and actual participants in the research:

### Potential and actual research participants:

	No of expression of interest sheets sent out	Number of information packs sent out	Individual interviews (Consent received)	Focus group (no of participants)
<b>External Supervisors</b>	10	4	4	Not applicable
<b>Supervisees</b>	9	6	6	5
<b>Clinical manager</b>	1	1	1	Not applicable
<b>Total Number</b>	17	11	11	5

Table 3.2

### ***Participant Groups***

The data generated in the research has been collated and organised in two participant groups. In the original methodology the participant groups were surveyed on the basis of their key perspective being that of a supervisee perspective, external supervisors perspective, or from a management perspective. In the course of the individual interviews and focus groups it became apparent that the participants did not fall tidily into each of these groups. Among the supervisee participants three were also offering internal supervision and two were providing external supervision and the Clinical Manager was providing internal management and clinical supervision and was also receiving external supervision. During the course of the research there were a number of changes in role for the participants as there were changes in management personnel during the course of the study and there was a change in management structure and management responsibilities assumed by two of the participants as a result. The participants have thus been placed in two groups – participants from within the Organisation and External Supervisors.

### **Demographic Profile of the Participants**

#### ***Organisation Participants***

Of the seven Organisation participants six were female and one was male. One of the participants identified as Māori, one was British and the remainder identified as New Zealand Pakeha. This participant group were a mature group with participants falling in the 40-60+ age groups. There was a range of roles being undertaken by each of the participants within the Organisation and they belonged to a variety of professional associations with several of the participants belonging to more than one professional association. Two of the participants identified their profession affiliation to social work and the remainder saw themselves as primarily counsellors. The profile of the Organisation participants is presented below in Table 3.2:

### Group Profile of Organisation Participants

Age	No of participants	Cultural identity	No of participants	Professional Association	No of Participants
40-50	2	Pakeha	5	New Zealand Association of Counsellors	4
50-60	4	NZ Maori	1	New Zealand Association of Psychological Type	1
60+	1	British	1	Mind Body Health Association of New Zealand	1
				Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers	2
				No professional association currently	1

Table 3.3

The roles of each of the organisation participants are detailed below:

- Site coordinator, counsellor, educator, supervisor, 2 participants
- Programme coordinator, counsellor, supervisor, 1 participant
- Social worker/family counsellor/supervisor, 1 participant
- Programme coordination, counsellor, educator, 2 participants
- Clinical Manager, 1 participant

#### *External Supervisor Participants*

Within the External Supervisor group there was one male and three female participants who were all experienced practitioners and in the 41-60 age ranges. One participant identified as a social worker, one saw their foundation profession as social work however also saw himself working as a counsellor, one identified as a psychotherapist and one participant identified as a counsellor in terms of professional orientation. Two of the participants in the External Supervisor group were also employed within

management positions within their respective organisations, one was in private practice and one was working as a social worker within an organisation. All participants within the External Supervisor group identified as New Zealand Pakeha.

### **Integrating Triangulation into the Research Methodology**

Denzin (1989) and Patton (1990) discuss the rationale for strengthening research methodology through triangulation or the combining of research methodologies. Denzin (1978b) cited in Patton (1990) asserts that data triangulation should be a principle underpinning research methodology in all research. It became evident that data triangulation was possible to achieve within this proposal via methodological and data triangulation that is through in-depth interviewing of research participants and focus groups. Triangulation was also achieved via the range of participants, which enabled a multiplicity of participants' perspectives.

### **Interviewing and Focus Group Sequence**

#### *External Supervisor Focus Group*

It was initially proposed that there would be a focus group only process for External Supervisors. This was based on the assumption that as all the supervisors were external to the Organisation it would be difficult to engage them in more than one interview format due to the financial cost of this to them. It was assumed that there would be a considerable amount to gain by interviewing the supervisors in a focus group setting as opposed to an individual interview setting. Once the expression of interest forms from the supervisors were returned it became clear that due to the geographical spread of the external supervisors that it was not going to be possible to run a focus group process at all. Consent was then obtained from the External Supervisors to participate in individual semi-structured interviews only. Three supervisor interviews were undertaken prior to the first supervisee focus groups and one after the first supervisee focus group. The focus group with supervisees also provided an opportunity to share reflections/ideas that were emerging out of the individual interviews. It was interesting to note that there was regret expressed by three out of the four supervisors that it had not

been possible to secure a focus group as they had been looking forward to having dialogue with other supervisors.

### *Supervisee Focus Group One*

This focus group provided an opportunity to explore the perceptions of supervisees about the transition to strengths-based practice and the connections to supervision practice. The aim of the focus groups was to use the information and ideas gained to provide a platform on which to develop the questions for the individual interviews with the Organisation participants (Supervisees and Clinical Manager) and the External Supervisor participants.

It was initially envisaged that there would be two focus groups held prior to the individual interviewing sequence. In reality, due to the time it took to secure an appropriate date and time for the first focus group, and the inability to secure a focus group process for the External Supervisor participants the individual interviewing sequence had already begun prior to the first focus group occurring. None of the participants, in the first focus group however had participated in an individual interview prior to the focus group. The sequence of interviews and focus groups is included in Appendix C.

I facilitated the focus group meetings. The focus group was audio-taped and I also recorded on newsprint the ideas that were merging in the discussion so that it was visible and transparent for participants and gave them further opportunities to give me feedback as to the way that I was interpreting their responses. The focus group began as follows:

- Review of consent
- Questions or issues to be clarified about the research or the group process
- Practical issues including breaks and ground rules

After the establishment of the process and ground rules for the group I then collected the demographic data relating to the participants. The focus group then moved into exploration and discussion with the following areas as the broad focus for the discussion:

- The culture of supervision in the organisation

- How supervision occurs in the organisation
- The group experiences with regard to peer supervision
- What is strengths-based practice
- The transition within the organisation to strengths-based practice and the implications for supervision
- Ongoing conversations between Supervisees, External Supervisors and the Organisation

The focus group responses were transcribed and collated and sent back to the participants for checking. There was a further opportunity to amend these responses at the beginning of the second focus group.

### *Supervisee Follow-up Focus Group*

Following the individual interviewing sequence the supervisee focus group was then reconvened to discuss the themes and patterns that were emerging from the individual interviews. The follow up focus group was another link in ensuring the research remained participatory and that the voices of the participants predominated the research. This focus group contributed to the participatory action research methodology in that participants were afforded an opportunity to reflect as a group with regard to changes and developments specifically related to supervision. The areas for discussion at the focus group were:

- Review of the focus group process and ground rules
- Review of the focus group notes from the first group
- What has happened for you in relation to strengths-based supervision since we last met
- Any changes that you have made to modify supervision with regard to content or process
- Any changes the supervisor has made?
- Any changes the Organisation has made?
- Building a group definition of strengths-based supervision
- What does a strengths-based supervision process look like?
- What are the components of a strengths-based supervision contract?

- In what ways might this be the same or different from a ‘traditional’ supervision contract?
- How does Strengths-based supervision deal with the issue of recording/notes in supervision?
- Specific examples of what supervisors say or do that lets you know that they are strengths-based
- Any other areas/ideas

### *Discussion of Focus Group Methodology*

Within organisations there are likely to be routine and/or tacit agreements between workers (Barbour 1999:124). Bringing people together within organisations can stretch the bounds of the informal practices of the relationship either by encouraging discussion around topics normally avoided or by prolonging conversation to explore issues in greater depth. This can result in stilted conversation or later regrets by the participants about their contribution to the discussion.

The common ways of interacting can, according to Barbour (1999), highlight the concerns of the group and the patterns of interaction that have been established within the organisation and can also provide a forum whereby the statements of the participants can be challenged. Barbour (1999) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of utilising pre-existing group forums within an organisation as the location of focus group activities. The advantages appear to stem from the use of the existing group dynamic to provide energy for the process. Three of the participants in the focus group worked in one site and the other two participants were connected through their involvement in the other two sites. There was high energy in the process with all participants expressing enthusiasm for participating. They were also enthusiastic about the food provided by the researcher to sustain them during the interview!

Fern (2001) discusses focus group size and explores the notion of traditional focus group size as being around eight participants. Fern (2001) goes on to support the notion of smaller focus groups of four-five participants where the focus of the study concerns the unique experience of a particular segment. This would seem to apply in this study

and in the end a group of five participants was established due to the snowballing effect of other participants encouraging their colleagues to join the process:

*Because the groups are homogeneous, they will share common expectations but they are more likely to do this in a shorter time period and move into their more unique expectations. (Fern 2001:161-162)*

### ***Individual In-Depth Interviews***

Four External Supervisors (including an External Supervisor who was also acting as a training consultant), six Supervisees and the Clinical Manager consented to participate in an individual interview. These interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one to one and a half hours with the exception of the interview with the Clinical Manager. This interview was unable to be completed in an hour and a half due to the detail of response that was generated in the conversation. Consent was gained from this participant to reconvene the interview at a time suitable to the participant to complete the interview schedule. The total interview time with the Clinical Manager was two hours and forty-five minutes. There were three variations of the interview schedule however they all followed similar themes. The interview guides are attached as Appendix B. All the interviews reviewed the consent process, process for the interview and the transcription of the interview tapes.

Demographic Data was collected about each participant in the following categories:

- Age group
- Cultural identity
- Roles with regard to the organisation
- Professional Association

In each of the participant interview groups (Supervisees, External Supervisors and Clinical Manager) the following themes were explored:

- Experience of being supervised: key experiences and themes
- What is strengths-based supervision?
- Impact of the transition to strengths-based practice in the organisation and impact on their practice
- Implications for supervision
- What fit should there be between agency and supervisor vision
- The language of strengths and the practice of strengths in supervision

- Recognising strengths-based supervision
- Links between individual and group supervision

Although having some similar themes and issues covered in each interview there was not necessarily a set order in which the questions were covered as this was determined by the participant's response. Within the supervisee interviews there was an opportunity to reflect also with the participants about any reflections or questions that had arisen as a result of the focus group meeting.

### **Ethical Concerns**

I met with the General Manager of the Organisation and the Clinical Manager for the particular site of the proposed research to discuss the proposal and implications of the research for the organisation. An ethics proposal was completed and submitted to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC). This proposal is attached as Appendix A. A letter of support from the Organisation in which the research was undertaken was obtained and submitted to the Ethics Committee. MUHEC subsequently approved the research.

### **Access to participants**

The idea for this study was generated from my own experience as a supervision practitioner and recipient of supervision. These roles enabled me to reflect on how I have constructed strengths-based practice and the implications of this within my practice as a supervisor and supervisee. In the course of this reflection I identified the Organisation as one that was also engaging in reflection about strengths-based practice. Contact was made with the Clinical Manager of the Organisation to explore the possibilities of becoming involved with the organisation in some way to explore the impact of strengths-based practice on the experience of supervision within the organisation. There were opportunities to discuss the proposal with two staff members of the Organisation at a strengths-based practice conference and I was also invited by the manager of the Organisation to meet with the whole staff group of the proposed site of the research to discuss the principles, focus and process of the research and to answer questions that potential participants may have had. The potential participants were

invited to explore the research proposal and to make suggestions regarding the research questions and methodology.

Once ethics approval had been obtained an information pack was sent to potential participants. Potential participants were canvassed for interest in participating in the study via a letter written by me but sent out by the organisation. For external supervisors this required a covering letter from the organisation explaining why they were sending this out. Those interested in participating as a result of the initial letter were requested to register their interest in writing, directly to me. This was not consent to participation, merely an expression of interest. The Organisation was asked to make the initial approach to the research participants to avoid any possibility of coercive behaviour by the researcher.

Potential participants who completed the expression of interest form (Appendix A) were then sent by the researcher the appropriate Information Pack (Appendix A) that provided them with the necessary details to give informed consent regarding their participation. Supervisees wishing to participate in the study provided informed consent to participate in an individual in-depth interview and/or focus group discussions with other participants. External Supervisors were invited to participate in a focus group discussion but as previously discussed the geographical spread of the supervisor group necessitated seeking consent for participation in individual interviews only for this group of participants

### **Confidentiality**

The participants for this study were either employed within three sites of a large social service organisation or were contracted as external supervisors by these sites to provide professional supervision for employees. This raised potential issues connected to the protection of confidentiality for participants. Confidentiality is always a central issue in research, however in a research study such as this where the group of potential participants is very small, the issue of protecting the identity of individuals becomes even more critical (Finch 1986). This remained a concern even when the research was broadened from one to three sites.

In order to address these concerns it was vital that the research did not name the Organisation because of the small sample size of participants and all reasonable efforts were made to ensure confidentiality was maintained and that sensitive information was respected. This was achieved through the use of numbers to differentiate the Supervisee and External Supervisor participants and the Clinical Manager was identified by role only. Identifying data both related to participants and the name and location of the Organisation was omitted in the research report.

Initial letters inviting participants to find out more about the study were sent out via the Clinical Manager of the sites chosen for study. These letters invited potential participants to respond directly to the researcher and there was no information passed back to the organisation by the researcher about the response to the initial letter or subsequent involvement by participants in the interviewing process.

All transcription of interviews with participants was subject to a confidentiality agreement. Each participant was then sent a copy of his/her interview transcript plus a copy of the tape. Each participant was thus able to amend the transcript if they so wished and then return it to me within a specified and reasonable time frame that is, two weeks. Once the transcripts were returned from the participant the material was then available to be used in the thesis.

All communication via mail was to the researcher's address at Massey University and the use of specially marked courier bags ensured that there was no opportunity for this to be opened by any one else other than the researcher.

It was not possible to guarantee anonymity between the Supervisee participants in the study due to the use of the focus group process however the identification of these participants by number and consent to use information from transcripts kept the material from the individual interviews confidential. Participants also consented to involvement in the focus group process with the knowledge that that there were limits to confidentiality.

There were particular issues related to confidentiality and anonymity among participants particularly with regard to participation in the focus groups. It was evident due to the small pool of participants in the study, who in the organisation were not participating in the focus group process by their absence. The size of the sample made participation or non-participation very obvious. The participants chose to meet at one of the Organisation's sites for the focus groups and the Clinical Manager for the sites also happened by coincidence to be at the site at the beginning of the first focus group. Anonymity for participants could thus not be maintained with respect to focus group participation within the organisation.

Expressions of interest forms were sent by the organisation to all staff. These forms were then directly returned to me. Information packs and consent forms were sent to those interested in exploring involvement in the research further by the researcher not by the organisation. There was no further direct link between the Organisation and the research process except with regard to contact between the participants and myself particularly where the participants' preference was for me to contact them at their work place. The participants concerned were obviously relaxed about knowledge of their participation in the research and where there were a number of participants from one site indicated their willingness to pass on information to each other about focus group and individual interview processes and times.

### **Participants Right to Decline**

All participants had the right not to participate or to withdraw from the research at any time. It was important that the organisation and myself who had an interest in the completion and outcomes of the research did not influence participation in any way. There was no contact made with potential participants who did not return the expression of interest forms thus respecting their right to decline to participate. Participants who became part of the research as a result of the emergent sampling process were told of their right to decline and there was no engagement with them until consent to participate had been received.

### **Potential Conflicts of Interest**

In undertaking this research I envisaged a number of issues that could produce potential conflicts of interest. The first related to my role as a supervisor and trainer in private practice with a vested interest in strengths-based practice. It was very important that my view of the world did not assume more importance than the views of the participants and that there was transparency in the process particularly with regard to the way the research was written up. The voices of the participants must be clearly evident within the research if it was to be truly accountable.

I had no professional or personal relationships with any of the Supervisee or External Supervisor Participants in the research. I had never been engaged as an External Supervisor by the agency and none of the participants had enrolled in any of the papers that I have responsibility for or teach in at Massey University. I had a collegial relationship with the Clinical Manager of the organisation and I had co-facilitated some training with the Clinical Manager. Some of the research participants attended this training however no discussion of the research was entered into during this training with either the participants or the Clinical Manager. This training occurred prior to the individual interviewing and focus group processes.

### **Data Storage and Security Arrangements**

All hardcopy and disks of all transcripts were secured separately, and password-only access was maintained on my home computer and my Massey University computer. As part of the ethics approval I agreed to retain in sealed containers all material on disk or existing as hard copy generated by this study for a period of five years unless it has been stated by a participant that they would like the tape and the transcript to be returned to them at the conclusion of the study. At the end of this period of five years all disks will be erased, hardcopy versions of the transcripts and audio-tapes destroyed.

### **Organisation and Analysis of the Data**

As discussed earlier all the individual interviews were audio-taped and then sent onto a professional transcriber. The decision to have the tapes transcribed was largely

influenced by the volume of audio-taped data generated in the research and an injury that precluded me from spending large periods of time working on the computer. Once the tapes were received back from the transcriber I played the tape alongside the transcribed copy and made changes to the transcript where I believed the transcriber had incorrectly interpreted the tape. I highlighted these changes in bold and invited the participants to make any changes to these bold areas or any other areas of the tape where necessary. The participants were also sent the tape so that they could compare the transcript against the audiotape. Once the edited transcript was received back from the participants I then listened to the tape again whilst reading the transcript and began coding under themes.

The focus groups as described earlier were also audio-taped and the responses generated in the discussion were also recorded on large sheets of paper. Due to the complexity of the data and the challenges of transcribing the focus groups I undertook this task on the basis that having facilitated the meetings it was easier for me to work with the tapes. This was also an opportunity to stay close to the data analysis in a way that was not possible with the individual interviews. The notes from each focus group were written up and then matched with the tapes with additions changes then made. The focus group was then sent to the participants for them to review and make changes that they felt more accurately reflected the discussion at the focus group meetings. The notes from the first focus group were also reviewed at the beginning of the second focus group.

Each of the transcripts was then re-read and themes identified in the margin of the transcript. These themes were then initially coded without reference to the research questions or the literature. Once all the material had been coded the themes were then linked together within their participant groups, that is, organisation participants and external supervisor participants. These themes were analysed with regard to the criteria developed with the participants alongside the literature written around strengths-based practice and strengths-based supervision. The data was broadly organised initially into two participant groups under the themes identified as having emerged within the interviews and focus groups. This data has of course also been seen through the frame (Rein 1983) that I bring to the research and those of my supervisors. Making the

different frames explicit within the data analysis is an essential ingredient in achieving meaningful data.

The data was broadly organised around participant perspectives in the following areas:

- Participants constructions of strengths-based practice
- Perspectives on the transition to strengths-based practice
- Constructions of strengths-based supervision
- Impact and implications of strengths-based practice on the relationship between Supervisees, External Supervisors and the Organisation

Within each of the broad areas key themes were then identified as sub-headings and participant responses then identified from the interviews and focus groups and clustered together using a “cut and paste” approach. There was considerable effort made to re-read and review each of the transcripts a number of times and to ensure that key themes and data relating to the research questions was not missed.

### **Limitations of the research methodology**

#### ***External Supervisor Sample***

One of the limitations of the research methodology related to the small number of External Supervisor participants and their geographical spread leading to an inability to secure a focus group process with these participants. Although there was a significant amount of data generated within the External Supervisor individual interviews it would have been advantageous to have had the opportunity to dialogue with these participants as a group. This would have strengthened the participatory action research methodology and the ability to triangulate the data.

#### ***Time taken to undertake the research***

Extending the scope of the project from one site to three and the subsequent emergent sampling process contributed as a limiting factor in the research. This was further exacerbated by significant professional and personal issues for the researcher encountered during the course of the research. The data collection process thus occurred over a 12-month period.

### ***Change of Personnel Within the Sites***

There was a significant change of personnel within the three sites of the organisation during the course of the research. Four out of the seven participants employed by the organisation left the organisation during the period of the data collection process. This impacted significantly on the second focus group collation as only two members of the focus group were still working in the Organisation at the point when the transcript was available for editing by the participants, which limited the feedback received.

### ***Geographical Spread of the Participants***

The participants in research were spread over a 350km distance. This impacted on ease of access to participants by the researcher and also ease of access by the participants to the researcher. There were challenges in joining the change process as proposed in the original research proposal. This geographical spread of the participants also impacted on their experience and perspective of the change process.

### ***Equipment failure***

One of the External Supervisor interviews had to be repeated due to the failure of the tape recorder resulting in an unintelligible recording of the interview. The impact of repeating the interview cannot be fully determined however this may have impacted on the spontaneity and flow within the interview given that the supervisor had to repeat the interview. This second interview was shorter than the first interview and shorter than any of the other supervisor interviews. There can only be speculation about the material lost as a result of the tape failure.

### ***Scope of the research***

The scope of the data analysis could have broader in terms of the information about generated the scope of this study as a masters thesis and a focus on strengths-base supervision necessarily limited the scope of the study. It is also necessary to be cautious

about the ability to generalise the research findings and also their transferability to other contexts. The lack of direct observation of the supervision process within this research could also be considered as a limiting factor.

### **Summary**

This chapter has discussed the methodology and research process undertaken in the study and key questions and issues that arose as a result of the decision to use a participatory action research approach to inform the research method. The material in this chapter provides a framework for the organisation of the data in the following chapters and some conclusions about strengths-based supervision and its implications for practice.

## Chapter Four - Constructions of Strengths-based Practice

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In this first chapter of three chapters that present the research findings there is a discussion of the participant constructions of strengths-based practice; their views around the change process occurring within the Organisation with respect to strengths-based practice and the impact of the organisational change process on the participants' practice and experience of this within supervision are also presented.

The participant constructions have been organised within two groups namely Organisation participant responses (Supervisee and Clinical Manager) and External Supervisor responses.

### Participant Constructions of Strengths-based Practice

#### *Organisation Participants*

The participant constructions of strengths-based practice were gained from focus group one and the individual interviews with the Clinical Manager and Supervisee One.

When assembling the responses to the question about defining strengths-based practice participants responses appear to reflect the themes and debates in the literature discussed in chapter two of this study. The following ideas and themes emerged in the collation of the organisation participant responses:

- Traditional practice or a new approach
- How change occurs
- Pathologising approaches versus strengths-based practice
- Theoretical framework or an approach to life?
- Collaboration and client-directedness
- Respectful practice
- Transparency
- Dealing with challenging issues

### ***Traditional practice or a new approach***

The key ideas identified within the participants' views reflect, in particular, the competing views offered by Staudt *et al* (2001) and McMillen *et al* (2004) of strengths-based practice as nothing more than traditional values and practice and the alternative arguments posed by Saleebey (1996), Margolin (1997), Munford and Sanders (1999) and Blundo (2001) that strengths-based practice is a departure from deficit-focused work with clients and that although the helping professions have used the rhetoric of strengths that their work has actually been based in relationships that reinforce the power and control of the therapeutic process. These two positions are clearly reflected in the views expressed by Supervisee One and the Clinical Manager. Supervisee One constructed strengths-based practice as jargon that was already incorporated in the principles of the counselling profession:

*It has been presented frequently as an opposition to the medical model, where there is a diagnosis and other people decide how things should happen or as an alternative to statutory social work where other people might make decisions on behalf of others. So in a sense, I mean, the strength-based principles are no different from the absolutely basic principles I would see, in counselling.*

The Clinical Manager held an alternative view, seeing strengths-based practice as a reordering of the traditional relationship between the professional worker and the client:

*.... There's an assumption that the clients know their situation, know their story, know some things about what works and what doesn't work and it's about exploring that sharing your own expertise in that environment with them. So it's actually about addressing power imbalances. You can't always diminish them or reduce them but at least you can address them ... make them transparent and clear and as much as possible working to minimise the imbalance on the basis of knowing that the clients have strengths, understanding and insight, capability, resources etc.*

These two views thus offer examples of the debates within the literature and the challenges within these debates related to the naming and defining of strengths-based practice and the role of the helper in the helping process. It is also possible that these views could reflect the different professional orientations of the participants that is, counselling and social work.

### *How Change Occurs*

One of the key differences identified within the Organisation participants was the view held around the principles underpinning the change process. This difference was most clearly observed when the Clinical Manager and Supervisee One interviews were compared. Supervisee One considered that insight as a result of a free association process essential. The focus within strengths-based on goal setting from this participant's perspective would therefore limit the free-association process occurring:

*My real belief is in a process that develops from the client more or less free-associating. From that insight develops- some from the client, some jointly and some within the therapist who communicates them to the client and lets the client reflect on that too. It is a 'free' process. The counselling input might be influenced by training – therapy methods but always (emphasis provided by the participant in a review of the transcript) in harmony with the client's own position, their phenomenology shaped by their history, culture, values etc. That they are wanting to explore in counselling sessions and relationship that is the only process I truly believe in – hence my strong reaction to any models or process that interferes with that. Goal setting would be one such antithetic approach. I am guided mostly by developmental theories of personality*

The Clinical Manager on the other hand viewed that change occurred through the client understanding how things could be different rather than by analysing problems and gaining insight into and understanding of the problem. Insight in the Clinical Manager's view could occur as a result of the process but was not necessary for change to occur:

*But that's a kind of a quite common belief that you look at the problem and the more you unravel about the problem, the better it will be. And of course there's historical work understandings around the insight is what brings change. I guess in a strengths approach change means change and change also can bring insight. But insight isn't the critical component. Difference is the component, the important component.*

These quotes further illustrate the heart of the debate about the language and definitions of strengths-based practice and the challenge that strengths-based practice faces in establishing itself as a distinct approach to practice. The quotes above also raise questions about the 'right way' of practising from a strengths perspective, that is, is there one way of being strengths-based? These views could also be expressions about differences in perception about the basis and location of the change process within helping professions.

### ***Pathologising approaches versus strengths-based practice?***

In the focus group and individual interviews there was an attempt to identify and explore participants' views around the debates in the literature that dichotomise strengths-based and deficit approaches. Within the focus group discussion there was a variety of opinion about this debate with participants agreeing that strengths-based practice is not new practice however it is offering new language and a new way of naming the relationship between workers and clients. The participants were in agreement that systems for example the social welfare, justice and education have not been strengths-based and that people have been trained to work in particular ways within these systems that they did not identify as strengths-based. Another participant observed that workers could be strength-based in non strengths-based systems. One participant held the view that societal structures, in particular patriarchal systems, had maintained and reinforced power-over people structures and a further participant felt that we came from a punitive society that had contributed to the use of deficit and pathologising approaches. There was some discussion within the focus group that there has been the association of "mystique" with the helping professions that had reinforced the expertise of the professional worker "and made a line between us and our clients". The focus group was optimistic that things were changing and that a reordering of the relationship with clients was possible "as society has changed we have been able to name another way of doing things".

Supervisee One offered an alternative position that the dichotomising within the literature was nonsense and that there was an invitation within the language of strengths-based practice to consider deficits:

*I think they are nonsense actually. Well even if you talk about strength and constraints to some degree there is a notion of a deficit. Doesn't it get away from a negative feeling of a person to more a feeling of empowerment? But to me even something like, if I think of things like a medical model, yes it can be obnoxious practices but there can be extremely person-centred, empathic processes they are exactly the same as counselling, there maybe a diagnostic description, but that could be worked with in a way that lets the person understand what is happening to themselves, work alongside the person, lets the person have most of the say. I suppose I am thinking in psychotherapy or counselling type terms, or even possible setting goals, multiple agencies, I can't see that they are incompatible to be honest. And I think each has something to offer the other. It depends on how they put it into practice really. But that is a potential problem.*

The Clinical Manager expressed irritation at the use of dichotomising because of its tendency to polarise people and devalue their experience and expertise resulting in defensiveness and for people to deny strengths-based as different from what they already do:

*It's an unfortunate process – part of me is really irritated by it – it's.. how to find a language is part of the challenge because the way that we try and indicate what it is, is we create, a polarisation and an extreme so that strengths-based is one extreme and deficit or medical models at the other. And so the implication is there's nothing in between and if you are not strengths based, you're the other, and if you're not strengths-based then the other is really an ugly position and you shouldn't be there. Which of course is saying to people the very opposite to what strengths-based is about which is the value of people's own experience, the expertise that they have, the way that they've managed to find solution....the truth is I haven't found an answer to how to do this and by creating contrasts I think we're probably doing ourselves a disservice, but at the same time by not doing that we run into the risk of people just saying, oh well I do strengths-based without actually having a good look at the range of options.....*

The Clinical Manager recognised this as one of the major challenges that the strengths-based approach faces in terms of how it finds language that defines it without polarising people. The other challenge that the Clinical Manager connected to this was to find language that invites people to consider the principles, values and positions within strengths-based and the alternative ways of practice it may offer:

*By doing that polarising they're not invited to without defensiveness explore their practice and I think it would be more useful in terms of having conversations with people about it is kind of like what were the values, the beliefs, the attitudes and stuff that invited you into this work. And how have they been shaped over time and how have you been able to hold on to them, what practises have encouraged you to hold on to them, what practises have kind of brought tension around that, and I've found maybe those would be better ways of having the conversations but, I don't know, in all honesty...I have no idea how to talk about a strengths approach so that, I don't know, maybe it's a western thing that you do, always do everything in contrast to something else.*

There was diversity within the organisational participants regarding the idea of strengths-based practice as a new way of practising; however there was significant support for the idea that strengths-based practice did provide concrete and clear ways of working with clients. There was strong support within the participants that the

dichotomising of deficits and strengths approaches was not helpful because of the way that this alienated people.

*A theoretical framework or an approach to life?*

All the Organisation participants saw that strengths-based principles were compatible with a range of models of helping. The Clinical Manager expressed this, as being connected to the idea that strengths-based practice is not a model but rather an approach to life and an attitude and position taken with respect to people:

*If I was to think through what strength-based is, it's less about what you do as the values, the beliefs, the attitudes of the position you take and what you do consistent that comes from other pre-existing kind of modalities, so that for example I can do cognitive behavioural stuff from a strengths-based approach.*

There was a rejection by all the Organisation participants of the idea that strengths-based is owned by any particular theoretical orientation or that is a set of skills or techniques. The Clinical Manager held a view that there have been attempts to turn key strengths-based values and attitudes and positions into skills. This participant considered the key to strengths-based practice was in the connection between worker and client as human beings not within professionalised behaviour or the technical application of a set of strengths-based skills:

*And some people technologicalise that as well by talking about the skills of empathy, so even that's professionalised, but it's actually about being a human being in connection with another human being. And then, but in that, it being a professional relationship and in that, you have more of the professional behaviours and stuff, but it being a human connection ... our relationship.*

Supervisee Three supported this view arguing that strengths-based practice was an attitude and that its use was not confined to the helping professions:

*Anybody... there'll be people who have that approach with that attitude, I don't even like the word approach, this is about the individual attitude, and they're out there, there are millions of us who deal with other people with respect and dignity .. it doesn't, I mean it can be a parent to the child, like it doesn't have to be, I mean that's what it was all set up as, like, this is a sort of counselling-social work approach.*

The Clinical Manager considered that any theoretical orientation was compatible with the strengths approach as long as the theoretical approach was underpinned and governed by the values, beliefs and attitudes of the strengths-based approach:

*So you can do kind of almost any theoretical transformation process or practise process if you like in strengths approach. So my thinking around a strengths approach is that it's more about the values, the beliefs and attitudes in positions and then the 'how to' is effectively analysed by and controlled by that process, and so it's not the 'what you do' that's strengths based, it's the less tangible. But of course you can analyse the 'what's done' against 'does this look like' that would be strengths-based in approach. And it's if you like the behavioural indicators of those things that if you like are below the surface, so that you can say somebody's behaving strengths-based by the way they behave whether they can articulate the language of strengths or not, because it's actually, those other things is the value laden stuff that for me is strengths based. The other stuff is just practice ways of doing stuff.*

This participant highlighted the “less tangible” aspects of strengths-based practice in terms of values, attitudes and positions as the most important aspect of identifying a strength-based approach.

Participants were invited to identify the theoretical approaches that they would connect with strengths-based practice. These are listed below:

- Brief Therapy (de Shazer)
- Solution focused
- Gestalt
- Transactional Analysis
- Narrative
- Client centred – Rogerian
- Eclectic skills
- Reframing – NLP
- Cognitive behavioural
- Developmental personality theories/psychotherapy approaches

These responses would appear to be consistent with the participants' views that they considered that they practised from a strengths-based perspective within a range of theoretical orientations. One participant in the focus group felt that cognitive behavioural approaches were not consistent with strengths-based practice however there

was no elaboration in the focus group discussion as to the reason for this view. It could be assumed that frameworks were identified on the basis of a sense of connection that the participants had with the frameworks and also the degree of comfort that they felt in utilising these frameworks. It could also be questioned that the counselling and therapy orientation of the participants that framed the participants' practice was underpinning the participants' views of these frameworks in relation to strengths-based practice.

Supervisee One favoured the use of developmental and personality theories in her view of strengths-based practice and considered that the narrative and solution-focused approaches were goal oriented and applicable to particular client needs but not all client needs. This participant felt that the structure within solution- focused and narrative approaches would narrow the focus of her work with clients:

*My notion of strength- based practice would like to include developmental/personality theories as the primary focus (more like psychotherapy) solution-focused, narrative, goal-oriented work is for a different purpose. It is relevant for different client presenting concerns or needs...yes although that structured way seems quite broad in practice, it is a bit narrower than it is said to be.*

The Clinical Manager saw that the strengths approach utilised by St Lukes Anglicare in Bendigo, Australia was a melding together of a number of theoretical frameworks into a package:

*I think what's happened is, certainly with St Luke's is that they have brought together if you like, solution-focused practice and brief therapy and strengths-based and kind of all kind of pulled it into one package.*

The frameworks identified within the participant responses connected to some degree with postmodern and constructive approaches to working with clients. The impact of the counselling and therapy orientation of the participants within the focus groups and individual interviews could also be observed in the particular theoretical frameworks identified by the participants as being connected with strengths based practice. The recurrent theme within the Organisation participants' responses was that strengths-based practice was an approach to life rather than a particular theoretical orientation.

### *Collaboration and Client Directed Process*

One of the key ideas emerging out of the interviews and focus groups was the notion that strengths-based practice was client-directed in nature and based around a notion of change that clients possessed competencies and resources that could be engaged to provide solutions to current issues or problems:

*Strength-based practice is characterised by a number of things for me. One is collaboration and client directiveness in that sense of sharing together the expertise.*

There was a dichotomy of opinion regarding whether or not this focus on client-directedness was a departure from traditional views of helping:

*I guess my belief is that all practices are strength-based, but strength-based to me is being presented as something where the client has most direction. The client has all the say really; you are supporting the clients in setting their own goals. ... the client process is central, the client's wishes are central, and there is a belief that the client isn't the problem but the problem is the problem. Clients may not always be aware of their assets, the so-called strength they have and constraints that they may have within themselves and that they can be drawn upon, but aren't aware of them in the process, but it is always a goal directed process.*

The idea of client-directedness was explored in the focus group discussion with the group participants taking the view that strengths-based practice focused less on having to understand the problem and more on where to go to with the problem and the idea of drawing upon the client's strengths in terms of determining where to go. The comment was made in the focus group that "no matter where you come from the focus is on drawing out strengths and focusing on an alternative picture". The Clinical Manager identified also the social constructionist concept that there is more than one way to construct the truth about something and the importance of valuing the client construction of the truth and their resilience. The Clinical Manager raised the idea that Saleebey (1997) talks about in terms of the way that humans are able to focus on healing and regeneration and the notion of self-righting:

*Another feature of the strengths approach is that there is more than one truth and I guess what I understand by that is that people's self righting mechanisms, their resilience, those kind of things lead people to discover all sorts of ways of solving problems and all sorts of ways of creating meaning around things. And so as professionals we sometimes kind of think there is only one way to do something or acceptable ways.*

The Focus Group supported the Clinical Manager's view regarding the role of the worker seeing the worker's role as "not an expert but worker has expertise to share, the worker has willingness to participate in a joint process and share their expertise, however is not dictating how things will be" (focus group participant). The idea that the worker has something to offer in terms of their expertise however this is not being used to compensate for deficits within the client but is considered as the worker adding to the resources of the client was also expressed in the focus group and in the Clinical Manager interviews. One focus group participant expressed that they would see themselves crossing over to a deficit focus if they became prescriptive about what needed to be done or "if I am thinking I know best". Supervisee One offered another view around the role of the worker and the way that professional could use their judgement and ability to assess without compromising the centrality of the client in the helping process:

*I think the client and client's perception does need to be central with them meaning making about their lives and all of that, but I think that can be offered alongside a professional assessment which either works alongside a client as a joint development of insight. There could be an input from both. I don't think it should ever be imposed on a client but I think it might broaden their perspective to have some of that professional insight explained and then they have choices around the degrees that they engage or utilise it and of course that is going to vary with the worker and their training... But I believe it is a joint process. To engage a professional to some degree implies some degree you want to engage in something more than you can do for yourself.*

### ***Respectful Practice***

A key idea that emerged in the focus group and the Clinical Manager interview was the idea of respectful practice underpinning strengths-based practice. The Clinical Manager considered that respect was connected with the position that you adopted with clients and was the foundation of a collaborative relationship:

*Respect that's obviously born out of the position that you take with clients, it's not a position again where as a professional you know better than and are able to make. Rather, it's about respecting that the position the client has as someone with dignity and worth collaborating with. Effectively, working a partnership with as participants together and then how to be able to work something out. So, and as much as anything, strengths-based practise is about position.*

The focus group considered that respect enabled a process of working with people and involved a “power-with rather than a power-over” relationship with clients. This was described as not having an “up or down process” and that there was equality in the client-worker relationship with each contributing to the work. Allan (2003) challenges this view citing the work by Healy (2000) who considers that equality is not possible in the client-worker relationship and that the key issue is the management of power in the relationship (Allen 2003:61). Allen (2003:61) discusses the role of the worker in the empowerment process acknowledging that there has been a shift from the modernist view of power as something done by the worker to the client to a view that the role of the work is to support clients to empower themselves. This latter construction would appear to connect with the organisation participants’ views of the use of power in the relationship.

### *Transparency*

The concept of transparency was identified by the Clinical Manager as a key component in strengths-based practice. This was defined as practice that was open in terms of information and process with nothing being hidden from the client:

*Another characteristic of that is transparency so that it’s not sort of behind professional doors, consultations and things that go on and hidden files and those sort of files where clients have to not just ask permission but then they get their files back highly edited.*

This view was also supported within the focus group with participants identifying transparent processes and recording practices as part of strengths-based practice. The Clinical Manager also considered that transparency was also to do with sharing the knowledge base and our rationale for helping with clients:

*And another feature of strengths-based is that knowledge is kind of power and often professionals will hold onto their knowledge base, so they’ll act out of their knowing either consciously not sharing it or unconsciously just acting out of it without actually describing their thinking behind what they’re doing. A strengths-based practice is also about sharing the rationale, the knowledge base that you have...*

These ideas are consistent with the description of the collaborating solution-focused professional as defined by Lipchik (1997) and other writers within the strengths-based

literature who are focused on a reordering of the relationship between workers and clients (Saleebey 1997, Rapp 1998, Blundo 2001).

### ***Dealing with Challenging Issues***

The focus group and Clinical Manager considered that a strengths-based approach offered a particular way of managing challenging situations with its focus on transparent bottom lines and respectful straight talking with clients. Several focus group participants felt that working with involuntary clients was more difficult, however, despite the challenges of engaging involuntary clients and the issues that might be present that “no matter what you can explore client strengths”. The Clinical Manager supported the focus group discussion around the ability of a strengths-based approach to deal with challenging situations through the use of clear bottom lines and transparent respectful processes:

*The strengths approach does deal with the real hard end issues and it has bottom lines, but the characteristic of the strengths approach I think is how those things are clarified in the position that you hold around them, with your clients. So that you can for example, in protection work, have a very clear stance around what the bottom lines around the well-being of children are. But what often happens is that people don't know what those are, they don't know what signs of progress would be and they don't know what they have to do, and so a strengths approach isn't about saying that there's no bottom line, it's about being clear about the journey.*

The focus group and Clinical Manager thus saw strengths-based practice as offering a clear and transparent framework for dealing with difficult issues and challenging situations with the view that a strengths approach was more likely to be helpful in the situation of mandated clients which fits with Jenkins (1990) notion of inviting clients to assume a position of responsibility in the area of abuse.

### **Working with the problem**

The Clinical Manager reflected on the way that problems have been constructed in strengths-based practice and issues of language related to the strengths-based approach. The Clinical Manager made the point that the language of a strengths perspective has been interpreted to mean that little time is spent looking at problems with a focus on

solutions and he felt that it was important that there be greater awareness that the problem is important in a strengths approach particularly with regard to gaining a clear understanding and perspective on the client's view of what is happening:

*And so it is very difficult in strengths approach to get the language that we need because what we try and say is that we don't spend so much time looking at the problem, we're more interested in the solution, and that is true, but what it tends to convey is if we ignore the problems, we don't treat them with the dignity and the weight that they need to have and we actually run the risk when we think like that of clients actually not feeling like they've had their story validated and don't get their story validated because we get straight on to solutions and stuff and so what I'm saying is we don't actually have the language to describe that we actually do spend time focusing on the issues, you spend the time necessary looking at the issues and the problems to validate the client's experience of it, to get a clear picture of it.*

This view is consistent with Saleebey's (1997) concept of working with and acknowledging the pain of the situations that clients are experiencing. The Clinical Manager, in his discussion of the way problems are addressed within a strengths-based framework raises an important issue around the way that strengths-based practice engages with the problems that clients are challenged by and provides another example of the need for clarity and understanding of what strengths-based practice actually is. Saleebey (2004:590) argues that the writers about the strengths approach understands and "have made it abundantly clear that that they believe that people have problems"; however Saleebey reinforces that these problems need to be seen in view of the strengths and resources that will always be evident:

*As soon as clients begin to talk about problems, I begin to listen for hints and murmurs of strengths. If I had my druthers, the balance in a dual focus would be clearly tipped in the direction of the discovery, promoting, and honoring of strengths and consorting with the possible. (Saleebey 2004:590)*

This section of the chapter has highlighted the organisation participants' constructions of strengths-based practice. These participants focused on the nature of the relationship between worker and client and the responses illustrated the debates in the literature regarding whether or not strengths-based practice actually exists as a discrete entity. Participants saw the connections between strength-based practice and an approach to life and supported the notion of consistency between strengths-based practice and a range of theoretical frameworks. In this next section the constructions of the External Supervisors who work outside of the Organisation will be presented.

## External Supervisor Constructions of Strengths-based Practice

Within the External Supervisor interviews there was some similarity to the Organisation participants with respect to the themes and ideas that emerged around the participants constructions of strengths-based practice. They have been categorised as follows:

- Respectful practice
- Theories and Models
- Strengths-based versus pathologising approaches
- Tools and Resources within strengths-based practice
- Strengths-based practice as an approach to life

### *Respectful Practice*

Respectful practice emerged as one of the key elements of strengths-based practice from the External Supervisor interviews. Respectful practice was defined as being based in a belief that clients have strengths and resources and that it is the worker's task to keep this in focus at all times. Supervisor Three defined respect in relation to the way that we not only overtly work with clients but also in terms of our thinking about clients and in conversations that we might have with other professionals:

*Yes, that respect, like doing respect and practicing that with people. That would be a value that I would have, would do my very best to hold to you know. Focusing on people's strengths, like, the empowerment model, which has been a huge part of social work practice here... But anyway, that's been a huge influence on me, in terms of working with people that were wanting to work in a way that builds people's capacities to have a good life, get the most out of life for themselves. So that's about looking at people from a, not a deficit way of looking at someone but you know like a positive way of looking at people. A belief in people's ability to do things for themselves, a belief in people's ability to make changes that might make differences in their lives. Yes, a belief in people and respect of people that they can do that.*

Respect for clients' strengths and competencies was observed by all respondents as a key part of a strengths-based philosophy. Three of the supervisors saw that by focusing on client strengths and times of exceptions to the problem that this was a growth oriented strategy with Supervisor One observing that this could be growth oriented but not necessarily so. There emerged also some ideas regarding strengths-based practice as

goal directed and focusing on a future picture. Some of the respondents looked at this in terms of a focus on how the client defined this rather than the worker. Supervisor Two referred to the notion of collaborative practice where the worker and the client were on a journey together where there was a valuing and elevation of the of client knowledge and experience:

*It's about seeing something of our common humanity with people so the breaking down of the descriptions of client and helper, helper and helpee, client and social worker. I'd call it respectful practice, that whatever issues they bring out there are elements of need in those issues too and if I can be knowing that, then it's like two people on a journey together, so that's how I'd describe something of it. Another part would be to describe it as saying that, perhaps this is the core bit, but it's like saying that every person has resources and strengths, competencies, and yet the process of socialisation often means that we lose those, we look at ourselves in deficit and it seems too that many models of helping aid that process perhaps unwittingly, but they perpetuate this same model of eradicating deficits and whereas I would see that in fact its about building, we all grow best if we start realising that we already have a history of strengths, sometimes they're buried and we're elevating the knowledge and the knowing of the client.*

Supervisor Three saw a belief in people's ability to bring about changes in their lives as fundamental to a strengths-based approach:

*A belief in people's ability to do things for themselves, a belief in people's ability to make changes that might make differences in their lives. Yes, a belief in people and respect of people that they can do that...*

Respect within these participants' responses has thus been connected to the notion of respect for people's ability to bring about change in their own lives and a respectful focus by worker's on client strengths, competencies and resources.

### ***Theories and Models Connected with Strengths-based Practice***

All the participants linked the strengths-based approach to a narrative approach and two saw client-centred approaches as being consistent with a strength-based approach. Supervisor One did not see strength-based practice as an exclusive or separate model and considered that it was connected to the base principles of counselling practice. Three of the External Supervisor participants' viewed strength-based practice as offering concrete operationalised ways of being with clients and specific tools and resources:

*But the little I do know, it kind of fits with a lot of the ways I think we've practised anyway over the years which is of course, well not of course, I think seeing the, not seeing the client as a problem but the problem is the problem, looking for the exceptions where there, looking for the yeah, the exceptions where perhaps they're not acting the way that's detrimental or whatever the word, so its looking for, or turning any situation scenario that's presented to you, finding the things that where its going to bring out the best or I guess the most competent part of the person that you're working with.*

### ***Strengths-Based Approaches Versus Pathologising Approaches***

External Supervisor participants were asked to consider the argument within the strengths-based literature that places the strengths-based approach at one end of a continuum and pathologising or deficit approaches at the other. The responses to this question were varied. Supervisors Two, Three and Four linked the medical model with a pathologising approach and Supervisors Two and Three made connections between statutory child protection work and its focus on risk assessment as having a deficits philosophy. Supervisor One distinguished between pathologising and deficit approaches associating pathologising approaches with Freudian conflict theory and considered that developmental approaches to therapy while deficit-focused considered this within a holistic framework and were not necessarily pathologising. Supervisor One also made the point that strengths-based approaches could be pathologising if a worker did not focus on the pain that a client was experiencing instead choosing to look on only the “bright side”:

*So it was quite radical revision of analytic theory to move from conflict theory (Freudian) to deficit. This was a move from the problematic to the strengths because deficit theory means that there is a wholeness that exists except that it is unavailable, there has been a deficiency of optimum conditions to allow the natural growth and strength to flourish as opposed to conflict theory that sees strengths as defences, as denials of the true struggle which is how to quell our aggressive desire.*

Supervisor One considered that it was very important to take care with the language around strengths and deficits and how these were defined considering that most therapeutic models would today see themselves as strengths-based and that essentially strengths-based practice embodied the core notions of the helping process. These differing views once again highlight the challenges of naming and differentiating strengths-based practice.

### ***Tools and Resources within Strengths-based Practice***

In defining strengths-based the concrete nature of the approach and the specific tools and resources available through the model was noted by three of the External Supervisors. The principles of strengths-based practice were seen by Supervisor Two to be available in a concrete and concise manner that gives people immediate access to tools that they can apply in their work. Supervisor Two defined this in the following way in a comment regarding the value of strengths-based training:

*Strengths-based... was a way of teaching them very concisely and concretely and giving them a concrete enough model that they could begin to see even after one or two days introductory practice how they could even begin to allow that to assist them in their interactions even with their children or with other mothers in their playgroup.*

Supervisor Two also identified strengths-based practice as integrating solution-focused and narrative approaches and extending the concept of empowerment through the use of tools that were immediately able to be applied by workers:

*I think what it's done also is add some very useful tools and there's some tools in terms of, hands on tools like the cards and things that you can actually use, and there's tools in terms of ways of working with someone, like externalising and the visioning, so it's added all of that to it too, so its brought, what I see it's brought together the best of those ways of working and added some of its own more modern day I suppose thinking around it. Plus its added tools that people can actually use in their work you know. I actually think its extending empowerment too; I think it's extended the empowerment model beyond where all of us were with it.*

### ***Strengths-based practice as an approach to life***

Three External Supervisor participants commented on the dangers of using the tools of strengths-based practice without an underpinning framework and philosophy with Supervisor Three asserting that utilising the tools without a framework as dangerous:

*But I feel, I feel it's dangerous when they sit out on their own and the tools become being used without there being too much of a framework behind them.*

Supervisor One saw some value in a manual for strengths-based practice however questioned the use of this by someone who was not a "good" practitioner:

*Here is a manual for strengths-based practice. And I think that that would be helpful and it would help people who were maybe in the middle to become more helpful supervisors or practitioners. I don't know if that would be helpful if that manual was in the hands of someone who actually wasn't a good practitioner or supervisor?*

This construction was supported by Supervisor Two who had reacted to the packaging of strengths-based practice as a new model as opposed to an approach to life:

*I went to something where people were sort of peddling out a couple of years ago, the new model, strengths-based practice and that kind of horrified me because I would say that another part of it is that I think it's a way of life, it's an attitude to life and I couldn't believe that all these people who were peddling it had that attitude, or there might be a lot of incongruity between what they were saying which was all nicely articulated on what they might do, so I think its, it calls for a very deep level of response, its a being approach.*

The view within a number of the interviews was that strengths-based practice is an attitude, a way of being, something that impacts not only in our work with clients but in all aspects of our lives and has provided an extension of the core values and concepts of the helping professions. Supervisor Three used the example of the use of empowerment within a strengths-based framework to support her analysis:

*And I think its extended empowerment into that, well I think with empowerment, it came up, but it didn't challenge us to think about the way, we're thinking about someone. I mean you could go and practice in an empowering way but you might have some other stuff going on in your head and I think what strengths-based has done is say to us, look at this, what are you thinking about this person, how are you talking about this person in other places? Challenging some of the case conferencing practices that have been very common you know, where you can talk about a client and the client's not present and how you do that, right it's like really challenged some of those things and developed with empowerment work.*

Supervisor Three raised the idea that strengths-based as more than a model asks workers to critique their congruence between words, thoughts and actions in a way that is consistent with an action/reflection methodology. This then supports supervision as one of the key opportunities available for workers to utilise an action/reflection methodology to explore the complex relationship between congruence and philosophy underpinning how they engage with clients.

## **Transition to Strengths-based Practice**

The second section describes the research participants' perspectives of the impact of the transition to strengths-based practice. Within the Organisation participants a range of responses were recorded in terms of the impact of the transition process in the organisation. During the course of the interviewing sequence the nature of the change became more apparent. The focus of the change appeared to have come from the desire of the Clinical Manager to develop an "integrated family service" within the Organisation and having a strengths-based approach as the underpinning framework in this change in service delivery:

*I think I came in and made it quite clear that we would be doing, my job was to develop integrated family services, which was the label describing our service and that the way that I'll be expecting that to be done in a strengths-based way, because that's the position that I took...I was just simply saying that this is the position I hold and therefore this is the way that I would like to see practice happen.*

The key aspects of the transition to an integrated family service appear to relate to a change in the nature of the demographics of the client group with more families and couples being seen within the agency and less of a focus on individual counselling. There was also a focus within the agency of developing a team approach with opportunities for staff to work conjointly with clients.

## **Organisation Participants**

There was universal opinion within the Organisation participants that the change had been driven by the Clinical Manager however there was a range of views about the impact of the Manager's vision and the change process. These views are clearly described in the views of two of the participants where one saw that there was reluctance on behalf of the staff to take up the transition as it was not understood by the staff:

*Probably our manager, like I think we were all quite reluctant in the beginning because I didn't know what it was.*

Supervisee Two acknowledged that the new Manager had initiated the change process but she described the transition as one that the staff supported and implemented:

*Well its been driven by a new manager two years ago who had a passion for strengths-based practice and who organised for us to do some training and also have somebody come in and do some work with us as a team. And has just plodded away, encouraging and bringing about the change, modelling the behaviour, modelling the practice in terms of supervision. Yes its definitely been driven by a new manager coming in and then picked up and run with in terms of the staff and the training coming...*

### **Impact of the Transition**

The Clinical Manager considered that a major feature of the change process for staff was the provision of language and permission to work in a particular way that they had not had a mandate for previously. The Clinical Manager noted also the discomfort felt by staff and their consideration of strengths-based practice as a new approach:

*When I started to do this and demonstrated and talk about it, they talked about how different it was for them and how they had to think a lot about the position, like what they were doing and that kind of stuff. And so it's possible that they've forgotten that kind of uncomfortable period because it's now feeling so comfortable again, just like it used to feel, how they practised before. ...I'm not trying to create meaning and interpretation. it's simply that I remember one person, in fact I can think of two people ... who would say quite clearly this isn't a lot different because... we've actually given them permission to work the way that was, that felt the right way to work, that they didn't have professional permission for, or the language around. ... So we did lots of changing little things about how we did stuff. But I guess that's what I'm thinking is that for people it's often about a return home to the reasons they got in and the ways they would have liked to have behaved.*

Within the focus group discussions there was a range of opinion about the impact of the transition on practice. One participant described the change as having had no impact at all on their practice while one person noted that although the transition had not changed the way that they were practicing it had provided a name for the way that they practiced. Two participants noted the provision of specific tools and resources that had become available through the transition for example, strengths-based assessment forms. Several focus group participants noted a different way of looking at the problem, with less focus on the problem and more on future picture of what the situation without the problem would look like. The participants were asked about what within a strengths-based

approach supported these things and there was a comment that having a belief in the client's knowledge and experience was important in this process. Again specific strengths-based tools and resources were noted as supporting this and one person made a link between strengths-based supervision and strengths-based practice. One person observed that one impact of the change was the way that they were working with as a supervisor with their supervision clients, which they saw as being more focused on the personal development of the supervisees and less on problem solving.

The individual interviews provided a greater opportunity to explore the transition process in more depth and participants' perspectives on what this has meant for them and their practice and the impact within the organisational context. None of the Supervisee participants viewed the transition to strengths-based practice as a new way of working. Three of the Supervisee participants discussed the transition to strengths-based practice as affirming of the way that they worked with clients with one participant expressing this as a move to being more truly herself:

*I think it's meant more personal awareness and personal development and yeah, a sense of affirmation really about how I work and it's been really good, its been inspiring I think to move back, to be more true to myself really.*

This participant reflected how she had changed organisations as a way of changing her practice however had become aware how ingrained some behaviour had become and that the transition to strengths-based practice had heightened her self awareness about her behaviour and provided continuing opportunities in informal conversations and peer supervision to continue to monitor and evaluate her practice. This participant felt that the culture in the organisation had created opportunities for respectful conversations and behaviour:

*I think when I left (another organisation) I was very cynical and I'd recognised that I needed to get out of there because I was becoming somebody I didn't really like, so I had, I'd processed that for myself and made the move, but the behaviour had become quite ingrained, not to totally be my belief system that people needed to be told what to do and sorted out and that sort of thing because I mean that was the discomfort that I was having and in terms of the processes that we used I saw them as really abusive. So that was there but in actual reality how I had become, I had been sort of lured into some of that disrespectful behaviour and so the change didn't obviously come overnight and I still need to be aware of the tendency to judge and be critical and so I find it really helpful to be in an environment here in terms of peer supervision and*

*just conversations that you have informally because of the culture that's been created in terms of respectful conversations and behaving.*

One of the participants described the transition as a reinforcement of what she believed good social work had always been about. This participant viewed that one impact of the change had been with her reflection and awareness of transparent practice with clients; however she was still unsure about the degree of change with respect to this in her practice:

*How has my practice been different? When I learned and read about strength-based practice I thought this was actually good social work practice and I actually couldn't see a lot of difference, I thought this was actually, as a social worker this is the way I thought I'd been taught to practise and it was the way I thought we should be practising. I think, yeah, how have I changed? Probably greater awareness of things like transparency with clients and an awareness of when that may be difficult. And I think yeah, but that's probably been the way I've practised anyway so I don't know whether it's a lot different.*

One participant viewed the change as providing a new name and formula for what she had already been doing. This participant also viewed strengths-based as consistent with her developmental stage as a very experienced worker. This participant felt that the transition had offered some useful tools and structure for individual and peer supervision:

*.... For me, strengths-based is really a new name for some things I already knew and did, but I think the focus for me with it is more the structure, I'm working with a structure and I like that, particularly for people who are new to the game, either supervisors or supervisees because it has a formula to work with that's sensible and practical and takes you somewhere. It's a formula really that's useful. There is a structure in it, but it's a formula that gives you a sense of going somewhere and not around in circles. No, it's not a model, it's just another word for what I do, really, ...But I just see that in my experience and age really and development.*

Two of the supervisee participants reported confusion about what the transition to strengths-based practice actually meant. Supervisee Six had questioned whether she had been doing something wrong as a counsellor however once it became clearer to her what strengths-based practice was she felt reaffirmed in her work:

*When they started talking about, when I started thinking of strengths-based training I thought ..... well what are they talking about .. for a while I thought, jeppers, maybe I'm doing this wrong as a counsellor. But when the strengths-*

*based came in it actually reaffirmed that what I was doing was not actually wrong.*

Supervisee Three registered a high degree of confusion about what strengths-based practice meant finding it difficult to grasp what the concept was. The opportunity to participate in strengths-based training provided the experience of the framework that she required in order to make sense of it:

*I had no idea what it was. And what I saw didn't, I couldn't get a grasp on what I saw either and it wasn't until I went to the strengths-based training, basically I went over to Bendigo to find out what this was about... it was just words on a sheet, a paper, like this is the way we're going to work and I didn't understand it at all. Because I need to experience it...*

The opportunity to participate in strengths-based training provided a key for this participant in linking the framework to her practice in a powerful way:

*(Bendigo) blew me away. And it locked, it locked everything together...and I thought, like my spiritual practice, like tick, my emotional practice and my recovery practice, like tick, my physical thing well you know, a question mark, but my counselling practice like tick, and they just went ... like that, so there was more congruence like, because I wasn't sure, I mean I was quite comfortable with what I was doing, but that was like my own little world if you like. You know, no one knows what you do in a counselling session.... Everything locked together.*

Supervisee Six once having been reaffirmed about the fit between her practice and strengths-based practice could not see that the transition was about anything more than everyday living:

*I hear ... strengths-based this and strengths-based that and blah blah blah but it's a term of the organisation...To me strengths-based means .... if you're thinking of a strength then you walk with it, you're not just picking up on a strength and then just giving it lip service. It's everyday living, that's what it is for me, everyday living.*

One participant constructed the transition as not having had an impact on the way that she practiced however she had noted a change in the nature of the client group with she was now working:

*So far it hasn't had a major impact on my practice. It set the degree to which I may be working more with whole families and couples again and things that I may not have worked with for awhile.*

Supervisee one commented that although the changes in the agency had not yet impacted on the way that she was working with clients there were some differences that she was experiencing about how she was now required to present her work in case notes and in peer supervision. This participant had experienced uncertainty about where the change was leading and as a result was resisting co-working with people even though philosophically she felt in tune with some of the principles of strength-based practice she was experiencing anxiety about the way that this was being structured.

*Personally I haven't changed my practice because ...I've been told, in a broad way I do work within those principles. I believe that is true. However I feel a lot of potential conflict around things like that peer supervision model that's given out in a particular format and presented by having to think of case work, in a particular way to take to peer supervision. It inevitably has a feedback to some degree on how you think about the casework.*

Within the individual interviews there was a range of views about the comfort and fit participants were experiencing with regard to the changes. At one end of the scale participants were experiencing ease with the change however noting the discomfort for others:

*Something I've personally been very happy to run with, not everybody here has and there's been some resistance to the processes that are used and things like that but no for me it's been a fit that has been very comfortable.*

Other participants in particular Supervisee One expressed anxiety about the impact of the change and saw this as an imposition on her practice where she was having to repackage her work to meet the organisational requirements:

*So far it hasn't had a major impact on my work, but I keep looking with anxiety that it is going to as it gets more and more into it. It will get more and more structured. I don't know about negotiating for common ground. It is not a process I chose. In other words I am being asked to shift within the practice and organisation in a way that I didn't choose.*

Four of the participants noted changes within supervision as a result of the transition within the practice framework:

*And also in supervision, so its really complemented and helped, it is a parallel process because its like something I was wanting myself, but that's been strengthened and aided by the environment that's been created here and the environment in the supervision.*

The Clinical Manager viewed one of the major changes within peer supervision as a result of the transition with respect to the way that clients were talked about:

*Previously, they were mysterious beings that had no, say that for example we would talk together in a team, say in peer supervision, without any name being mentioned, it's this client, like they weren't human beings, they were these clients. So I started saying, do they have a name, can you just, we don't need their whole name, just their first name so we can talk about ... and we can actually bring them present in this room. And that in peer supervision the client's story is only used as the context for the, you know, these are kind of like my bottom lines and the things that I'd be expecting to see and notice and there's others of course but, and I guess one of the things that you can do is that if you notice that kind of a challenge again attitudes, values, beliefs and positions of staff and so they may not notice practise change but I do know that they've had to have those conversations too. And I think supervision's been quite different. In fact I can tell you categorically that it is hugely different to how it was.*

Supervisee Two noticed a change in the way clients were talked about and the use of humour within the team in which she was located. This participant saw that a process that encouraged subtle behaviours to be noticed without any sense of judging was occurring:

*Because I mean my, as I sort of said before, the sort of sarcastic sense of humour I would tend to make throw away comments and think they were quite funny, and suddenly .. oh okay, that didn't, and like just being made aware of those sort of subtle things really that okay you need to just, because it's part of your thinking, if you're making those throw away comments you're still thinking like that. And not being done in a, like being pulled up about it or being made aware of it, not being done in a harsh sort of judging way, but just a noticing.*

Case recording was another area identified by three of the participants as having changed as a result of the transition. Supervisee one saw this as a potentially problematic area because of gaps that she now perceived in the way that notes were being asked to be written:

*And if paper work is going to follow that process there either becomes a matter of me sort of to some degree not recording what I believe are some of the central processes of my work and I just record it in that format and supplement it maybe. Because I think there are some absolutely gaps that are essential to me, you know, the relationship and the notion of the self and what is happening to it. They are totally left out of the model we have been presented with. And some of the affects - so, yes it yet to be seen how much it might or might not change my practice rather than just my recording of it and my presentation of it.*

The Clinical Manager saw that the change in case recording would result in non-judgemental note taking while Supervisee Four conceptualised the transition as providing reminders about thinking about how the client would perceive what had been written about them and to separate out her opinions from those of the client:

*No, it hasn't felt like a huge shift, although there's still been challenges I think and for me it would probably be in the areas of record keeping and I guess for me the thing about strengths-based practise is I keep on reminding myself is would the person be happy with what I'm writing and being very aware of distinguishing my own observations and opinions from perhaps theirs.*

Within the discussion on the transition process two of the participants noted that one of the impacts of the transition was to make it easier to identify when something was not strengths-based:

*One interesting thing is that I think I've become more aware of when colleagues or people I work with are not working in a strengths-based approach and it's been good for me to be able to name that and that's good.*

### **External Supervisor Perspectives**

Within the External Supervisor participants there was little impact, if any, observed in the practice of the people that they were supervising that they would directly attribute to the transition process. Supervisor One felt that the change had caused anxiety for the person that they were supervising in terms of the implications of doing something different:

*I think there's been more anxiety from the supervisee about change in the organisation and some anxiety/resistance of anyone to doing something different. I think, I mean there have been changes in the practice of my supervisee; I'd like to think that these were the result of development and understanding, being able to understand what it is that she's seeing in front of her and what she's hearing. But, no, I wouldn't say there's been a huge change in the practice arising from a sense of using a different model.*

Supervisor Two noted that the supervisee had been quite cautious about the transition to strengths-based practice and was sceptical about the motivations impacting on the change and the risks for clients in the process:

*... their first view was something like, oh does this mean that I'm looking with some starry eyes at a person's strengths while someone sexually abuses the children in this family and I'm kind of taking my eyes off that. So there was a*

*lot of questioning and I really appreciated that, it was like they weren't going to just say yes to the Clinical Manager, they were critically going to think this through until they came to their own opinion. That took months, whereas now the framework my supervisee was using was very much, I'd put it into a narrative thing, strengths-based approach and so over perhaps a two year period there's been an enormous movement and its truly an integration... it isn't that they've become strengths-based and they were once... were deficit-based, they actually I would say are an integrated worker where they're drawing on the strengths of both of those in their own stance of practice, and personal synthesis.*

Supervisor Two noted integration in the practice of the person that they were supervising however was unable to attribute this directly to the change process. This supervisor felt that the impact of strengths-based practice might have supported the integration process that was already occurring for this supervisee through opportunities to attend strengths-based training and within the supervision process. Supervisor Three felt that the transition to strengths-based practice had not impacted significantly directly on how the person they were working with in supervision was already practising, observing that the supervisee worked already in an empowering and respectful manner:

*when we set up a contract the strengths-based approach of course was talked about because that was what we'd been asked to do. So we had a common look at the five column thing and all of that and every now and then that comes up, but it comes up in a fairly light, almost jokey kind of way, but I think the person that I'm supervising has a real commitment to practise in an empowering respectful way with people anyway. So that it fits for her, but, and as for go through it, we can identify the work in the five columns, it's probably not boom-boom-boom or anything like that, but you can see the thing, things are there in what we're doing.*

Supervisor Four felt that the transition process within the Organisation was more about the Organisation catching up with how the worker already practiced as opposed to bring about changes in the supervisees practice. This supervisor saw that the transition had broadened the vision of the Organisation in ways that suited the worker's preferred style of working:

*No, no I don't, not at all, I think that she's always worked in that way anyway and so it's kind of like the model, the organisation's caught up to her in a way. I think her particular style its, was well suited to that. She works in that way with families anyway... It's about the philosophy of strengths-based and the philosophy of the individuals.*

**Summary**

This chapter has presented the participants constructions of strengths- based practice and their views of the transition within the Organisation. The debates within the literature are mirrored in the participant responses with differing constructions of strengths-based practice and vigorous debate as to its existence as a discrete practice framework or difference from existing practice frameworks. The issue of the language of strengths-based practice and the need for clarity about what this means was highly evident within the discussions. These debates and themes continue in the next chapter as participant views around strengths-based supervision are presented.

## Chapter Five - Defining Strengths-based Supervision

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This objective of this chapter is to discuss the participants' constructions of strengths-based supervision and the differentiation or otherwise of strengths-based supervision as a distinct approach to supervision.

### Organisation Participant Perspectives

Participants interviewed and those attending the focus groups were invited to consider how they might define strengths-based supervision. The following themes emerged in defining and describing strengths-based supervision and have been categorised under the following headings:

- Expertise without being the expert
- Focus on strengths and competence
- Focus on the worker's story
- Supervision as parallel process with clients
- Offering and receiving challenge in supervision
- Contracting in supervision
- Learning to make the most of supervision

#### *Expertise without being the expert*

The data provided a clear description of the participants' views around the nature of a strengths-based supervision relationship. Participants described this relationship as being based in connectedness and a joining with the supervisor as opposed to a "one-up, one-down" relationship. One of the dominant ideas that emerged was that the supervisor took a particular position with regard to their relationship with the supervisee. Supervisee Two reinforced the importance of equality in the relationship and a sense of not being supervised by an expert:

*Again, to me it's about your values and beliefs and your way of being in the world. Like there are some specific behaviours I guess that fit with it in terms of the transparency and the respectful (relationship). So things are very open*

*and you feel that it's very much an equal relationship. That you're not going to an expert*

The Clinical Manager described this as acknowledging and validating the supervisee's expertise and knowledge and maintaining a power-with stance with supervisees as opposed to a power-over stance:

*The first is acknowledging the position of their clients, and their clients being the workers, of having the expertise and all that kind of stuff, so it's not knowing better than, so the supervisor has exactly the same responsibilities of practice, position and values ... that the worker has with their clients.*

Supervisee Two saw this experience of supervision as being a combination of a growth in her confidence and a shift in her thinking as well as the specific behaviours of the supervisor:

*Now whether that's partly the fact that I'm actually more confident in who I am, whether that's a shift in my thinking, or whether that's actually because of his behaviour... I think it's probably a bit of both, yeah, but certainly I guess that's a specific thing in strengths-based practice that I would say is specific.*

This idea of the supervisor having expertise but not being “the expert” in the relationship is supported in the literature by Lowe and Guy (2002:12) and is consistent with Anderson and Swim's (1995:6) stance of the supervisor adopting an “unknowing” stance to as a means to elevate the supervisee's knowledge, strengths and resources.

Supervisee Two acknowledged the expertise of the supervisor, however this was differentiated from a “one up-one down” relationship and one where the supervisor was the expert in the relationship. Supervisee Two was also clear that although she was now experiencing this kind of supervision as a mature worker she considered that if supervision was to be truly strengths-based then it should be the experience of all supervisees regardless of their practice experience and maturity. Supervisee Three offered her view of being in a supervision relationship where she had experienced the supervisor as the expert and experienced supervision as a place where there was an imbalance of power:

*Well certainly with the first counsellor I had there was a very strong power imbalance. I guess maybe because I was really new to the work but also that we worked so differently and she didn't always like the way I worked, even though I did get some really good results... if I was stuck with a client I would*

*come and she would say well you know you do this, one client, she said this is the issue, so I'd go back and in the end it wasn't that at all. ... this was a woman of huge experience and so naturally I took her suggestion, but it never moved and then one day I just had an intuition and took it there and it was, it just blew the session away. So even in the early days I had that intuitive understanding and, I mean I don't think she ever gave me any credit for some of the work that I do, ... she was the expert, I mean if she was sitting in the room she would be horrified at what I'm saying, but nevertheless that's what it felt like.*

Supervisee One gave the example of where she had felt that she could not discuss an area of development that she wanted to progress in supervision as this would have been too anxiety provoking for her. She worked on this issue outside of supervision until she felt comfortable to discuss this with her supervisor:

*I valued her input but I always felt as if I was still developing and so she was very supportive mostly with the work I did. But for a long time I felt somewhat hesitant with her because I felt I wanted to develop in these ways, but I was also a bit apprehensive to approach her too directly about where I thought my gaps were or my developmental areas, or my underdevelopment was and it felt like it was too anxiety provoking really to try and address that difference too much. So although she was supportive of my casework, I think I didn't develop as much as I had wanted to. I developed outside of supervision.*

Within the discussions emerged the paradoxical idea argued by and Anderson and Swim (1995) and Lowe and Guy (2002), that the less of an expert the supervisor demonstrates that they are and the more focused on the supervisee's competence and strengths they are, the more transparent and open the supervisee is likely to be around exposing their practice in supervision. This position according to the focus group participants was encouraging of the supervisee's notion of their own expertise and thus of directing the process of supervision. Supervisee Five in the individual interview was explicit about the nature of the relationship that she expected to have with her supervisor and the kind of outcomes and focus that she expected from supervision:

*What I notice particularly is that they're clear about their role and they're clear about their own clinical practice; they don't talk about themselves, they ask me direct questions, they ask me about my theoretical background, why I did what I was doing, what the outcome was, how did I feel about that, what would I have done differently. There's a whole process around it which makes me feel good about what I've done with my client, or raising some question where I could see a different direction. But in no sense feeling clouded or going away feeling dissatisfied and thinking that was a waste of time.*

A sense of direction in the supervision process was also noted. This could be linked to the strengths-based notion of a future picture and the influence of solution-focused approaches within the strengths-based literature (Anderson and Swim 1995, Mainstone 1998, Edwards and Chen 1999, and Lowe and Guy 2002).

### *Focus on Supervisee Strengths and Competence*

Strengths-based supervision was seen to be a place of modelling where the supervisor focused on the supervisee and their competence. Supervisee five saw this as a process that was constructed around promise and potential:

*If we're going to use the words strengths-based I would say that the supervisor is seeing potential and promise and helping and enabling in the process the supervisee to see that in themselves and move forward. That to me would be strengths-based... I've felt for a long time that supervision has been deficit, so I quite like the idea of having strengths-based because it changes the focus, draws people into thinking about what are the qualities and strengths this person has that can move them forward.*

Supervisee Five described the deficit approach as occurring in supervision where supervisors were unclear about the boundaries between counselling, therapy and supervision "so that becomes deficit and then the supervisee goes away feeling counselled rather than supervised". This participant considered that clarity about roles and expectations was one of the major contributors to the experience of strengths-based supervision. The focus group participants conceptualised strengths-based supervision as an affirming process that highlighted the competency of the worker:

*More affirming in terms of bringing out your own strengths and resources - helping to develop that.*

One participant in the focus group viewed this as identifying what was working well in the worker's practice and seeing that even in situations that have not gone well it is possible to see something positive:

*Looking for something that I've done well -nothing is negative even if something hasn't gone well.*

This view can be connected to the notion of reframing as utilised within narrative therapy (White and Epston 1990) and strategic family therapy (Robins and Szapocznik 2000). Participants in the focus groups referred also to a respectful, transparent, open

relationship that enabled a “trusting process” in supervision so that the supervisee sets the parameters for the exploration of their practice:

*Trusting process – free to explore whatever, not afraid of hiding practice, even if make mistakes will be affirmed as a person.*

The participants also saw supervision as a process where what they learned, became the focus of the supervision session and that a strengths-based approach in supervision highlighted areas of development but not in a deficits focused way:

*Highlights ‘growth areas’ can develop and grow – highlights growth areas not deficits and reinforces competency not inadequacy.*

The focus group participants identified strengths-based supervision as being supervisee led with the supervisor being in tune with the supervisee as opposed to the supervisee having to grasp things from the supervisor perspective. This was seen to support the development of confidence that the supervisee had in their view of practice. This was connected up with the idea that there is a sense of being in tune with the supervisor and that the supervisor grasps what the supervisee’s view of what works in the helping process and their values and philosophy that underpin this. The participants in focus group two described this as a mirroring back process:

*Changed what I am looking for in supervision – In a sense having confidence about what I believe – what I do works – mirroring back in a sense – putting it out with someone who is strengths-based – doesn’t get an oh? response – someone in tune with me.*

The participants in focus group two also viewed that being in a strengths-based supervision relationship gave permission to be themselves in supervision and a sense that it was going to be a non-judgemental relationship. This is aligned with Saleebey’s (1997) concept of suspension of disbelief:

*Not going to be judged, feeling okay –may have been challenged but will have some additional resources to go away with.*

### ***Focus on the Worker’s Story***

One of the other key ideas that emerged in the individual interviews and in the focus group was the notion of supervision being focused on the practitioner and how they

were working with the client as opposed to focusing directly on the client, as the Clinical Manager stated:

*Another responsibility a supervisor has is to bring the journey back to the worker's experience, not the client's...that it was actually about the workers, the struggles the worker is having, the issues the worker is facing working with the client, that kind of stuff. Not a brainstorming around or a, effectively a gossip about like this is what these types do. You know how sometimes workers will take their list of clients to their supervisor and they will talk though, what they often talk through is what the clients are up to, the kind of place, the times ... and it's all well and good but it's actually, for me it's more about where are you up to, what's your position with this client, how are you coping with the changes they've made and the position that leaves you in. And how are you feeling with how these safety issues are being addressed, you know that kind of stuff.*

A focus on the story of the worker was raised by Supervisee Two in her reflections about her current experience of supervision where the focus came back invariably to her as a worker. This participant experienced this as a particular tone in supervision:

*We do look at clients, we do look at actual practice, what I'm doing, what might be more useful. We do look at my process, so its like we're covering everything still but its definitely got a different tone to it and it generally comes back to me.... and I think that would have been much more useful for me to have had that many years, like I could have had that long ago.*

There was some robust discussion in the focus group about whether good relationship and maintaining a focus on the supervisee were exclusive to a strengths-based perspective. One participant contended that some supervisors were trained to work in this way without any reference to a strengths perspective. One participant made the point that it was the way that the supervisor focused attention on the supervisee was important to understand, that is, was the nature of the focus on the supervisee emanating from a from a competence or strengths view or from a deficits approach? Durrant and Kowalski (1993) cited in Thomas (1994) assert that supervisors have a choice about whether to focus their attention in supervision on competence or deficits:

*It is our contention that, as therapists we have a choice about the basic stance we wish to adopt. To see people in terms of pathology or to see them in terms of competence is a matter of choice rather than one of truth. (Durrant and Kowalski 1993 cited in Thomas 1994:17)*

Thomas (1994) supports the constructions of the organisation participants in his view that this notion of choice is very important in supervision and that effective supervision focuses on the competence of the supervisee:

*This idea is vital to the practice of solution-oriented, or competency-based supervision- therapists must be viewed as incomplete and imperfect, yet competent colleagues who seek out the consultant in order to bring about progress in their goals. (Thomas 1994:17)*

### ***Modelling of competence/parallel process with clients***

Apart from the positive implications for the supervisee in terms of having a competence-based framework in supervision, it was noted in the focus group and in the interviews that this also had parallels for the client-worker relationship. One of the key aspects noted by the focus group participants was the specific focus on competence that strengths-based supervision offers and the opportunity to have this modelled as a means of supporting work with clients:

*Nice to have that experience coming from the supervisor – where you are getting positive feedback and focus on competence – encourages you to use this with your clients.*

Supervisee Four offered her experience of having supervisors who problem solve for her in supervision and how she saw the implications of this in the client-worker relationship:

*I have found at times I get annoyed at supervisors that problem solve for me and I guess as I've trained as a supervisor or I've recognised that I've sometimes done that myself, and for me good supervision is not problem solving in the first instance because in fact it takes away the opportunity for the practitioner to learn. So I'm aware of it, sometimes I do it as I supervise myself, but I've also been aware as a practitioner how annoying it is that when I come to supervision I don't want problems solved for me. I perhaps want some feedback, some possibilities, but then be left with the options of taking them and I guess there it's a good parallel with good clinical practice too, that we shouldn't be problem solving for our clients, we should be offering them some ways forward and giving them back the decision making power.*

This Clinical Manager supported the concept of supervision modelling a parallel relationship to that of the worker and their client and in fact saw this as a responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that this occurred in supervision:

*And so they have that responsibility, to behave consistently with how they'd like the worker to behave. So that's I think, if you like the paramount principle is be with the worker how you want the worker to be with the client, and so it's about acknowledging their expertise, their knowing, their stuff you know, validating their position, their story.*

This analysis is consistent with the arguments by Cohen (1999) and Munford and Sanders (1999) who view supervision as a key ingredient in the transmission of social work values and thus if relationships between clients and workers are to be strengths-based then this must occur within the supervision relationship also. The Clinical Manager saw that a strengths-based supervisor has a responsibility for the way the client is talked about in supervision. This was conceptualised by the Clinical Manager as always striving to have an environment in supervision where the worker talks about the client as if the client was in the room and even if they are wanting to talk about difficult or challenging client issues:

*One of the supervisor's responsibilities is bringing the client, making sure that the client is present in the sense of being treated with respect in the room, not talked about dishonourably. And obviously there's some balances to that where sometimes the worker's got to do, offload and actually ventilate their feelings and you've got to be able to do that safely with a supervisor and have your position of needing to do that validated, same way that the client needs to have theirs validated. And sometimes that will be done with disrespect... but the overall flavour has to be one of that if the client was present, they could sit comfortably with this conversation being had.*

The Clinical Manager went onto describe the scenario where supervision developed to the point that clients could be physically present in a supervision session:

*It would be a great session when the client and the worker went together to supervision to kind of unravel this relationship and how it's working well for the client or not. Like that would be a really good sign for me that everybody was comfortable, that it was really genuinely happening. That would be a good sign. Fairly radical departure stuff.*

The Clinical Manager's vision about the role and place of the client in supervision is echoed by O'Donoghue (2003:78-79) in his discussion of the "voice" of the client. O'Donoghue (2003: 78-79) makes the important point that the voice of the client is "rarely heard in its indigenous form because it is interpreted by practitioners through their interpersonal process recall". O'Donoghue (2003) suggests that the externalisation of problems and the separation of the client from the problem may increase the voice of

the client in supervision and O'Donoghue (2003) also invites supervisors and supervisees to be clear about their own professional and personal narrative and the place of their own stories in supervision:

*When they have critically examined their preconceptions, assumptions and values, they can read out of the client's story rather than read themselves into it. (O'Donoghue 2003: 126)*

The notion of the client's presence in the supervision room remains a central consideration in the process of supervision.

### ***Dealing with the hard stuff – offering and receiving challenges in supervision***

The notion of challenge as a key part of supervision came up frequently in the discussions with supervisees in both focus groups and within the individual interviews. The strong consensus of opinion was that by setting the parameters and exploring what challenge meant in supervision a framework was provided whereby challenge was accepted and welcomed by supervisees because they had constructed the parameters for this framework and it was supervisee led and focused. Supervisee Two saw this as:

*Not in such a, like he wouldn't use that word 'judgmental' but he has asked me in a sense. And I think that's part of like setting up the contract that we had, is really being really honest and transparent about what are the issues that I struggle with, that I want to work on and I want to be challenged on, so I was very open about that and like the conversation we had right at the beginning around where I'd come from, what I know I needed to watch, was great because like he really knows the weaknesses that I want to change.*

There was a strongly held view that strengths-based supervision incorporated and encouraged conversations about difficult issues and that it was more likely to do this than other types of supervision. This was viewed as linked to a focus within strengths-based based supervision on respect for the supervisees' competency and the sense that supervisees found it easier to address issues within this framework. There was a clear expectation that supervisors would challenge them in supervision, however this would be done safely and within a process that had been negotiated at the outset of the supervision contract. Within the individual interviews and the focus group discussions the sentiment was that a strengths-based approach had facilitated greater capacity and confidence for dealing with hard issues and asking hard questions. The following ideas

were generated in the focus group process about the nature of dealing with challenging issues:

- Supervision is about challenge
- Strength-based is not avoiding the hard stuff
- Capacity for growth and development has given me the capacity to deal with hard issues
- Strengths-based supervision is about facing hard issues
- Confidence to ask hard questions

All the Organisation participants except one, discussed the idea of strengths-based supervision as being particularly relevant in difficult situations in that it provides transparency, parameters for the relationship and a way of being that assists workers to cope with difficult times. This was expressed by Supervisee Five:

*Oh I would see that it would work best at when the going gets tough because it has a process that's unique to enhancing, drawing out opportunity and promise and where we might go with this, it supports the supervisee. We go right across the board.*

All those who were asked the question about the limits of strengths-based supervision felt that there was not a situation where it would not be relevant or able to be applied because of the values and attitudes that flow from the approach that set clear and transparent processes for dealing with challenging issues.

The focus group participants saw that the initial contract developed with a supervisor became a foundation for the way in which hard issues were dealt with. One supervisee saw this contract as the place to be clear about what issues she might want challenge about and this had led to a discussion with the supervisor about how this could occur. The key thing was that the Supervisee participants saw themselves as having control over this process and this then paradoxically encouraged them to invite challenge within supervision as opposed to other experiences where they had been concerned about revealing or exposing deficits and feeling judged by their supervisor about these.

### ***Learning to Make the Most of Supervision***

Reflections in the individual interviews with a number of the supervisee participants developed into a discussion about the way in which we learn to be a supervisee. Several of the participants acknowledged the importance of the supervisor in the process. Three of the participants, who were supervisees within the Organisation and also providing supervision, reflected on their training as supervisors as having had an important influence on their own use of supervision. Two of the participants commented on the important role that supervisors have as educators about supervision. Supervisee Two considered that “it is in supervision that people learn most about supervision and how to use it”. These participants commented that people often come to supervision because it is a requirement of their professional association or their organisation however are often quite passive in their approach to the process in terms of expecting this to be a supervisor led process. Davys (2002) offers support for this view in her analysis of the supervisee within the supervision literature as a naive and passive recipient of the supervision process. A strengths-based approach with its focus on a supervisee led process and being concrete and specific was seen as a useful tool in supporting supervisees to get the most out of supervision. In the supervision literature developmental approaches often reinforce the notion of the supervisee who develops from ‘incompetence to competence’ (Hawkins and Shohet 2000). This view was not supported by the participants in the research who considered that supervisee-focused supervision could be achieved at any level of practice development given the appropriate resources and training about how to make the most of supervision as suggested by Supervisee Two:

*Well I think it's a training thing and I think you need to, there needs to be an aspect of the training that is very practical and very personal so that perhaps exercises are given, what are the questions that you would be taking along to your first session with a supervisor to see whether you have a fit. You know people just haven't often even thought of that. Helping people to really tease that out for themselves. And be really, I think there's a lot of jargon in this world, counselling and social work and people often use the jargon but when it comes to pulling them down to specifics they're not often quite so clear. So helping them to get really concrete, to really look at where they're at in their own development, what they think their needs are, I mean that would have been just awesome for somebody to have modelled that in terms of supervisor long ago, with me to have made me stop and think well where I'm at, what are the challenges in my work personally, what are the things I struggle with, what are my strengths, all of that sort of stuff. But it was never ever really done. And I*

*think that would have had a huge difference long ago which I'm getting it now but it's you know, quite a long time into my work.*

### **External Supervisor Perceptions**

Within the External Supervisor interviews three key themes emerged in the exploration of their perspectives on strength-based supervision. These themes were similar to themes emerging from the narratives of the organisation participants:

- Focus on strengths and competence
- Expertise without the expert
- Care and Comfort within the supervision relationship

### ***Focus on Strengths and Competence***

The dominant theme in the External Supervisor interviews was that the defining characteristic of strengths-based supervision was the idea that it was supervisee focused and competency focused as opposed to deficit focused. One Supervisor felt that it was possible to be strengths-based supervision and that this was possible to achieve whilst still focusing on “deficits” as this did not have to be done in a pathologising way. The three other Supervisors agreed with this view to the extent that they saw that strengths-based supervision did not ignore areas of development or learning but offered a specific way of addressing these areas through a focus on strengths and competence. As with the discussion on strengths-based practice the way the language was used called for careful concretising of concepts and ideas. Supervisor Three made links between strengths-based practice and strengths-based supervision:

*Well I see it to be as an experience, how to put this, that you work with someone in a way that is empowering of them, that's focusing on their strengths in the work, it's not talking about their weaknesses or their lacks, it's not doing that, but it is still working with things that they're wanting to develop in a way that works in the strength way with things they're wanting to develop. It's just a different way of approaching it for me, it's like, instead of seeing something of the weakness or something that someone's got to work on, I mean you still see that someone's got to do the work, but you approach it in a way that talks about it as a strength rather than something you're not doing well.*

Supervisor Four constructed strengths-based supervision as being paralleled with good supervision per se whereby the supervisee was affirmed and challenged in a way that enabled them to learn in the supervision process without feeling “useless”:

*Yeah. I mean good, that is what I would consider good supervision. It is about, I mean there is nothing worse than coming out of supervision thinking oh, I'm just so useless, I can't do my job, you know, why am I doing this which is what I have experienced in the past, I am useless, that is not strengths based, its about, its how you phrase the things that you put to the supervisee, its how you challenge them but in a way that's still going to affirm them so they see it as a learning thing rather than a put down, so absolutely, I think its good practice.*

Supervisor One offered a different construction of strengths-based supervision from her perspective as a psychotherapist, whose work was informed by the theory of self-psychology and insight focused work with clients. This supervisor saw that a strengths approach could focus on “deficits “ without pathologising the person:

*The strengths-based piece looks like understanding with the supervisee what it is that is actually being required, needed from the worker in terms of, again in terms of this deficit except that I don't see that as a pathology, I see it as what this person is needing in order that they can carry, complete that gestalt, to be able to use what will grow as a result of being recognised and understood.*

This Supervisor considered that she would not want to focus exclusively on times of “exception” or strengths because that could become a collusive act encouraging denial:

*The bit that I would see as probably not being strengths-based practice that I would do, I would not specifically be encouraging my supervisee to be looking at their clients and, maybe as in narrative theory or something, of seeing the bit and say, look at that spotlight on that good intent, on that good strength and leave it at that for that to do its work. I wouldn't see myself as doing that exclusively. Because I wouldn't, I don't see that as a whole picture. The other bit looks like and there is pain there for you as well. The aspect of both of those `being presented. I think at its worst, strength- based practice as I fantasise what it is, colludes in denial and colludes in a false self of compliance which can produce a Hawthorne effect of improvement through having the light shone on it and the attention, but its at the cost of denying something.*

Supervisor One considered that the things that trip us up were important to be highlighted in order to bring understanding:

*I practise as a psychotherapist and as such my clients undertake to try to understand why it is they might keep tripping themselves up, that this is ignored, to bring it more out into understanding. But that being so ... might sound like I might ignore the sparkling moments and yet what's critical to self psychological theory is the mirroring of affect, so the sparkle that's there, the glimmer that's there in the person's face has to be affirmed at that time or else it is a failure of empathy. So it may not be kind of the full interpretation of and*

*look, kind of building it up, but certainly the noticing and understanding and that moment of hope.*

From the interviews with the supervisors it would appear that there was agreement between the supervisors that a strengths-based approach needed to also deal with difficult issues if it was to be effective. The point of divergence in the supervisor interviews appeared to relate to the use of strengths and competencies as a means to addressing issues or to directly focus on the issue itself and that resolution of the issue comes from insight and understanding of the deficit itself.

### ***Expertise without the expert***

This approach, was also named by one supervisor as a process with the supervisor doing less and the supervisee doing more, which connects with the notion of supervisor “unknowingness” (Anderson and Swim 1995:6) in the literature. This supervisor also made connections between strengths-based supervision and the process of spiritual direction that encouraged the supervisee to direct the session:

*I'm doing another type of training at the moment in spiritual direction and I think that's actually impacting my supervision heaps. It's a very, its an intriguing model in that case because its quite laid back and its almost like encouraging people, where the supervisor would do less, in one sense I'd say yeah, what the supervisor's attempting to do is to do less and less, it's like a minimalist approach and encouraging the supervisee or, in that case, what they call a directee, to do more and more. And so I'd noticed that although it seems like a different discipline entirely, it's absolutely affecting my counselling and my supervision.*

This concept of not knowing by the supervisor and modelling of the value of the supervisee's expertise provided, according to one of the supervisors, a foundation of safety and an enabling environment that encouraged supervisees to share and value their experiences and values and to discuss or even raise issues without being judged on this. Supervisor Two saw that a course he had done with Michael White around the Narrative approach had provided support to encourage supervisees to feel safe enough in supervision to share material that they might have been reluctant or even afraid to share:

*I think from Michael White's course, you know I think that was a foundational shift in being able to have respect for conversations with anybody and I think it was the affirmation that a lot of my thinking that I'd had underneath suddenly was ok.... It began to help me with my supervisees to be able to let them value*

*their kind of sense of thoughts, the stuff that they don't dare put out because they think its wrong.*

Supervisor Three offered a comparison between a deficit-focused approach and her views of strengths-based supervision from her own experience of being supervised:

*I often would come out with a feeling that there was stuff that I wasn't doing very well and I needed to work on it and that can feel a bit low and not so great for your confidence. I'd like to think that people can leave supervision feeling okay, feel okay, with the knowledge that they've got some stuff developing but feeling really okay about that. And I've had experiences myself where you kind of oh yeah well I don't do that very well. You'd like to think that people could leave with not that sense of I didn't do that very well, with a different sense about it... know that they could do it differently next time, it's got a stronger, positive feel to it.*

### ***Care and Comfort in the Supervision Relationship***

Supervisor Four identified that their model of supervision was one based on being professional and personable in supervision and that focusing on equality in the supervision relationship was a way of encouraging the supervisee to feel they could bring all the things that were impacting on them to supervision. This supervisor felt that because she demonstrated care for her supervisees that this encouraged and supported the people that she worked with in supervision to talk about things that were impacting on them:

*I'm professional, however there is quite a personal, personable, that's a better word, personable part of me and I think that that's how I am in supervision. And myself and one of my colleagues here, our kind of little thing that we've come up with is, people don't, this is still clients, people don't know, don't care how much you know until they know how much you care, and I guess there is an aspect of that with supervision as well, its about, and I think that's why supervisees, feel that they can talk about other things that are going on for them that are affecting their work because they know that actually I do care that they're actually alright you know; so its about their own integrity and safety as well as their clients, and because the supervisee works in the area that I am passionate about, which is families and children, that goes without saying that I want a good outcome for them.*

Supervisor Four described her view of how this occurred in supervision; this was based in a comfortable supervision environment:

*I didn't, before I knew about strengths-based, and I'm not a really knowledgeable person on strengths-based practise, I think I was using it*

*without knowing that that's what it was called, so I very much believe that that kind of fits in with that comfortable, relaxed, sharing kind of supervision that I like.*

## **Summary**

The key ideas from the organisation participants' perspective were that strengths-based supervision was characterised as supervisee-focused and supervisee-led and that supervisors modelled an unknowing stance or used their expertise without being the expert in the relationship. The participants saw strengths-based supervision as valuing supervisees for their competence and knowledge and that they were not passive recipients of the supervision process. The Organisation participants asserted the need for supervisors and supervisees to co-construct together their meaning of strengths-based practice. There was also support within the narratives for the paradoxical position of the more freedom supervisees experienced and the safer the supervision process was, the more likely they were to raise issues within supervision that they found difficult and challenging. Within the Organisation participants there was support for the idea of supervision that focused on a success and competence focused approach where the supervisees were active participants in the process. There was also a theme within the organisation participants related to how supervisees learn how to use supervision and the idea that this has been the domain of supervisors. There was support for the idea of training opportunities for supervisees to learn about how to maximise the use of supervision.

The External Supervisor narratives offered similar themes to those of the Organisation participants with respect to defining strengths-based supervision. There was a strong emphasis in the interviews on supervisee strengths and competence and the role of the supervisor in how they use their expertise in the supervision relationship. The narratives of the participants continued to echo the themes of the previous chapter highlighting the debate about how to define strengths-based supervision and whether it exists as a theoretical framework or is to be viewed as an approach to life. McCashen (2001) sees the origins of the strengths-based approach as developing from a range of theoretical frameworks. Munford and Sanders (2005:159) have similar views and discuss the range

of approaches that inform the use of strengths perspectives that is “critical social work and community work, postmodern and constructive approaches”.

The narratives of the participants may not have provided any resolution of the debate about the distinct nature of strengths-based supervision, however, a clear set of principles that the participants identified as belonging to the use of a strengths-based approaches within supervision would appear to be consistent with a critical framework and approach to practice.

## **Chapter Six - Relationships between Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation (Current and Future)**

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Chapter six considers the implications of the transition to strengths-based practice with respect to the relationships between External Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation and the significance of these supervision relationships in the development of strengths-based practice. Cohen (1999) argues that supervision is one of the fundamental influences on the development of strengths-based practice and thus it was important in this study to explore the supervision relationships and the significance and current structure of these relationships in the development of strengths-based practice. The discussions about current relationships also identified differences for all the participants in terms of how these relationships could be structured in the future. The Organisational participant's perspectives on a strengths-based supervision contract also emerged in the analysis. The chapter also considers the participants views around the fit between the theoretical and practice orientation of the Supervisee, Supervisor and the Organisation, a key theme and focus of the research.

### **Organisation Participants**

#### ***Current Relationships between Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation***

The Supervisee participants were asked to consider their relationship with their External Supervisors and the relationship between External Supervisors and the Organisation at the first Focus Group. All of the Organisation participants reported that they had a contracted supervision arrangement with their External Supervisor. Morrell (2001) in a review of the supervision literature on supervision contracts concluded that there was a focus in the literature on the individual contract between the supervisee and the supervisor. This was mirrored within the participant responses. The relationship between the Organisation and External Supervisors was identified by the participants as existing only via reporting arrangements in the contract. The Organisation participants identified a range of reporting arrangements between the Organisation and the External

Supervisors. In the discussion in focus group one the diversity of these arrangements was highlighted for the participants and they expressed some surprise about this diversity. The kinds of arrangements that existed between External Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation are collated in Table 6.1.

### Reporting Arrangements in Supervision Relationships

Reporting Arrangements between External Supervisors and the Organisation	Number of responses
No supervision report process	2
Supervision report linked to appraisal	1
Supervision report two years ago	1
Report linked to membership renewal of professional association	1
Report only if concerns by supervisor	1

Table 6.1

The focus group raised the view that there was some assumption that external supervisors would only contact the Organisation if there were concerns about a supervisee's work. One member of the focus group viewed the reporting arrangements between external supervisors and the Organisation as being deficit-focused reporting by Supervisors rather than strengths-focused. This point of connection would only occur if there was something problematic that the Supervisor was concerned about with respect to the practice of the Supervisee as opposed to a forum where successes and competencies could be celebrated. Marek et al (1992), Thomas (1994), Selekman and Todd (1995) and Mainstone (1998) support the view that celebrating success and competency in supervision is more helpful than a focus on deficits. Thomas (1994) asserts that a focus on competence is essential if workers are to make progress in their work:

*Therapists must be viewed as incomplete and imperfect, yet competent colleagues who seek out their consultant in order to bring about progress towards their goals. (Thomas 1994:17)*

The focus group participants were also asked about the way that the Organisation would engage with an external supervisor if the Organisation was concerned about any aspect of a supervisee's work. There was a lack of clarity expressed about how this would

occur and one focus group participant reflected that there were a number of issues related to the accountability/reporting arrangements that she had no knowledge about or had discussed with her supervisor. Supervisee One considered the separation between the Organisation and external supervision as appropriate and connected to her autonomy as a professional person:

*They do have a contract with the organisation and so they don't have a direct link although they would be there if they were concerned about particular practical or safety issues that couldn't address directly with me. But it is not an equal three-way process and I wouldn't want it to be because I have come again from a counselling model that I believe and I think supervision is for the supervisee and to me that is my philosophy of organisations that they believe in the professionals and the professionalism and are able to accommodate that variety and function that way.*

Izhaky (2001:83) recommends that organisations work with external supervisors to develop clear definitions and expectations of the external supervisor role. Morrell (2001) supports this in her call for stronger links between organisations and external supervisors however argues that there is far from universal acceptance of this view. Morrell's (2001) analysis can be supported by considering the supervision policies of the Aotearoa/ New Zealand Association of Social Workers (1998), the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (2005) and the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (2005). None of these policies provide any detailed guidelines regarding the relationship between external supervisors and organisations. A recent amendment to the Aotearoa/ New Zealand Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2004) does go some way towards this; The code recognises the need for appropriate arrangements given that social workers may be supervised by more than one person and that organisational learning is one of the objectives of supervision. The New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists supervision policy has clear provisions for the ongoing review of the supervision contract that exists between the Supervisor and the Supervisee however this is linked only to the professional association. This supports the view of Supervisee One who considered that the primary relationship in supervision exists between the supervisee and the supervisor with accountability to clients being maintained via her profession. Within the British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists Ethics for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2002) there is an explicit reference to the independence and separation between the line management supervision

and external supervision with a clear separation between external supervisors and organisations “where the counselling supervisor is also line manager, the supervisee should also have access to independent counselling supervision” (2002:5). The separation of the educational and administrative functions in supervision is supported by Erera and Lazar (1994) however they are not specific in how the relationship between external supervisors and organisations should be constructed.

### **Ongoing and Future Relationships**

There was a range of responses within the Organisation participants regarding the ongoing and future relationships between External Supervisors and the Organisation. One participant was supportive of the primary relationship continuing to exist between the supervisee and the supervisor and the management of this relationship being retained within this dyad as part of their professional domain and responsibility. This participant viewed the development of a three-way relationship between supervisees, supervisors and the Organisation as interfering with the professional integrity of the supervisee and that the major accountability within this relationship was to the profession not the Organisation. Several of the focus group participants were however in favour of a link between their external supervisors and the Organisation. These participants identified the Organisation’s performance appraisal process as a way linking in external supervisors as a mean of supporting the supervisee’s growth and development:

*Valuable means to have supervisors in the loop because they can enhance changes in development in the practitioner’s growth and practice.*

There was discussion in the focus group that linking the external supervisor with the performance appraisal process could bring together the functions of supervision that are currently separated through external and line management supervision and could provide greater accountability for clients. One member of the focus group saw that there would be a positive impact for the supervisee in terms of being heard and that linking supervisors in could also increase the transparency and openness of the performance appraisal process. Supervisee Five was also in favour of the Organisation meeting with the supervisor and supervisee in the initial contracting phase and then meeting on a six-monthly basis to review the supervision arrangements:

*...I like the idea of every 6 months meeting the supervisor and the supervisee and looking if everything’s okay and I need to know so that I can set that up for*

*change if it's necessary. Clear open process, honest open process and everybody's happy, changes can happen when they need to, when they need to rather than lingering on. If there's a need for a change of the supervisor we know why that needs to happen.*

### **Clarifying Strengths-based Practice**

There was a discussion within the focus group about the need to clarify what each participant within the supervision process understood by the term strengths-based practice and this then needed to be integrated into the supervision contracting process. There was support within the focus group for external supervisors receiving input from the Organisation in terms of what the organisational perspective on strengths-based practice meant and clarifying the organisational expectations of what this might mean within the external supervision relationship. Supervisee Five considered that it was essential for supervisees also to clarify for themselves what strength-based practice meant and then explore this with a potential supervisor:

*Having staff well versed in the practise of strengths-based practice so that they could, when they're seeking out supervisors, have a clear indication in their head what they're looking for so that that supervisor marries what they want to do, and then having that triangular thing between us; with discussion first about what that means and how that will happen.*

The Clinical Manager voiced his regret at the separation between the external supervisors and the Organisation and was interested in developing strategies to connect the Organisation's strategic vision with the external supervision process:

*That supervisors would be invited to share the, I guess the strategic direction, to actually get a sense of where we as an organisation would want them to go... I hope that the part of the outcome for supervisors will either recognise how they fitted or not, ... another picture of the future, I'd quite like being part of an organisation that offered some training to the supervisors around the strengths-based practice, we'd actually offer external supervisors clear pictures about what we're doing, how we're doing it, what an integrated family service looks like.*

There was strong support within the perspectives of the Organisation participants for engagement with external supervisors by supervisees and the Organisation with respect to ongoing conversations about the nature and construction of strengths-based practice. Ung (2001) supports the views of the Organisational participants in his argument that there can be a disconnection between the agency context and "agency life" and the

external supervisor resulting in a “lack of contextual understanding of the content of what is presented” (Ung 2001:100).

### **How Closely Should Supervisor Style Mirror the Agency’s Stated Framework?**

Another dimension of the discussion that connected with the view that external supervisors needed to have a clear understanding about the Organisation’s philosophy of strengths-based practice was the argument that emerged within the focus groups and Clinical Manager interview that there should be consistency between the external supervisor framework and the Organisation framework. Supervisee five constructed this as the notion of the importance of congruence between supervisor, supervisee and organisational constructions of strengths-based practice and that if this clarity and congruence was established that this then allowed for a difference between supervisee and supervisor models. The key idea was the congruence between the values and attitudes not the specific models that each worked from.

Supervisee One offered an alternative view in supporting that there needed to be consistency between supervisee and supervisor theoretical and professional orientation and that the Organisation needed to be adaptive and responsive to workers as professionals:

*To be honest I believe counsellors are professionals practising a profession. I believe organisational structures should adapt to the profession and support its practitioners i.e. build policy around that relevant of course also to the type of work/client group that is targeted. Instead these days’ organisations form policy and expect counselling professionals to adapt their practice – often in ways that cut across professional principles and practice.*

These varying views then raise the issue of whose orientation directs the supervision process. The supervision literature (Brown and Bourne 1996, Hawkins and Shohet 2000, Kadushin and Harkness 2002) tends to emphasise the relationship between supervisor orientation and supervisee orientation and although there have been some discussions in the literature regarding the role of the external supervisor with respect to the organisational context (Izhaky 2001) the question of the fit between organisational frameworks and supervisor frameworks does not feature strongly. Morrell (2001) raises the question of organisational input into the choice of external supervisor related to the

expertise and experience of the Supervisor and offers the following areas for consideration by organisations:

- Training in supervision and/or considerable experience as an external supervisor
- Demonstration of understanding of the nature of professional work in organisations
- Professional reputation
- Own supervision arrangements
- Particular criteria e.g. religious affiliation, understanding Māori or other cultural groups (Morrell 2001: 37)

O'Donoghue (2003) considers the fit between external supervision and the organisation in terms of delineating the central concerns of external supervision from those of agency supervision:

*For external clinical supervisors, protection of client interest and well-being is their first concern. The second concern is that of the interest and well-being of their direct client (the practitioner). (O'Donoghue 2003:32)*

Hewson (1999) addresses the relationship external supervisors, supervisees and the organisation encouraging clear contracts to be negotiated between the parties in terms of expectations and roles. Hewson (1999: 76) recommends that there is an "equidistant" relationship established between the parties with balance in the contact between the parties however the mechanisms by which this might occur are not defined.

Within the strengths-based and solution-focused supervision literature there is some discussion of the question of fit between supervisee and supervisor theoretical orientation. Marek *et al* (1994) consider that a solution-focused approach in supervision is particularly useful where both the supervisee and supervisor are utilising a solution-focused approach because supervision then offers a modelling process for the supervisee. Marek *et al* (1994) assert also that because of the focus within a solution-focused approach on worker competence and resources that all supervisees regardless of theoretical orientation will find a solution-focused approach in supervision beneficial:

*All supervisees despite their theoretical orientation can come to understand their own unique strengths and abilities as therapists through the solution-focused supervision model. (Marek et al 1994:60)*

Selekman and Todd (1994) support Marek *et al's* (1994) view asserting that solution focused supervision has general utility across theoretical orientations. Selekman and Todd consider also that even if the model is not fully implemented the underlying principles and tools offer a means to developing a “cooperative climate for supervision” (1994:22). Cohen (1999) argues for flexibility in the application of a strengths-based approach in supervision and that this should be ultimately directed by the Supervisee’s theoretical orientation. Cohen (1999) appears to be suggesting that there can be incompatibility between strengths-based approaches and some other theoretical orientations however does not provide any specific examples to support this argument.

### **A Strengths-based Supervision Contract – what would this look like?**

From the focus group discussion regarding the relationship between Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation a number of important ideas were identified around contracting within strengths-based supervision. The major consideration for the contract and the contracting process was that this would be overt with clarity about roles and expectations. The focus group participants also felt that there needed to be clarity about bottom lines in terms of the accountability and expectations of the supervision relationship. The group also considered that clarity and transparency about things such as reporting and recording also needed to be in the contract. One key aspect that emerged out of the discussion was a focus on clarifying supervisor and supervisee understandings of what strengths-based practice is and developing a shared definition of this for use in supervision. The focus group also saw the need for supervisors to not only define strengths-based practice but also have a commitment to this way of being. This supports Blundo’s (2001) view around the paradigm shift and the need for absolute clarity and operationalisation of strengths-based practice so that it can be discerned from rhetoric that does not actually result in a significant reordering of the nature of the supervision relationship.

The focus group saw contracting as a collaborative process and that there was not a one size fits all approach in a strengths-based contract. The group focused on the processes for dealing with “bottom lines” and what happens if there is conflict in the relationship; here it was emphasised that concerns or reservations on both sides should be discussed

overtly and identified early rather than remaining covert or submerged in the supervision relationship. There was a discussion in the focus group of seeing issues as issues rather than deficits, which could suggest an externalising, approach to problems. Processes for noticing change also were seen as important to be built into a supervision contract with transparency and clarity as the guiding principles to the contract process. This was important to the group as noticing change was viewed as a way of focusing on competency and what is working rather than what is not working. The group considered that the contract should not be negatively focused around issues and concerns as this could perpetuate a deficits approach and thus a focus on competency was preferred. The Focus Group noted that the key assumption that people can change and grow needed to be the focus of the contract and thus the supervision process. Heath and Tharp (1991) cited in Thomas (1994:12) in a presentation about therapist's needs from supervision mirror much of the language of the research participants:

- We want relationships based on mutual respect
- You don't have to be a guru
- Supervise us or evaluate us, not both
- Assume that we're competent
- Tell us what we're doing right. Affirm us. Empower us
- Listen to us. Make supervision a human experience
- We want different things and sometimes we want change

A mind mapping exercise within the focus group developed the following ideas around the key components of a strengths-based supervision contract:

- Commitment and clarity about strengths-based practice and the development of a shared vision and definition of strengths-based practice
- Confidentiality
- Clarification of line management roles
- Tea and cookies
- Overt about what happens if there were issues/concerns, issues and concerns not to be constructed as conflict which provides a negative focus
- Supervision process is named
- Individualised contracts (one size does not fit all)

- Agency bottom lines need to be clear in the contracting process – two separate contracts including a three way contract between the organisation, supervisor and supervisee
- Expectations for accountability within the contract – agency expectations needed to be clear and supervisor expectations of the agency including reporting back to the organisation by the Supervisor

The key elements in the discussion about contracting related to the notion that the contract provided opportunity for in-depth discussion about the nature of strengths-based practice and the concept of a contract developed from a competency and success focused stance that was uniquely tailored to the supervisee.

## **External Supervisor Responses**

### *Structure of Current Relationships*

The External Supervisor participants offered a similar narrative to that of the Organisation participants with respect to the nature of the relationships between themselves and the people that they were supervising and their relationship with the Organisation. The primary relationship was identified as being between themselves and the supervisees with all four External Supervisors reporting that they did not have a close working relationship with the Organisation. Supervisor One called this absent and contractual; Supervisor Two reported his contact with the Organisation around supervision issues as limited to an annual report regarding supervision and otherwise non-existent. Supervisor Three described the relationship as distant with a reporting clause in the contract in the event of problems that could not be resolved in the supervision sessions. This was mirrored in the view of Supervisor Four who saw that the relationship that she had was with the person that she was supervising rather than with the Organisation. Supervisor Four had been asked to sign a contract at the beginning of the supervision relationship. The contract was set up to be reviewed on an annual basis had continued to roll over without review. Supervisor one summed up the nature of the relationships between supervisors:

*Absent and contractual really, it's, for me it's only through my experience with the supervisee, there is I recall a contract which I signed a few years ago and which I think technically comes up for review each year but I don't initiate*

*anything and I guess I expect the organisation to and I'll happily respond to that, but nothing has happened. So I feel a little bit in a sense in the dark about whether the organisation's happy with my supervision. Of course I've got an understanding that if I have any concerns of course I remember from that contract or from any, even unspoken contract, that I would initiate a connection, but as I say it's contractual and financial, not relational.*

The relationship between the Organisation and External Supervisors was thus focused on reporting to the Organisation in the event of issues or concerns arising however there was not a consistent approach to the requesting of reports from supervisors on an annual basis. The general theme seemed to be that if there was not contact between supervisors and the agency then the assumption was that supervision was probably working.

### ***The Significance of Supervisors***

The Supervisors were all asked about the significance of their role with respect to work of the Organisation. Supervisors Two and Three acknowledged the significance and influence of external supervisors. Supervisor Four noted that significance of the supervisor role, expressing the view that the impact of supervision was more significant with a greater impact on development and practice than it could look from a purely quantitative view in terms of time spent in supervision:

*I tend to think it could be quite influential, I, the more I look at supervision and training I'd tend to say supervisors have a much greater influence than we often think, often the training institution sees and having watched and audited other students, I think a supervisor can have an enormous influence and they become the person or if they're a really good supervisor they become a really key facilitator of all the learning and all the integration.*

Supervisor Four also viewed external supervisors as part of the Organisation team and asserted the value of utilising their expertise in achieving the Organisation's vision for the future:

*I think, my own feeling is that I tend towards there being a greater collaborative link about the strength-based way of things that I tend to more and more believe in is community approaches, team approaches in that all the different perspectives coming together and I think I'd say within that framework supervisors are part of the team and there must be ways that, the predominant model that I've experienced is the supervisor's sort of way out the side here and they're somehow not in the loop as such; here they are, I'm suggesting they have a huge amount of influence and yet there's often no way for the agency often, from the agency point of view I often felt very cautious*

*about going to a supervisor and vice versa and I think there's a way that there should be, I think a conversation could be held about the agency for instance having a time when they actually ask supervisors and they said look this is where we're going, this is something about vision, our dream, we'd like to work on how could this work rather than just following the model, and they actually, they engaged everybody in a conversation.*

Supervisor Three offered her experience (as manager of another organisation) of what can occur when there are differences between organisational values and the values of external supervisors and the implications of this for organisations and workers:

*I've had supervisors who practice in a way that is outside of the agency's values and philosophy, and that has been very difficult, so what we've learnt as an organisation is to be very careful about that because we're, we've got a culture in our organisation that's made up of our values and our philosophy and our way of working and if a supervisor is working in a way that doesn't support that, that is not supporting the work of the organisation, it's not supporting the staff member.*

### ***Transition within the Organisation***

The External Supervisors were all asked about their perspective of the Organisation's expectations of supervision and their role in the light of the transition to strengths-based practice. The External Supervisors expressed a lack of clarity about the transition to strengths-based practice and the implications of this for external supervision.

Supervisor Three observed that she had made assumptions about the nature of the transition without having had any feedback from the Organisation or an opportunity to test this out:

*I guess I'd probably need to have to kind of say well I'm not sure what the approach is. Like, are people going to be asked to commit to it by a certain time or not? Or is it taking it's very, a slow kind of gentler approach, I don't actually know that. I don't know, if I knew where the organisation was at with strength-based approach and work, like I don't actually know where they're at, don't know, because I don't know whether they're, it's fully integrated in the organisation completely throughout or not, or whether they're still in transition around it.*

Two of the External Supervisors interviewed constructed the transition within the Organisation as being more connected to a change in focus with regard to client group i.e. a move to seeing more families rather than individuals. Supervisor One expressed a lack of clarity about what strengths-based actually meant for her role as an External

Supervisor and was having to construct her own view of what this could mean in her work with the person she was supervising:

*I'm happy to engage in that (strengths-based supervision) with my kind of understanding of it but like I say I haven't had a piece of paper that says this is the sort of supervision we expect, this is called strength-based and it should be thus.*

The perspectives of the External Supervisors were consistent in their expressions regarding a lack of clarity about what the transition meant for their role as supervisors and they had made assumptions about this that had not been checked or tested within the organisational context.

### ***Ongoing Arrangements and Conversations between External Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation***

Within the External Supervisor responses, three participants expressed support for the idea of regular meetings between the Organisation and the External Supervisor group. This was seen as a way of keeping supervisors informed of the organisational direction and any implications of this for supervision. Supervisor Two saw supervisors as part of the agency team and felt that by explicitly engaging them in some way with the agency that this could add to the resources available to the organisation not just through supervision. Supervisor Four also expressed support for the ideas of supervisors meeting with the Organisation to clarify expectations and to also hear about the vision of the Organisation:

*I would love the opportunity to actually sit down with them with the other supervisors and perhaps them to share with us their perspective and I guess some sense of what their expectations are of us. Because we're kind of just doing our own thing and I think its probably fitting with what the agency wants, but it would be kind of nice to have that confirmed and to see what other supervisors are doing as well, you know, for this local organisation. So I would like some input from them that would be really nice. Especially because its been very changeable.*

Supervisor Three also saw that there was a strong link between the role of supervisors and the agency's commitment to strengths-based practice and that by engaging with external supervisors there would be a clearer understanding of supervisor philosophy and how this could support the development of strengths-based practice:

*I mean I think if the Organisation is really committed to taking on a strengths-based approach they would do that, they would bring the supervisors in closer, because hey, they don't know what we're doing. How can we help them achieve where they want to go to?*

Supervisor Three commented on the isolation of external supervisors from each other and also the absence of opportunities for supervisors to reflect about the strengths perspective and its implications for supervision:

*I'd love to hear from other supervisors about how they're doing this because you, if you quite often, I've not had another conversation with a supervisor who's been asked to work in strengths-based way.*

Supervisor four also noted the value of the Organisation meeting with the supervisor and the supervisee at the time of performance appraisal. Supervisor four considered that this created an opportunity to advocate for supervisees if necessary and also saw external supervisors as a “vital link” in offering feedback in a strengths-based way about “areas that need to be worked on but also it is looking at competency”.

Supervisor One was not supportive of the notion of regular three way meetings between supervisors, supervisees and the Organisation, expressing a concern that this could result in the supervisor providing organisational supervision that could compromise the integrity of the professional relationship with the supervisee. Supervisor One was however supportive of an annual contract and supervision report and some opportunity for information from the agency about their philosophy and direction if the supervisor observed this to be having an impact on the person that they were supervising. This was a way of testing out supervisee perceptions with what the Organisation was presenting:

*If it was impacting on my supervisee, it would be good to have the external official view of what it is that this is happening to help realistically appraise any paranoia that might be, I don't mean it clinically but “anxiety”.*

The views of the External Supervisors would appear to support Ung's (2001) view that external supervisors can become disconnected from the organisational context of the supervisee and Morrell's (2001) call for stronger links between organisations and external supervisors as a means of supporting supervisees.

Within the External Supervisor interviews a theme emerged with regard to the impact of the organisational transition on the agenda that supervisee's were bringing to

supervision. The supervisors all noted the change process in the agency as impacting on supervisees and what they were seeing as issues for supervision. This was seen by Supervisor Two as an argument for creating opportunities for supervisors, supervisees and the Organisation to meet together as a forum for the normalising of these issues and developing a strategy to deal with them:

*I wouldn't be surprised if several people were going to different supervisors with a somewhat similar problem that they were trying to cope with, maybe they could be identified and the suggestion made by individual supervisors, look we really suggest you do, you get somebody just for a day to facilitate a session on our change processes or whatever the issue is that's bleeding internally.*

Copeland (1998) offers support for the normalising role of the external supervisor in her view that external supervisors have an important role as agents of change in terms of noticing issues and being able to provide advocacy around these with organisations. Supervisor Two acknowledged the view around the need to maintain the primacy and independence of the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee can create discomfort between organisations and external supervisors in terms of the management of their relationship. This participant could still envisage benefit in supervisors at least having knowledge of the direction of the agency if they were not comfortable with a three-way meeting process:

*They would still I think benefit from knowing this is something about where this agency's going, and they may actually have pieces that from whatever their theoretical discipline is or approach is, that they would say, well we notice this and we wondered whether that is a weakness or a strength or whatever. So I'd, rather than saying that I think they should do, this is what they should do in some concrete process, my feeling is that the process is important, they actually should ask the supervisors, they could perhaps come together on a morning, with a bit of a presentation, where the agency is going, and then put most of the time in a conversation about how could we work out ways that are mutually beneficial to assist the work of the agency in professional practice.*

Morrell (2001:39) acknowledges that the confidential and independent relationship between the external supervisor and the supervisee "is its most precious and essential element" however she strongly advocates for a feedback loop between supervisor and organisations in order to meet the accountability requirements of professional supervision. Morrell (2001) critiques the range of arrangements that can exist between organisations and supervisors, that is:

- Concern focused reporting
- Regular supervision report
- Regular meetings between all the parties to the supervision arrangement.

Morrell (2001) considers that three-way meetings offer the most benefit to all those involved where clear guidelines for the release of information and preparation for the meeting has been undertaken:

*The confidential independent aspects of the relationship are not jeopardised. On the contrary workers feel valued and affirmed by the agency's willingness to be involved with them and their professional development, concerns and constraints. (Morrell 2001:40)*

There is support for this view within the perspectives of the research participants and support for a view that develops this approach as a means to focus on strengths, competency and successes and becomes a forum for the celebration of what is working as much as what is not.

#### ***Fit between Supervisor Theoretical Framework and Organisational Framework***

External Supervisors were also asked about the significance of supervisor orientation matching agency orientation. Supervisor's Two and Three saw the importance of connection between the supervisors values and philosophy and that of the organisation however they both expressed the point that once this was established then this could support the notion of some difference in approaches between supervisor and supervisee. Supervisor Two saw this with regard to the challenges that a supervisor who saw the world differently could bring not only to the relationship with the supervisee but also with the agency:

*I think that's healthy, I wouldn't like to see some, almost incestuous, or too close a thinking and people not being willing to challenge each other, I think that's a really core thing and I suppose that's the only danger I see as sometimes I, the people who speak from totally different positions, because I, ultimately I suppose I come down to the viewpoint that the people who truly are effective sometimes they can challenge with very different models, and I wonder whether it's a false thing to be able to say well it's because they've got a strengths-based or, it's a game that may well come down to be a level of integration, a level of maturity, a level of being, some quite different factor that's about their influence, and those people, whatever the model they bring in, are profoundly useful, even if they're a little bit of a thorn in the side.*

Supervisor Three saw that supervisees and supervisors needed to have some common points of connection around philosophy however felt if there was exact mirroring in the relationship that this would limit the supervision relationship and process:

*Oh I think it has to have some commonalities, but I don't, I mean I think if you were mirroring it totally, what would that be like, that might actually really limit it. I think you have to have some common values and beliefs about the way that you're working with people.... I think there needs to be a clear understanding about what expectations are. Like what the organisation expects from the supervisor and what the supervisor expects from the organisation. And the supervisee as well. And I think the supervisee needs to be absolutely really clear what this agreement and relationship is.*

Supervisor One considered that the primary relationship existed between the Supervisee and the Supervisor and that this was the key area in which fit needed to occur. The External Supervisors as a group were less enthusiastic about the idea of "fit" between external supervisors and supervisees with the supervisee group strongly advocating that fit resulted in more challenge in the supervision relationship while the external supervisor responses appeared to link closer fit with less challenge in the supervision relationship.

## **Summary**

Chapter Six has outlined the perspectives of the participants in the research with respect to the relationships between supervisees, external supervisors and the Organisation. The perspectives on the existing relationships support the constructions in the supervision literature of the primacy of the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee and the notion of independence and separation of the organisational and external supervisor relationships. However, almost all the Organisation participants supported the idea of strengthening and clarifying the tripartite relationship between supervisees, external supervisors and the Organisation. There was a range of views about how this could be achieved with support for initial meetings at the time of the development of the supervision contract and regular three-way supervision reviews. One Organisation participant asserted the continuing need for a separation between the Organisation and external supervisors as a means to ensuring independence in the supervision relationship. Several of the Organisation participants considered that linking external supervisors to the performance appraisal process could be useful and supportive of

supervisee development. There was also support within the Organisation participants for a more competency focused reporting system as opposed to reporting only when concerns existed about practice. The Organisation participants also expressed support for opportunities for external supervisors to meet as a group with the Organisation to hear about the vision for the Organisation particularly with regard to strengths-based practice and to have an opportunity to clarify what implications, if any, this had for their role as an external supervisor. The Organisation participants were almost all in favour of the need for a close fit between the orientation of the Organisation, external supervisors and supervisees.

The External Supervisor participants mirrored the Organisation participants in their description of the current relationships between the three parties. The External Supervisors saw their role as important and of value in excess of the time actually spent in supervision. There was universal support within the Supervisor group for receiving information about the strategic direction of the organisation and any implications for supervision in this. One External Supervisor was happy to receive information about this at the time of reviewing the contract however did not see value in meeting with the Organisation or other supervisors while the other three External Supervisors expressed support for meetings between the Organisation and the external supervisor group and the development of three-way supervision review meetings.

The perspective of the External Supervisors differed from the Organisation participants in that the External Supervisors expressed less support for complete “fit” in the theoretical orientation between the Organisation, external supervisees and supervisors. The key difference in these perspectives was that the External Supervisors supported the notion of challenge occurring within the supervision relationship and to the Organisation and the issue was raised by two of the External Supervisors that complete fit in orientation could result in a degree of comfort in the relationship that could lead to complacency. This view is at odds with the Organisation participants who expressed the idea that the more comfortable and trusting the supervision relationship, the more likely they were to invite challenge about their practice.

The focus group offered their perspective on the key ingredients of a strengths-based supervision contract with clarity about roles and expectation and a focus on supervisee-led supervision that was strongly linked to the competency and strengths of the supervisee.

The findings in this chapter lend weight to the argument for supervision as an important and central tool and resource in a change process and the value of ongoing clarification of the expectations and roles of all those involved in supervision so that supervisee, external supervisor and organisational goals and aspirations around supervision are aligned in the interest of best practice with clients.

## **Chapter Seven - Conclusion-Strengths-based Supervision – rhetoric or reality?**

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This chapter reviews the research questions and research process. A summary of the findings is presented and some conclusions and discussion about the rhetoric or reality of strengths-based supervision are offered. Recommendations are made about the implications of the strengths-based practice for supervision within an organisational change process. The chapter concludes with some recommendations for future research.

### **Review of the research objectives and methodology**

The aim of this research was to explore the impact of a transition to strengths-based practice within three sites of a social service organisation. The primary objective was to explore the participants' constructions of the transition to strengths-based practice and their perceptions of the implications of this for supervision. The central consideration within this study was the participants' conceptualisations of what strengths-based practice and supervision might look like; how this connected, or collided with their views around traditional approaches to practice and supervision; and asks the question about whether strengths-based supervision is a distinct model or approach to supervision or whether it is a repackaging of traditional approaches to supervision. This research also sought to locate the significance of the transition to strengths-based practice within the participants' experiences of supervision and the nature of the relationship between external supervision and the change process.

A total of eleven participants took part in the study. Seven of these participants were employed within the Organisation and four participants were providing external supervision to staff within the Organisation. The participants were located within a range of professional groups, that is social workers, counsellors and psychotherapists. The sample was drawn from three sites of the organisation utilising theory-based and opportunistic sampling (Patton 2002:240). The research was informed by participatory action-research methodology, which was utilised because of the requirement that the researcher join a change process being undertaken within the agency and the

compatibility between this research methodology and the principles of strengths-based practice (McTaggart 1991, Hart and Bond 1995, Saleebey 1996, Kemmis and McTaggart 2001). Semi structured individual interviews were undertaken with all the participants and five organisation participants were also engaged in two focus group meetings.

This research was undertaken at a time when there is debate within the literature as to the legitimacy of strengths-based practice being offered as a distinct approach offering a paradigmatic shift in the nature of the relationship between workers and clients (Margolin 1997, Blundo 2001, Staudt *et al.* 2001, McMillen *et al.* 2004, Saleebey 2004). The debates within the literature have often been constructed utilising a dichotomising approach with strengths-based practice at one end of the continuum and deficit or pathologising approaches at the other (Blundo 2001, McMillen *et al.* 2004). This study has also sought to locate and parallel the debate around strengths-based practice within the supervision domain. The data gained in the research was organised in three key areas, participant constructions of strengths-based practice, strengths-based supervision and the implications for the relationships between supervisees, external supervisors and the Organisation.

### **Exploring Strengths-based Practice**

I considered in undertaking this research that it was important to explore participant constructions of strengths-based practice before exploring views around strengths-based supervision. The responses generated by participants highlighted and reflected the debates within the literature regarding strengths-based practice. The following themes emerged within the participant responses:

- Many ways to understand strengths-based practice
- Role of the worker
- Insight and the change process
- Strengths-based practice as an approach to life
- Dealing with challenging issues

### *Many ways to understand strengths-based practice*

There were a number of constructions of strengths-based practice within the participant responses and a continuum of responses regarding the nature of strengths-based practice as a distinct approach to practice or as embodied in traditional models of helping. There was no universal definition of strengths-based practice with significant debate between the participants as to the existence of strengths-based practice as a distinct entity. The responses ranged from the view of strengths-based practice as embodying the core values that have always been at the basis of the helping professions on one hand, to participants who considered strengths-based practice as a radical departure from traditional models of helping that have been based in a focus on deficits. Within the participant responses there was universality of opinion that they considered their practice to be strengths-based however there were different constructions of how this was actualised in their practice. Within the responses a common theme emerged with respect to the idea that strengths-based embodied a focus on the client and client self-directedness.

Two of the participants considered that a focus on strengths might not always be strengths-based as this could lead to a lack of focus on insight and missed opportunities for growth and development for clients. There was a clear rejection by the participants of the dichotomising of strengths-based and deficit approaches although the reasons for this differed. One of the participants articulated his frustration with a dichotomising approach because of its tendency to engender either defensiveness or a view that strengths-based practice is something that people have always utilised in their practice. The response that strengths-based practice was not something new was apparent within the participant responses as were expressions of confusion about what strengths-based practice actually meant. There was a lack of clarity about how the term strengths-based had been used in relation to the transition within the Organisation. This lack of clarity was particularly evident within the external supervisor group with participants expressing that they had made assumptions about what strengths-based practice meant but did not have clear views of how this had been operationalised within the Organisation.

### ***Role of the Worker***

The role of the worker was a significant theme within the research with debate about the use of the worker's expertise. Participants considered that workers could use their expertise without this undermining the world of the client with the notion of adding to the resources of the client through the use of the worker's expertise. Six of the participants considered that strengths-based practice offered a particular approach to people that recognised the client as an authority on their own life and repositioned the role of the worker with respect to the client. This was embodied for these participants in the notion of respectful practice. One of the participants considered that strengths-based practice took the concept of empowerment further than other theoretical frameworks and offered concrete tools for how workers could evaluate the position, attitudes and values that were being adopted with clients.

### ***Insight and the change process***

Two of the participants considered that focusing on deficit was possible within a strengths-based approach and that not to do so was limiting the work with a client. Several of the participants considered that their understanding and view of strengths-based practice led them to see this as a framework that was potentially limiting to the way that they were currently practising, particularly with regard to their preference for and belief around a focus on the use of insight as a tool for change. One participant expressed an alternative view that insight could occur within a change process but was not necessary for change to occur and that noticing difference was the key to change.

### ***Strengths-based practice as an approach to life***

A strong theme in the research was that there was not 'one way' of being strengths-based and that strengths-based practice was not restricted to use by a particular theoretical orientation. The dominant view of participants within the research appeared to be that the values, attitudes and positions underpinning a particular approach were more important. Participants considered that strengths-based practice was compatible with a range of theoretical frameworks and approaches and that the defining concept around strengths-based practice was linked to the values, attitudes and positions adopted

by the worker in relation to clients as opposed to a particular skill set, with several of the participants asserting that strengths-based practice was a way of life rather than a model of practice.

### ***Dealing with Challenging Issues***

One significant theme that emerged within the research was the value of a strengths-based approach in dealing with difficult issues when working with clients. Many of the participants affirmed the use of strengths-based practice in challenging situations because of their view that it supported workers to be clear about bottom lines, focused on respectful collaborative relationships and provided a focus on transparency in the relationship between workers and clients.

### **Defining strengths-based supervision**

Participant conceptualisations of strengths-based supervision were consistent in many respects with the ideas expressed in the responses regarding strengths-based practice. The key ideas from the organisation participants' perspective were that strengths-based supervision was characterised as being supervisee-focused and supervisee-led and that supervisors modelled an unknowing stance or used their expertise without being the expert in the relationship. These participants saw strengths-based supervision as valuing supervisees for their competence and knowledge and that supervisees were active participants within the supervision process. The Clinical Manager saw the role of the Supervisor to model the principles of strengths-based practice so that supervision provided support for strengths-based practice with clients. As part of the individual interviews and the second focus group, participants from within the Organisation were invited to consider how they might define strengths-based supervision. The following principles emerged from the organisation participants. These outline what defines and differentiates strengths-based supervision:

- Expertise without being the expert
- Focus on strengths and competence
- Focus on the worker's story
- Supervision as parallel process with clients

These principles were largely connected to the position adopted by the supervisor in the relationship and were seen to support the development of supervisee-focused and competency focused supervision. There was also support within the narratives for the paradoxical position of the more freedom supervisees experienced and the safer the supervision process the more likely they were to raise issues within supervision that they found difficult and challenging. Strengths-based supervision was seen to offer an approach that would enable this to occur. There was strong agreement among the focus group participants that supervision based in these principles would enable a safe environment in which they felt safe to explore issues and to deal with challenging situations and to also offer supervisors feedback and challenge.

### **Making the Most of Supervision**

A key theme in the research related to how supervisees learn to use supervision. The view was expressed by several of the participants that from their experience this was often a supervisor-led process. Two of the participants noted the impact of attending supervisor training on their understanding and use of their own supervision and identified a need for more opportunities for supervisees to have training around how to make the most of supervision. One Organisation participant who offered a supervisee and supervisor perspective reflected that many supervisees expect the supervisor to direct the supervision process.

### **Building a definition of strengths-based practice within the supervision relationship**

There was strong support within the focus groups for opportunities for supervisees to construct their views around strengths-based practice and to then explore these constructions with their supervisors with the aim of building a shared definition and understanding of what strengths-based practice might mean in the supervision relationship. This could provide a clear definition and operationalisation of strengths-based practice within the supervision relationship. The narratives of the participants continued to echo the themes of the previous section highlighting the debate about how to define strengths-based supervision and whether it exists as a distinct theoretical

framework. Within the participant responses there was no clear narrative defining strengths-based supervision as different from other supervision models however supervision informed by strengths-based principles was identified within the focus group and Clinical Manager interview as being important in the organisation. Within the focus groups the observation emerged that strength-based supervision differed from other models of supervision because although other models might emphasise a supervisee focus, a strengths-based approach ensures that this is competency and success focused and not deficit focused.

The External Supervisor narratives offered similar themes to those of the organisation participants with respect to defining strengths-based supervision. There was a strong emphasis in the interviews on supervisee strengths and competence and the role of the supervisor in how they use their expertise in the supervision relationship. The External Supervisor perspective can be linked to the notion of offering expertise without having to be the expert in the supervision relationship (Lowe and Guy 2002).

### **Transition within the Organisation and the Relationships between Supervisees, External Supervisors and the Organisation**

The research considered the impact of the transition to strengths-based practice within the Organisation on the participants' experiences of supervision. Some key ideas emerged relating to the views of the participants in the research with respect to the relationships between supervisees, external supervisors and the Organisation. Themes were identified about the nature and shape of the current relationships between external supervisors, supervisees and the Organisation and also how the participants saw these relationships developing in the future. The impact and implications of the transition for supervision relationships also featured in the narratives of the participants.

### **Current Relationships between External Supervisors, Supervisees and the Organisation**

The current supervision relationships were identified as primarily focused on the external supervisor– supervisee relationship with little connection between the

Organisation and the external supervisors. One participant summarised this as absent and contractual which reflected the views of the Organisation and External Supervisor participants across the study. The participants' narratives on the existing relationships supported the view that the current nature of the relationships reinforced the centrality of the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee and the notion of independence and separation of the organisational and external supervisor relationships. A variety of accountability arrangements existed between the external supervisors and the Organisation with contact to be activated if the Supervisor identified a problem related to the supervisee's practice that needed to be brought to the attention of the Organisation.

The External Supervisors and Organisation participants affirmed the importance of supervision and that the significance of supervision to worker well-being and development and client outcomes was proportionally greater than the time actually spent in supervision. The perspectives of the participants were also consistent in their expressions regarding a lack of clarity about what the transition within the Organisation meant for supervision. The External Supervisor group considered that they had had to make a number of assumptions about what the transition meant however had not had opportunities to test these assumptions within the Organisational context. Austin and Hopkins (2004: 155) conceptualise the role of supervisors as "change leaders" reinforcing the importance of the role of supervision in an organisational change process. Although the perspective offered by Austin and Hopkins (2004) locates the supervisor role within the organisational context the importance of external supervision was noted by all the research participants and could be considered to be a significant element within a whole organisation reflective approach to the change process.

### **Future Constructions of the Relationships**

Almost all the Organisation participants supported the idea of strengthening and clarifying the relationship between supervisees, external supervisors and the Organisation and establishing this as a tripartite relationship rather than as only a relationship between the external supervisor and the supervisee. There was a range of views about how this could be achieved with support for initial meetings at the time of

the development of the supervision contract and regular three-way supervision reviews. One Organisation participant asserted the continuing need for a separation between the Organisation and the external supervisors as a means to ensuring independence in the supervision relationship. Several of the Organisation participants considered that linking external supervisors to the performance appraisal process could be useful and supportive of Supervisee development. There was also support within the Organisation participants for greater emphasis on competency and success-focused reporting systems as opposed to reporting only when concerns existed about practice. The Organisation participants also expressed support for opportunities for external supervisors to meet as a group with the Organisation to hear about the vision for the Organisation particularly with regard to strengths-based practice and to have an opportunity to clarify what implications if any this had for their role as an external supervisor. The Organisation participants were almost all in favour of the need for a close fit between the orientation of the Organisation, external supervisors and supervisees.

There was universal support within the External Supervisor group for receiving information about the strategic direction of the Organisation and any implications for supervision in this. One External Supervisor was happy to receive information about this at the time of reviewing the contract however did not see value in meeting with the Organisation or other supervisors while the other three External Supervisors expressed support for meetings between the Organisation and the external supervisor group and the development of three-way supervision review meetings.

### **Theoretical Orientation within the Supervision Relationship**

In considering the relationship between the Organisational vision of strengths-based practice and the orientation of the external supervisor the External Supervisors differed from the Organisation participants in that they expressed less support for complete "fit" in the theoretical orientation between the Organisation, external supervisees and supervisees. The key difference in this view was related to the External Supervisors' view that a complete fit in supervisee-supervisor orientation could result in a degree of comfort in the relationship that could lead to complacency and a lack of challenge within the supervision relationship. This view was at odds with the Organisation participants who expressed the idea that the more comfortable and trusting the

supervision relationship the more likely they were to invite challenge about their practice.

### **Contracting in Supervision**

The focus group discussions offered a perspective on the key ingredients of a strengths-based supervision contract with clarity about roles and expectation and a focus on supervisee led supervision that was strongly linked to the competency and strengths of the supervisee.

### **Recommendations**

There are a number of recommendations that flow from this research with respect to the continuing the conversation about the nature of strengths-based practice, how supervisees learn how to make the most of supervision, the voice of the supervisee within the supervision literature, the nature of the relationships between supervisees, the Organisation and external supervisors and the significance of supervision in a change process. Each of these recommendations is now discussed in turn:

#### *Continuing the Conversation about Strengths-based Practice?*

This research has highlighted the importance of the ongoing clarification and operationalisation of what strengths-based practice means to organisations, external supervisors and supervisees. It would appear that within the literature there is an aspect of writers talking past each other as they seek to justify or critique strengths-based practice. The nature of theoretical understanding and theory building cannot be conceptualised as static processes according to Reid (2002) and Turner (1996) supports this view with his notion of theory as an evolving process:

*Theories are open, dynamic systems that grow, change and develop as they interact with other systems and are variously applied by practitioners. (Turner 1996: 701-702)*

This was also apparent within the research and it thus seems critical that there is ongoing dialogue and conversation about how to understand strengths-based practice. The importance of supervision as a place to reflect on this requires further conversation and operationalisation so that the language of a strengths-perspective is not rhetoric but

can be observed in concrete and tangible ways within organisations, the work of individual practitioners and within supervision in all its forms. The question of whether or not strengths-based practice is a cornerstone of the helping professions is less important than how we are able to reflect on the principles within a strengths-based practice within our interactions with people. Whether or not it is 'new or traditional practice' the important thing is to continue the conversations about how we position ourselves in relation to clients and to have clear and concrete tools for evaluating the connections or otherwise, between what we say we do and what we actually do. The language of a strengths-based approach invites us to consider alternative ways of viewing problems and encourages us to engage in client directed work that is focused in solutions. The challenge of strengths-based practice is to put its claims forward without adopting the 'power-over' expert we know-how to do this approach that the writers within the strengths-based literature critique so consistently when discussing 'deficit' approaches.

*Making the most of supervision – supervision as a partnership*

This research supports the stronger use of and ownership of supervision by supervisees. Within the research the participants identified that the primary means to learning about supervision was from supervisors and that often supervisees rely on the supervisor construction of how supervision should be. This research supports the active participation by supervisees in establishing their vision of how supervision will best work for them, preparation before engaging with an external supervisor and clarity around the purpose and focus of supervision and how this will be achieved with a particular supervisor. Two of the participants reflected on how supervisor training had developed their use of their own supervision as supervisees. This research supports the call by Davys (2002) for training opportunities for supervisors and supervisees. This research supports this and recommends that supervisees and supervisors have opportunities to reflect together on how to make the most of supervision. It is also recommended that supervisees and supervisors have opportunities to work together within organisations and also with supervisors and supervisees from other organisations to construct what is strengths-based supervision.

There are opportunities for supervisees to receive training in supervision however often this is within a fieldwork context as part of professional training and in fact much of the supervision literature is focused on supervisors focusing on the needs of trainees. It is recommended that training opportunities are developed which focus on what supervisees want from supervision, what their strengths and competencies are and how supervision can develop these further with a balance between celebrating success and focusing on development and the “coaxing of expertise” (Thomas 1994:11). Training needs to provide opportunities for supervisees to clarify for themselves and with their organisations before choosing a supervisor about what their expectations and those of organisations. The expectations of organisations with respect to the principles that they believe underpin supervision need to be clear for the supervisee and the supervisor. It is recommended that joint training opportunities be developed that focus on supervisee and supervisor perceptions, expectations and understandings of supervision and the development of an individualised interviewing format for supervisees to use when choosing a supervisor and for the ongoing review of supervision. This training could also consider questions that encourage supervisees and supervisors to explore what they need to know about each other, how will competence be addressed within the relationship, how will the supervisor and supervisee use their expertise and knowledge in the supervision relationship.

### *Refocusing the literature*

If there is a shift to occur in supervision with greater focus on the ownership of supervision by supervisees then a refocusing in the literature needs to occur so that the supervisee perspective and voice is much more developed within the supervision literature. The supervision literature is heavily weighted in the direction of a supervisor audience even when reflecting on the needs of supervisees (Davys 2002). This research recommends that supervisees be encouraged to offer their experiences to other supervisees and to supervisors to balance the literature and support a more active role of the supervisee as a partner in the supervision relationship. The idea that the quality of supervision is related to the quality of the supervisor is important, however the role of the supervisee as actively constructing what they need from supervision as a tool for the development of ongoing reflective practice is very important. Within the interviews the importance of supervision experiences was identified, both negative and positive,

including the significance of these experiences and the long-term impact on how people used supervision. Increasing the supervisee profile within the literature, including an increase in writing that is written from a supervisee perspective for supervisees is important, if the shift from naive and passive recipient supervisee to active, participating supervisee is to occur. This is the paradigm shift in the supervision relationship. As long as the supervision literature remains largely directed at supervisors the balance of power and responsibility for the supervision process will remain with supervisors. It is encouraging to note that recent amendments to the Aotearoa/New Zealand Association of Social Workers (2004) supports the supervisee as an active participant in the supervision process who has a responsibility to negotiate the way supervision will occur. Developing the voice of the supervisee in the supervision literature will support and facilitate this to occur.

#### *Connecting up External Supervision and Organisational Supervision*

One of the findings that emerged within the research related to the relationship between the Organisation, external supervisors and supervisees. Two recommendations have been identified in response to the findings. The first recommendation is that there is value in organisations inviting all the external supervisors to meet as a group with the organisation to have an opportunity to dialogue about the vision of the organisation and to clarify any implications for their supervision relationships. This would also provide a forum for discussing the role of the external supervisor with the organisation and any themes or common questions that the supervisor group has about this. The second recommendation relates to the individual supervision relationships. It is recommended that a meeting be held at the time a supervision contract is established between an external supervisor, supervisee and the organisation and that a three-way contract is established. Ideally this would involve a success and competency focused reporting process and this would provide opportunities for supervisors, supervisees and the organisation to meet together to celebrate success and achievements, clarify roles and expectations.

The supervision literature reinforces the importance of supervisee choice as contributing to effective supervision (Inskipp and Proctor, 1993, Scaife 2001, Davys 2002). This

theme within the strengths-based literature supports supervisee choice on the basis that supervisees know what they require from supervision (Thomas 1994, Anderson and Swim 1995, Cohen 1999). There needs however to be clarification at least of the organisation's position via a policy statement so that supervisees are clear about the parameters and bottom lines of the supervision arrangement. It is further recommended that professions to review their supervision policies to take account of all the parties to supervision arrangements. The question of organisational expectations understanding of supervision within the organisation's strategic vision is essential to be clarified with supervisee's prior to the selection of a supervisor.

This research has also identified the importance of connecting all the elements and stakeholders (including external supervisors) involved in a change process if a learning approach focused on reflective practice in all aspects of a organisational life is to be achieved (Austin and Hopkins 2004).

### **Future Research**

Research that utilises a focus group methodology with external supervisors would also merit consideration in light of the regret expressed by the External Supervisors that a focus group process was not possible within this study. Further research that engaged external supervisors within a focus group process would be interesting particularly with respect to exploring their perspectives around their relationship with organisations. It would also have been useful to explore within a group process, external supervisor constructions of strengths-based supervision. It would be interesting to explore further the impact of professional and theoretical orientation on these perspectives.

It would be useful to consider extending the research undertaken to include other sites within the Organisation or even the Organisation as a whole as a way of developing a much broader construction of strengths-based practice and the implications for supervision practice across the Organisation.

O'Donoghue (1999) and Davys (2002) call for more research into the practice of supervision in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Further research that considers how the question of supervisee choice is developed within the Aotearoa/New Zealand context and the

impact on supervisee choice of external supervisor by organisational supervision policies and organisational vision would merit some further attention. Views around the contractual arrangements that exist between organisations, external supervisors and supervisees are further areas that could be considered in future research.

This study has highlighted the continuing debate regarding strengths-based practice and has attempted to locate supervision within the debate, as the literature around strengths-based practice does not yet appear to have fully engaged supervision. This research signals the need for further research into experiences of supervision and how people define and experience strengths-based supervision. Further research that engages with other organisations, external and internal supervisors and supervisees and continuing the conversation about strengths-based practice and its implications for supervision could be also be beneficial.

Research with other practitioners regarding their conceptualisations and experiences of strengths-based practice and how this is connected to their experience of supervision would be another important area for future study. Locating this research within professional associations such as the Aotearoa/New Zealand Association of Social Workers or the New Zealand Association of Counsellors could provide constructions of strengths-based practice across a variety of practice contexts. It would also be useful to explore the research questions utilised within the study with other organisations that see themselves as strengths-based or in a transition to strengths-based practice. This research has had a focus on external supervision because of nature of the organisational context with respect to supervision so there could be value in exploring the research questions also with organisations that utilise an internal supervision framework within a strengths-based framework.

## **Conclusion**

The need to be clear about what strengths-based practice and the importance of developing shared understanding about what this actually means beyond the rhetoric has also been highlighted in this research and as a fundamental task for the Organisation, supervisees and external supervisors. The research findings presented a variety of

constructions and meanings associated with strengths-based practice and highlight the debate in the literature about the validity or otherwise of distinguishing strengths-based practice and the argument of strengths-based versus deficit approaches (Blundo 2001, McMillen *et al* 2004, Saleebey 2004). This research offers a view that continuing to focus on a dichotomising approach may be less helpful in the long run as this has the continuing potential to alienate and engender defensiveness. What this research has indicated is that supervision is one of the critical places for workers to reflect on the fit between their actions and their view of these actions. Although the research question about the existence of strengths-based supervision as a distinct supervision model was not addressed definitively within the research findings a clear theme has emerged within the participants' responses that supports a supervision framework that is clearly linked to the principles of strengths-based practice and supervision within the literature (Thomas 1994, Anderson and Swim 1997, Cohen 1999, Munford and Sanders 1999, Blundo 2001, Saleebey 2004). The narrative of the Supervisee participants in the research strongly supported the notion of a supervision environment where supervision focuses on strengths and competency and a safe transparent and clearly contracted relationship that encourages supervision to be a supervisee-led and focused process. This research has supported the greater ownership of supervision by supervisees and a positioning of the supervisor as someone with expertise but not responsibility for the supervision process. This research has also highlighted the importance of engaging external supervision processes in a change process and also the value identified by the Supervisee participants of connecting up and establishing clear and well structured three-way contracts between supervisees, external supervisors and the Organisation. The findings related to the nature of the relationships between the participants lend weight to the argument for supervision as an important and central tool and resource in a change process and the value of ongoing clarification of the expectations and roles of all those involved in supervision so that supervisee, external supervisor and organisational goals and aspirations around supervision are aligned in the interest of best practice with clients.

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## **1.1 Justification**

This is a proposal for a Masterate thesis. This study considers the process that occurs in the professional supervision of workers within a social service organisation, specifically as the organisation develops a strengths-based approach to practice. The research is directed towards understanding the nature of this transition for supervisees and supervisors (internal and external to the organisation) and the role of supervision in this process.

## **1.2 Objectives**

The aim of this research is to explore supervisor and supervisee perceptions and understandings of “strengths-based” practice and the implications of these perceptions and understandings within the supervisory relationship and supervision practice.

Some of the key questions to be addressed in the research include:

1. How does the organisation perceive supervision will develop as a result of the transition to strengths-based practice?
2. What is the nature of the transition process and how is it impacting on supervisors (internal and external) and supervisees?
3. What does strengths-based supervision look like and how does this compare to other models of supervision currently experienced by workers in the organisation?
4. What part does supervision play in the transition to strengths-based practice?
5. What can the organisation put in place to support the development of strengths-based supervision?

These questions will be explored utilizing focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews underpinned by participatory action research methodology (Reason and Bradbury 2000).

## **1.3 Procedures for Recruiting Participants and Obtaining Informed Consent**

This research is located within one site of a large social service organisation.

Potential participants will be drawn from staff who currently have supervision in place and all supervisors who either provide this as:

- members of staff, or
- who are independent practitioners contracted by the organisation solely for the purpose of providing supervision on an external basis to staff.

There are nine employees of the organisation and six external supervisors who are potential participants.

Potential participants will be canvassed for interest in participating in the study via a letter written by me but sent out by the organisation. For external supervisors this will require a covering letter from the organisation explaining why they are sending this out. Those interested in participating as a result of the initial letter will be requested to register their interest in writing, directly to me. It will be noted that this is not consent to participation, merely an expression of interest. These potential participants will then be sent the appropriate Information Sheet that provides them with the necessary details to give informed consent regarding their participation. All the forms related to participation including information and consent forms are included with this proposal.

Supervisees wishing to participate in the study will have provided informed consent to participate in an individual in-depth interview and/or focus group discussions with other participants.

External supervisors will only be asked to consent to participate in one focus group discussion with other participants who are also supervisors for the organisation. It is envisaged that it will more difficult to engage this group in more than one meeting due to their independent practitioner status and in some cases very limited involvement with the organisation.

All participants remain under no obligation to participate. Informed consent can be withdrawn at any stage up to the point where transcripts or recorded notes from the discussion groups have been amended by participants and returned to myself on the basis that the information can be utilised within the thesis analysis and report.

### **1.3 Procedure in which Research Participants will be involved**

Participants who offer a supervisee perspective will be invited to attend a series of focus group meetings and also an individual interview. It is envisaged that there will be three focus groups with supervisees during the course of the study. The first focus group with supervisees is scheduled to occur prior to individual interviews with the supervisee group. The second focus group will occur after the individual interviewing sequence and the third will be after the data analysis so that the research findings can be shared with this group of participants. Focus groups will be organised at a time and venue identified as acceptable to the participants. As most of the participants are located within one hour's travel of Palmerston North there is a significant degree of flexibility possible in terms of discussion group times. These discussion groups will be of no more than two hours duration.

Individual interviews with the supervisee group will be of a maximum of one and a half hours duration and will be undertaken at a time and venue identified as acceptable to the participants. As with the discussion groups most of the participants are located within one hour's travel of Palmerston North there is a significant degree of flexibility possible in terms of individual interviewing times. The approach taken in the interview will consist of a semi-structured interviewing process.

Supervisors will be invited to attend one focus group meeting. This will be scheduled to occur after the individual interviewing sequence has concluded. Again the ease of access to potential participants who are supervisors will provide flexibility as to meeting times and locations. Refreshments will be provided at all focus group discussions.

#### **1.4 Procedure for handling information and material produced in the course of the research including raw data and final research report(s)**

The individual interviews will be audio taped and will be transcribed later by a suitably skilled transcriber who has signed a Transcribers Statement of Confidentiality. Each participant will be sent a copy of his/her interview transcript plus a copy of the tape. Each participant is thus able to amend the transcript if they so wish and then return it to me within a specified and reasonable time frame (i.e. two weeks). Once the transcripts are returned from the participant the material is then available to be used in the thesis.

The focus group meetings will be audio taped and there will be a record kept by me of the key themes of the discussion that arise during the meeting. I will check these notes with the participants as they are recorded. The audiotape will then be transcribed and a copy of the transcript will be sent to the participants for comment about their excerpts and amendment if required. Once the material is returned from the participants it may be then utilised within the thesis.

#### **1.5 Procedures for sharing information with Research Participants**

All participants will receive a copy of transcripts for individual interviews and discussion groups that they have attended. Supervisee will also receive information about the findings of the study at the final focus group meeting. Supervisors will receive a brief summary of the research findings in writing only, as it is envisaged that it will more difficult to engage this group in more than one meeting due to their independent practitioner status.

I will be happy at any time to be contacted by any of the participants to answer questions or to discuss any aspect of the study methodology.

#### **1.6 Arrangements for storage and security, return, disposal or destruction of data**

All communication via mail will be sent to me at Massey University. This correspondence will be returned in specially marked packages so that there is no opportunity for this to be opened by any one else other than the researcher.

All hardcopy and disks of all transcripts will be secured separately, and password-only access will be maintained on my home computer and my Massey

University computer. No transcripts or participants details will be stored on either computer – these will be stored separately disk in a locked filing cabinet to which only I have access.

When using disk copies of participants' details I will not leave the computer unattended and undertake not to save any of this information onto the hard drive of either computer.

The researcher will retain in sealed containers all material on disk or existing as hard copy generated by this study for a period of five years (as per the Massey University Policy on Research Practice, section 2.2) unless it has been stated by a participant that they would like the tape and the transcript to be returned to them at the conclusion of the study.

At the end of this period of five years all disks will be erased, hardcopy versions of the transcripts and audiotapes destroyed.

## **2. ETHICAL CONCERNS**

### **2.1 Access to participants**

Potential participants are either employees or contracted professional supervisors for employees of one branch of a large social service organisation. The number of potential participants is thus determined by the organisational structure.

All potential participants in the study who are employees of the organisation will be sent an information sheet containing an expression of interest response form.

The organisation provides the means in the first instance of accessing the participants, as I will need to engage the organisation with respect to sending out the expression of interest form to supervisees and supervisors. Potential participants interested in completing the expression of interest form will then send this to me at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University. Once I have received the expression of interest forms I can then provide detailed information about the nature of the study. The organisation would not be involved in contacting participants from this point.

## 2.2 Informed Consent

Explicit informed consent from each participant is critical to this study. I will be providing potential participants with as much detail about the project as possible through the Information Sheet in order for them to give informed consent. The Information Sheet will provide detailed information regarding the purpose, methodology and focus of the research as well as my contact details. The names of my supervisors and their contact details will also be included in the Information Sheet. The expectations with regard to expectation of participants with regard to the time required to participate in the study plus information regarding the content and process of individual interviews and focus group meetings.

The Information Sheet will also clearly articulate that consent may be withdrawn either verbally or in writing at any time up to the point where transcripts have been considered by the participant and sent back to me, either with amendments or with confirmation of the transcript as an accurate reflection of their perspective and comments.

Potential participants will also be informed that during the audio taping of an interview that they can request this to be stopped at any time to clarify any questions that they might have. Participants will also be advised that they will receive a copy of the transcript and have the opportunity to amend this within a stated time frame.

It will also be reinforced that participants have the right to refrain from answering questions or discussing particular material in individual interviews or focus groups without having to justify this. Participants will also have been informed of the range of topics likely to be explored in individual interviews and focus groups.

The information sheet will also contain information about my relationship with the organisation and my involvement in teaching in the supervision area and as a private practitioner offering supervision.

### **2.3 Anonymity and Confidentiality**

The participants for this study are either employed within a single site of an organisation or are contracted by this site to provide professional supervision for employees. This raises potential issues connected to the protection of confidentiality and anonymity for participants. It is important that the research does not identify the site and that all possible efforts are made to ensure confidentiality is maintained and that sensitive information is respected. This can be achieved through the use of pseudonyms and the non-inclusion of identifying data both related to participants and the name and location of the organisation in the final report. It is not possible to guarantee anonymity in the study however the use of pseudonyms and consent to use information from transcripts will keep the material from the individual interviews confidential

Initial letters inviting participants to find out more about the study will be sent out via the organisation. These letters will invite potential participants to respond directly with the researcher and there will be no information passed back to the organisation about the response to the initial letter or subsequent involvement by participants in the interviewing process.

Participants who are interested in becoming involved in the individual interviewing sequence will also be invited to attend focus groups. Informed consent will need to be sought separately and specifically for this aspect of the project. Participants will of course meet together in the focus groups and a group agreement around confidentiality will need to be negotiated at each focus group meeting.

There is no intention within the scope of this study to individually interview external supervisors. It is hoped to engage these participants in a focus group discussion. These potential participants will be invited to participate in the study and will be contacted in the first by letter sent out through the organisation.

Informed consent will need to be sought separately and specifically for this aspect of the project.

All transcription of interviews with participants will be subject to a confidentiality agreement. Confidentiality is also a contracted component of the supervision arrangements for this study.

All communication via mail will be to the researchers address Massey University. This correspondence will have be returned in specially marked sealed packages or boxes so that there is no opportunity for this to be opened by any one else other than the researcher.

#### **2.4 Potential Harm to Participants**

To ensure that there is no pressure brought to bear on potential participants to participate in the study initial contact will be in writing. Initial letters inviting participants to consider becoming involved in the study will be sent out through the organisation. The organisation will not be given any information about those initially approached and the outcome in terms of participation or otherwise in the research. Potential participants will be under no obligation to be involved and there will be no pressure brought to bear by the organisation with regard to this. Interviews and focus groups will be arranged at times and locations which preserve the anonymity and privacy of the participants.

#### **2.5 Potential Harm to Researcher**

I am aware that the time frame for this research is brief and that I am undertaking this study while engaged in full time employment. I also have a disability that is exacerbated by extended periods of keyboard use and I am thus required to use voice recognition software to manage this issue. This project requires me to monitor and manage my health and stress levels. This will be achieved through the support of my thesis supervisor, my family, and my professional supervisor. I also have substantive support to undertake this research from Disability Services at Massey University, particularly with regard to transcription of audiotapes.

## **2.6 Potential Harm to the University**

I do not anticipate that there is any actual or potential risk of harm to the School, the College or the University.

## **2.7 Participant's Right to Decline to Take Part**

Participants will only be involved if they have given informed consent. All potential participants will be made aware that their participation is voluntary and that there is no compulsion or obligation to me or the organisation to take part. The Information Sheet will also clearly articulate that consent may be withdrawn either verbally or in writing at any time up to the point where transcripts have been considered by the participant and sent back to the researcher either with amendments or with confirmation of the transcript as an accurate reflection of their perspective and comments.

## **2.8 Uses of the Information**

Information gained in this study will be utilised in the proposed Masterate thesis and in subsequent academic publications and conference proceedings emerging out of the research findings.

## **2.9 Conflict of interest/Conflict of Roles**

Participants will be informed of the nature of the relationships and contexts in which I have contact with the organisation outside of this research. I will inform participants of my involvement in the subject area as a supervisor working in private practice and the role I have in teaching material related to supervision theory and practice. I have also run some training with a staff member of the organisation around the concepts of strengths-based supervision that was attended by employees of the organisation. This was a one-off event and I will not be engaged in further training with the organisation for the duration of the study.

I will ensure that my primary relationship for the duration of the study is as a researcher. I will also be as transparent as possible about my relationship with the organisation through out the course of this study and answer any questions

that participants may have about this as openly and fully as possible. I will explore any issues arising with my supervisors and will also invite participants to contact my supervisors if they wish to raise issues about the research.

### **Other Ethical Concerns**

I do not foresee that any other ethical concerns will arise.

## **3. LEGAL CONCERNS**

### **3.1 Legislation**

#### **3.2 Intellectual Property Legislation**

It is the intention of this research project that all criteria relative to intellectual property will be met via the proper citing of all literature and information sources.

#### **3.3 Human Rights Act 1993**

This act has no specific connection or relevance to this project.

#### **3.4 Privacy Act 1993**

The processes in this study related to ensuring confidentiality and anonymity are consistent with the principles and procedures contained within the Privacy Act 1993.

#### **3.5 Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992**

This act has no specific connection or relevance to this project.

#### **3.6 Accident Rehabilitation Compensation Insurance Act 1992**

This act has no specific connection or relevance to this project.

#### **3.7 Employment Relations Act 2000**

This act has no specific connection or relevance to this project, as I am not undertaking the project as an employee of Massey University.

#### **3.8 Other Legal issues**

There are no other legal issues relevant to this study.

#### **4. CULTURAL CONCERNS**

Potentially at least one participant in the project will be Maori. It is fundamental that my approach to this participant(s) will be based on an approach that is sensitive to and open to alternative constructions of the interview questions and process in ways that are respectful and acknowledging of difference. I would seek to understand from all participants ways to ensure that the processes of this study are respectful and focused on strengths-based principles. I will seek to apply the principles related to this study that I apply in my practice as a clinical supervisor and within my teaching at Massey University.

#### **5. OTHER ETHICAL BODIES RELEVANT TO THIS RESEARCH**

##### **5.1 Ethics Committees**

As a full member of Aotearoa Association of Social Workers I am accountable to the organisation for my practice. The association requires no formal approval for this project.

##### **5.2 Professional Codes**

I am a full member of the Aotearoa Association of Social Workers and I am thus required to meet the practice standards set by this body. These standards of practice will be reflected in the project.

#### **6. OTHER RELEVANT ISSUES**

No other relevant issues have been identified in the preparation of this proposal.

## **Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice**

### **Invitation to Potential Participants (Supervisees form)**

My name is Chris Thomas and I am currently involved in carrying out research towards a Master in Social Work with the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University (Palmerston North/Turitea campus).

I am currently employed as a supervisor in private practice and I also coordinate and teach two papers in the Post Graduate Diploma in Social Service Supervision at Massey University. I also coordinate external training for supervisors employed by the Department of Child Youth and Family Services and supervisors who work for Non-Government Organisations contracted to provide services for the Department of Child Youth and Family Services.

I am approaching supervisees employed by (name of the Organisation) and supervisors who are employed by the organisation and those who are contracted independent practitioners specifically to provide external supervision with an invitation to participate in this proposed study. The aim of this study is to explore perceptions and understanding of strengths- based practice and how this can be related to supervision. In view of your involvement in the supervision process I am writing to you in the hope that you might be interested in participating in this project.

#### **Thesis Supervisors**

You may also wish to discuss the project with my supervisors. They are:

- Professor Robyn Munford, School of Sociology Social policy and Social work, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North - phone (06) 350-5799 extension 2825.

- Kieran O'Donoghue, lecturer, School of Sociology Social policy and Social work, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North - phone (06) 350-5799 extension 2818.

### **Ethics Committee Approval**

This project has been reviewed by and approved by the Massey University Regional Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/57. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee, Palmerston North: telephone 06 3505249, email S.V. Rumball@massey.ac.nz

### **What will Participants be invited to do?**

#### **Involvement in this project would consist of:**

1. Completing the attached expression of interest. This needs to be sent to me at the School of Sociology Social Policy and Social Work, PO Box 11- 222, Palmerston North in the self-addressed stamped envelope enclosed. You will notice that this envelope has been stamped confidential and personal to ensure it is only opened by myself.
2. Reading an information sheet and getting your informed consent to participate in the project (i.e. signing the Consent Forms and returning these to me).
3. A 1 - 1 1/2 hour unstructured interview with me, at a time and place suitable for you. This will be focused on your understanding of strengths based practice, your experiences of supervision and your views around the use of strengths based concepts and principles within the supervision relationship. This will be taped and transcribed.
4. Attending three two-hour focus group discussions. One focus group discussion will be held prior to the individual interview, one held after all individual interviewing is completed and one final focus group at which I will present the findings of the research. The first two focus group discussions will be audio taped and a written record kept by me during the meeting. These written notes will then be checked against the audiotape.
5. Looking over the transcription from your individual interview and the notes recorded at the focus group discussions, making any changes you want to make to

your transcript and the recorded notes of your excerpts from the focus groups and returning these to me.

### **What can the participants expect from the researcher?**

All participants, and their personal information and contributions, will be treated with the utmost respect and positive regard. This project is not about criticising supervision practice or identifying good or bad supervision practice but rather gaining understanding of the views that supervisors and supervisees hold about supervision and their experiences of supervision and the connection between these views and experiences and strengths- based practice.

I will make every effort to answer all your questions and you are welcome to contact me by phone or e-mail if you wish to clarify anything about the information contained in this Expression of Interest form.

### **Researchers Contact Details**

My contact details are:

Email: C.Thomas@massey.ac.nz

Phone: work: (06) 3505799 ex 2834

If I am not available, please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as possible.

### **Interested?**

**If you're interested in learning more about participating in this study, please complete the attached expression of interest form and send it to me in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope by the Friday 5 July 2002.**

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Chris Thomas

**Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in  
an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice  
Invitation to Potential Participants  
(Supervisors Form)**

My name is Chris Thomas and I am currently involved in carrying out research towards a Master in Social Work with the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University (Palmerston North/Turitea campus).

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I am approaching supervisees employed by [REDACTED] Service and supervisors who are employed by the organisation and those who are contracted independent practitioners specifically to provide external supervision with an invitation to participate in this proposed study. The aim of this study is to explore perceptions and understanding of strengths- based practice and how this can be related to supervision. In view of your involvement in the supervision process I am writing to you in the hope that you might be interested in participating in this project.

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2. Reading and information sheet and getting your informed consent to participate in the project (i.e. signing the consent forms and returning these to me).
3. Attending one two-hour focus group discussion. The focus group discussion will be recorded in writing and also audio taped. The written record will be checked against the audiotape by the researcher.
4. Looking over the recorded notes from the focus group meeting, making any changes you want to make to these notes of your excerpt and returning these to me within a specified timeframe.

### **What can the participants expect from the researcher?'**

All participants, and their personal information and contributions, will be treated with the utmost respect and positive regard. This project is not about criticising supervision practice or identifying good or bad supervision practice but rather gaining understanding of the views that supervisors and supervisees hold about supervision and their experiences of supervision and the connection between these views and experiences and strengths-based practice.

I will make every effort to answer all your questions and you are welcome to contact me by phone or e-mail if you wish to clarify anything about the information contained in this Expression of Interest form.

My contact details are

Email: C.Thomas@massey.ac.nz

Phone: Massey University: (06) 3505799 ex 2834

If I am not available, please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as possible.

### **Interested?**

**If you're interested in learning more about participating in this study, please complete the attached expression of interest form and send it to me in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope by the Friday 5 July 2002.**

Yours sincerely

Chris Thomas

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an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice**

**Invitation to Potential Participants  
(Supervisees form)**

**EXPRESSION OF INTEREST**

I have read the invitation to participate in this project and wish to register my interest in the project. I understand that I am not under any obligation to be involved in the project.

Please provide me with a copy of the information sheet and the necessary consent forms (should I decide to become involved in the project).

Name: (Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr)

Contact Address:

Phone: (Home) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

(work) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

When is the best time to contact you?

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in  
an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice**

**Invitation to Potential Participants  
(Supervisor form)**

**EXPRESSION OF INTEREST**

I have read the invitation to participate in this project and wish to register my interest in the project. I understand that I am not under any obligation to be involved in the project.

Please provide me with a copy of the information sheet and the necessary consent forms (should I decide to become involved in the project).

Name: (Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr)

\_\_\_\_\_

Contact Address:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (Home) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ (work) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

When is the best time to contact you?

\_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice

### CONSENT TO INTERVIEW

I have read the Information Sheet, and any questions that this information raised for me have now been addressed satisfactorily

I give my consent to being a participant in this project with respect to the following points:

1. That I am aware that any further questions that I may have will be answered.
2. That I am agreeing to participate in a semi-structured interview with Chris Thomas for a maximum of 1.5 hours, and that I am aware that this interview is to be audio taped and transcribed.
3. That I can have the audio-taping of my interview stopped/paused at any point should I have a question or a concern, or wish to stop the interview.
4. That I will be sent a transcript of my interview plus the audiotape and that I can amend this transcript and return it to Chris Thomas within 2 weeks of receiving it.
5. That I am aware aspects of the information from this study may be included in subsequent academic publications and conference presentations emerging out of the research findings.
6. That I can withdraw this consent verbally or in writing at any time prior to the sending back of the amended transcript of the audiotape of my interview to Chris Thomas.

Name: (Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr)

\_\_\_\_\_

Contact Address:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (Home) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ (work) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

When is the best time to contact you?

\_\_\_\_\_

When and where would you prefer to be interviewed?

\_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice**

### **CONSENT TO FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (Supervisees)**

I have read the Information Sheet, and any questions that this information raised for me have now been addressed satisfactorily

I give my consent to being a participant in this project with respect to the following points:

1. That I am aware that any further questions that I may have will be answered.
2. That I am agreeing to participate in two focus group discussions with Chris Thomas and other participants who receive supervision as employees of (name and site of organisation) for a maximum of 2 hours per focus group discussion. I am aware that this interview is to be audio taped and that Chris Thomas will make a written record of the discussion during the group meeting.
3. That I will participate in a further focus group discussion again for a period of 2 hours maximum once the findings of the study have been produced. This discussion will not be audio taped but a written record of the discussion will be made by Chris Thomas
4. That I can have the audio taping of any of the discussion groups stopped/paused at any point should I have a question or a concern, or wish to withdraw from the discussion.
5. That I will be sent a copy of the written record of the meeting and that I can amend these notes and return them to Chris Thomas within 2 weeks of receiving them.
6. That I am aware aspects of the information from this study may be included in subsequent academic publications and conference presentations emerging out of the research findings.
7. That I can withdraw this consent verbally or in writing at any time prior to the sending back of the written record of the discussion group.

Name: (Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr)

\_\_\_\_\_

Contact Address:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (Home) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ (work) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

When is the best time to contact you?

\_\_\_\_\_

Refreshments will be provided at the discussion group. Do you have any dietary requirements that must be met?

\_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice**

### **CONSENT TO FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (Supervisors)**

I have read the Information Sheet, and any questions that this information raised for me have now been addressed satisfactorily

I give my consent to being a participant in this project with respect to the following points:

1. That I am aware that any further questions that I may have will be answered.
2. That I am agreeing to participate in a focus group discussion with Chris Thomas and other participants who supervise staff from (name and site of organisation) for a maximum of 2 hours. I am aware that this discussion is to be audio taped and that Chris Thomas will make a written record of the discussion during the group meeting.
3. That I can have the audio taping of this discussion group stopped/paused at any point should I have a question or a concern, or wish to withdraw from the discussion.
4. That I will be sent a copy of the written record of the meeting and that I can amend these notes and return them to Chris Thomas within 2 weeks of receiving them.
5. That I am aware aspects of the information from this study may be included in subsequent academic publications and conference presentations emerging out of the research findings.
6. That I can withdraw this consent verbally or in writing at any time prior to the sending back of the written record of the discussion group.

Name: (Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr)

\_\_\_\_\_

Contact Address:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (Home) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ (work) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

When is the best time to contact you?

\_\_\_\_\_

Refreshments will be provided at the discussion group. Do you have any dietary requirements that must be met?

\_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in  
an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice  
INFORMATION SHEET FOR SUPERVISORS**

Thank you for your expression of interest in this project. It is hoped that the following information will assist you in making an informed decision regarding your involvement in this study.

**Who is the researcher?**

My name is Chris Thomas and I am currently involved in preparing my thesis towards a Master in Social Work with the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University (Palmerston North/Turitea campus).

It should be noted that aspects of the information from this study might be included in subsequent academic publications and conference presentations emerging out of the research findings.

**Thesis Supervisors**

My supervisors for this study are:

- ❖ Professor Robyn Munford, School of Sociology Social policy and Social work, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North - phone (06) 350-5799 extension 2825.
- ❖ Kieran O'Donoghue, lecturer, School of Sociology Social policy and Social work, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North - phone (06) 350-5799 extension 2818.

**Please feel free to contact my supervisors and discuss any aspect of this study with them.**

**Ethics Committee Approval**

This project has been reviewed by and approved by the Massey University Regional Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/57. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University

Regional Human Ethics Committee, Palmerston North: telephone 06 3505249, email S.V. Rumball@massey.ac.nz

### **What is the study about?**

This study considers the process that occurs in the professional supervision of workers within a social service organisation, specifically as the organisation develops a strengths-based approach to practice. The research is directed towards understanding the nature of this transition for supervisees and supervisors (internal and external to the organisation) and the role of supervision in this process.

### **What will Participants be invited to do?**

Having consented to participating in the project you will be invited to attend a focus group discussion at a time and location that is suitable to you. This focus group discussion will have a maximum duration of two hours and refreshments will be served.

The focus group discussion will be recorded in writing and also audio taped. The written record will be checked against the audiotape by the researcher

After the focus group the notes recorded at the meeting will be sent to you. You will be invited to make any changes to your excerpts within these notes and then return them to me within a two-week time frame.

### **Focus Group Discussion – 2 hours maximum**

This discussion will begin with the development of a group agreement regarding confidentiality and the way that the group will work together during the course of the discussion. Brief demographic details will be recorded also at the beginning of the meeting to build a picture of the experience and contexts in which supervisors practice. The remainder of the group meeting would consist of an unstructured discussion around:

- ❖ What experience and perceptions do participants have of strengths based practice?
- ❖ What participants consider to be the principles of strengths- based practice?

- ❖ What do participants consider strengths-based supervision to be and how does this compare to other models of supervision currently utilised by supervisors?
- ❖ What have participants noticed about work with clients as the organisation is moving to a strengths based model of practice?
- ❖ What part does supervision play in the transition to strengths-based practice?
- ❖ What can the organisation put in place to support the development of strengths-based supervision?

Other areas for discussion that emerge out of the focus group meeting would also be explored.

### **Arrangements for storage and security, return, disposal or destruction of data**

All communication via mail will be sent to me at Massey University. This correspondence will be returned in specially marked packages so that there is no opportunity for this to be opened by any one else other than the researcher.

All hardcopy and disks of all transcripts will be secured separately, and password-only access will be maintained on my home computer and my Massey University computer. No transcripts or participants details will be stored on either computer – these will be stored separately disk in a locked filing cabinet to which only I have access.

When using disk copies of participants' details I will not leave the computer unattended and undertake not to save any of this information onto the hard drive of either computer.

The researcher will retain in sealed containers all material on disk or existing as hard copy generated by this study for a period of five years (as per the Massey University Policy on Research Practice, section 2.2) unless it has been stated by a participant that they would like the tape and the transcript to be returned to them at the conclusion of the study. At the end of this period of five years all disks will be erased, hardcopy versions of the transcripts and audiotapes destroyed.

### **Rights of Participants participating in this Study:**

❖ **Right to Decline**

You have the right to decline to participate having considered this information sheet. If you have not returned the consent forms within the designated time frame I will assume that you have declined to participate. I will make no further follow up if the consent forms are not received within the designated time frame.

❖ **Right to refuse to answer any particular questions or participate in any particular aspects of a focus group discussion**

The audiotaping of a discussion group or individual interview may be stopped/paused at any point should you have a question or a concern, or wish to withdraw from the discussion.

❖ **You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up to the time that you have returned notes from the discussion group and vetted them for accuracy.**

❖ **You have the right to ask questions about the study at any time during participation**

❖ **You have the right to provide information on the basis that identifying details will not be included in the research report or subsequent publications.**

This includes identifying details about you and the organisation that is the focus of this study

❖ **You will be provided with a brief summary of the research findings at the end of the study**

**What can the participants expect from the researcher??**

All participants, and their personal information and contributions, will be treated with the utmost respect and positive regard. This project is not about criticising supervision practice or identifying good or bad supervision practice but rather gaining understanding of the views that supervisors and supervisees hold about supervision and their

experiences of supervision and the connection between these views and experiences and strengths- based practice.

### **Researcher Contact Details**

I am also available to provide you with any further information that you require, and I will make every effort to ensure you questions are answered satisfactorily. You are welcome to contact me by phone or e-mail if you wish to clarify anything about the information contained in this Expression of Interest form.

My contact details are

Email: C.Thomas@massey.ac.nz

Phone: Massey University: (06) 3505799 ex 2834

If I am not available, please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as possible.

### **Interested?**

**If you're interested in participating in this study please complete the appropriate Consent Form(s) and return to me in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope by the 15 July 2002**

Yours sincerely

Chris Thomas

**Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in  
an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice  
INFORMATION SHEET FOR SUPERVISEES**

Thank you for your expression of interest in this project. It is hoped that the following information will assist you in making an informed decision regarding your involvement in this study.

**Who is the researcher?**

My name is Chris Thomas and I am currently involved in carrying out research towards a Master in Social Work with the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University (Palmerston North/Turitea campus).

It should be noted that aspects of the information from this study might be included in subsequent academic publications and conference presentations emerging out of the research findings.

**Thesis Supervisors**

My supervisors for this study are:

- ❖ Professor Robyn Munford, School of Sociology Social policy and Social work, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North - phone (06) 350-5799 extension 2825.
- ❖ Kieran O'Donoghue, lecturer, School of Sociology Social policy and Social work, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North - phone (06) 350-5799 extension 2818.

**Please feel free to contact my supervisors and discuss any aspect of this study with them.**

**Ethics Committee Approval**

This project has been reviewed by and approved by the Massey University Regional Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/57. If you have any concerns about the conduct of

this research, please contact professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee, Palmerston North: telephone 06 3505249, email S.V. Rumball@massey.ac.nz

### **What is the study about?**

This study considers the process that occurs in the professional supervision of workers within a social service organisation, specifically as the organisation develops a strengths-based approach to practice. The research is directed towards understanding the nature of this transition for supervisees and supervisors (internal and external to the organisation) and the role of supervision in this process.

### **What will Participants be invited to do?**

Participation in this project is in two parts and separate consent is required from you for each. The two components are three focus groups and an individual interview.

### **Focus Groups**

Having consented to participating in the focus group component of the project you will be invited to attend a group discussion at a time and location that is suitable to you. This focus group discussion will have a maximum duration of two hours and refreshments will be served.

The focus group discussion will be recorded in writing and also audio taped. The written record will be checked against the audiotape by the researcher

After the focus group the notes recorded at the meeting will be sent to you. You will be invited to make any changes to your excerpts within these notes and then return them to me within a two-week time frame.

### **Focus Group Discussion One – 2 hours maximum**

This discussion will begin with the development of a group agreement regarding confidentiality and the way that the group will work together during the course of the discussion. Brief demographic details will be recorded also at the beginning of the meeting to build a picture of the experience and contexts in which supervisors practice.

The remainder of the group meeting would consist of an unstructured discussion around:

- ❖ What experience and perceptions do participants have of strengths based practice?
- ❖ What participants consider to be the principles of strengths- based practice?
- ❖ What do participants consider strengths-based supervision to be and how does this compare to other models of supervision currently utilised by supervisors?
- ❖ What have participants noticed about their work with clients as the organisation is moving to a strengths based model of practice?
- ❖ What part does supervision play in the transition to strengths-based practice?
- ❖ What can the organisation put in place to support the development of strengths-based supervision?

Other areas for discussion that emerge out of the focus group meeting would also be explored.

### **Focus Group Discussion Two**

This focus group will continue the process developed in focus group one. There are no clearly defined areas for discussion at this focus group, as this will depend on data that has come from individual interviews and the first focus group.

### **Focus Group Discussion Three**

This focus group discussion will not be taped although there will be notes taken by myself at the discussion. This final focus group will provide an opportunity for participants to receive information about the research findings. This meeting also provides an opportunity for discussion about the findings. A written summary of the findings will also be provided at this meeting.

### **Individual Interviews**

Having consented to participating in an individual interview that will be no longer than 1.5 hours I will make contact with you to arrange a time and venue that is appropriate to you.

This interview will be semi-structured and will explore your experiences of supervision prior to the organisation beginning the transition to strengths-based practice and as the transition is occurring. I will also be interested in exploring in depth your conceptualizations of strengths-based practice and how these can be linked into supervision. If you have participated in a focus group I will also be interested in gaining any reflections or comments that you have about the group discussion.

With your consent the interview will be audio taped and transcribed by a qualified transcriber who will have signed a Transcriber Statement of Confidentiality.

You have the right to withdraw at any stage of the interview or have the interview paused or stopped if you have questions that you would like to clarify.

Once transcribed a copy of your transcription will be forwarded to you along with the audiotape. This will be sent with a letter inviting you to amend the transcript and then return it to me within a two-week time frame so that the information can then be used in the research report

#### **Arrangements for storage and security, return, disposal or destruction of data**

All communication via mail will be sent to me at Massey University. This correspondence will be returned in specially marked packages so that there is no opportunity for this to be opened by any one else other than the researcher.

All hardcopy and disks of all transcripts will be secured separately, and password-only access will be maintained on my home computer and my Massey University computer. No transcripts or participants details will be stored on either computer – these will be stored separately disk in a locked filing cabinet to which only I have access.

When using disk copies of participants' details I will not leave the computer unattended and undertake not to save any of this information onto the hard drive of either computer.

The researcher will retain in sealed containers all material on disk or existing as hard copy generated by this study for a period of five years (as per the Massey University

Policy on Research Practice, section 2.2) unless it has been stated by a participant that they would like the tape and the transcript to be returned to them at the conclusion of the study. At the end of this period of five years all disks will be erased, hardcopy versions of the transcripts and audiotapes destroyed.

### **Rights of Participants participating in this Study:**

#### **❖ Right to Decline**

You have the right to decline to participate having considered this information sheet. If you have not returned the consent forms within the designated time frame I will assume that you have declined to participate. I will make no further follow up if the consent forms are not received within the designated time frame.

#### **❖ Right to refuse to answer any particular questions or participate in any particular aspects of a an individual interview or focus group discussion**

The audio taping of a discussion group or individual interview may be stopped/paused at any point should you have a question or a concern, or wish to withdraw from the discussion.

#### **❖ You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up to the time that you have returned notes from the discussion groups and or returned your interview transcript from an individual interview having vetted them for accuracy.**

#### **❖ You have the right to ask questions about the study at any time during participation**

#### **❖ You have the right to provide information on the basis that identifying details will not be included in the research report or subsequent publications.**

This includes identifying details about you and the organisation that is the focus of this study

#### **❖ You will be provided with a brief summary of the research findings at the end of the study**

**What can the participants expect from the researcher?'**

All participants, and their personal information and contributions, will be treated with the utmost respect and positive regard. This project is not about criticising supervision practice or identifying good or bad supervision practice but rather gaining understanding of the views that supervisors and supervisees hold about supervision and their experiences of supervision and the connection between these views and experiences and strengths- based practice.

**Researcher Contact Details**

I am also available to provide you with any further information that you require, and I will make every effort to ensure your questions are answered satisfactorily. You are welcome to contact me by phone or e-mail if you wish to clarify anything about the information contained in this Expression of Interest form.

My contact details are

Email: C.Thomas@massey.ac.nz

Phone: Massey University: (06) 3505799 ex 2834

If I am not available, please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as possible.

**Interested?**

**If you're interested in participating in this study please complete the appropriate Consent Form(s) and return them to me in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope by the 15 July 2002**

Yours sincerely

Chris Thomas

**Strengths -based Supervision: An Analysis of Supervision in  
an Organisation with a Vision of Strengths-based Practice**  
**TRANSCRIBERS STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

I acknowledge that I have been employed, by Chris Thomas, to transcribe audio-taped interviews which were recorded by Chris Thomas for this study.

I agree to keep confidential all the information contained in the audiotapes and the completed transcripts

I agree to ensure all materials in my possession, related to this study, are stored securely until such items have been handed over to Chris Thomas.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B – Interview Guides

### Interview Guideline – Individual Interview – External Supervisors

#### Interview process:

- Review consent
- Any questions or issues to be clarified?
- Practical issues including breaks in the interview?

#### Demographic Data

1. Preferred name
2. Age group?
3. Cultural identity?
4. Brief career history
5. Professional association

#### Relationship with the organisation

1. How long have they been supervising for the Organisation
2. How many staff?
3. What roles are the staff in
4. How did they become involved – worker or agency request
5. What are the processes in place for conversations with the organisation and review of supervision
6. How would you describe your relationship with organisation?
7. How would you describe the supervision culture within the organisation?

#### Supervision Content and process

1. Frequency of supervision
2. Mode of supervision
3. How would you describe the content/focus of supervision?
4. Any particular areas of focus?
5. Use of video/audio tape?

### **Supervision framework**

1. What is your own history of receiving supervision?
2. How did you come to be a supervisor?
3. What have been the key successes in your own supervision?
4. What are the significant influences on your supervision framework?
5. What theories and models underpin your supervision practice?
6. How connected are the models that you use in supervision practice to those that you use in your own work with clients?
7. What kind of supervision supports best practice with clients in your view?

### **Strengths based practice**

1. What do you understand by the term strengths-based practice
2. What is your experience of strengths-based practice? In your client work, in supervision?
3. What/who has contributed to this understanding and experience for you?
4. What theories/models do you see as connected to strengths based practice
5. How do you view strengths-based practice? Is it a distinct approach to practice?
6. What is your view of the current debate about pathologising/deficit based approaches on one hand and strengths-based practice on the other?

### **Transition to strength based practice**

1. What is your understanding of the transition process and who/what is driving the process?
2. What changes have you noticed (if any) in the practice of your supervisee(s)
3. What changes (if any) have you noticed in your practice as a supervisor as a result of this transition?
4. What difference if any do you expect to see in work with clients as a result of this transition
5. What do you see, if any, as the implications for supervision practice for workers that you supervise for the agency
6. What would you consider strengths-base supervision to be?
7. What implications might there be in the future as the transition consolidates?

**Ongoing relationship with the organisation**

1. What dialogue/conversations would you like to occur with the organisation about the transition
2. What are the agency's expectations of supervisors during this transition?
3. How closely should supervisor style and approach mirror the organisation's stated practice framework?

**Additional Comments**

Additional comments or question from the Supervisor

**Conclusion**

- **Discuss transcription process and opportunity to give feedback**
- **Discuss disposal of tape – return to participant?**
- **Ensure participant has contact numbers**
- **Thanks them for their time and participation**

<b>Interview Guideline – Individual Interview – External Supervisors</b>
--

**Interview process:**

Review consent, any questions or issues to be clarified, practical issues including breaks in the interview

**Demographic Data**

Preferred name, age group, cultural identity, brief career history and professional association

**Relationship with the Organisation**

Length of time supervising, supervisee profile, nature of initial and ongoing contact with the organisation and relationship with the organisation

**Supervision Content and Process**

Frequency and mode of supervision, focus in supervision, use of audio/video/transcripts

**Supervision Framework**

Your own history of supervision, development as a supervisor and supervision framework. Exploration of the links that you see between supervision and work with clients.

**Strengths Based Practice**

Exploration of your view and experience of strengths-based practice

What theories/models do you see as connected to strengths based practice?

**Transition to Strength Based Practice**

Perceptions, implications and outcomes of the transition process for practice and supervision.

**Ongoing Relationship with the Organisation**

What dialogue/conversations would you like to occur with the organisation about the transition and your perception of agency expectations?

## **Additional Comments/Questions**

### **Conclusion**

- **Discuss transcription process and opportunity to give feedback**
- **Discuss disposal of tape – return to participant?**
- **Ensure participant has contact numbers**

**Thank you for your participation**

**Interview Guideline – Individual Interview – Supervisees**
**Interview process:**

- Review consent
- Any questions or issues to be clarified?
- Practical issues including breaks in the interview?

**Demographic Data**

1. Preferred name
2. Age group?
3. Cultural identity?
4. Brief career history
5. Professional association

**Relationship with the organisation**

1. How long have you worked at the Organisation?
2. What role are you in?

**Supervision Content and process**

1. Who chose your current external supervisor – you or the organisation
2. How would you describe the relationship between your supervisor and the organisation?
3. What processes are in place for contact/conversations between your supervisor and the Organisation?
4. How often is supervision reviewed? What is the process for this?
5. Frequency of supervision
6. Mode/s of supervision
7. How would you describe the content/focus of supervision?
8. Any particular areas of focus?
9. Use of video/audio tape?
10. How would you describe the supervision culture in the organisation? What are your feelings about this?

**Supervision framework**

1. What is your own history of receiving supervision?

2. What have been the key successes in your own supervision?
3. What have been the significant influences on your supervision framework?
4. What kind of supervision supports best practice with clients in your view?
5. How would you describe your supervisors approach? Do they operate from a particular perspective/framework in supervision?

### **Strengths based practice**

1. What do you understand by the term strengths-based practice
2. What is your experience of strengths-based practice? In your client work, in supervision?
3. What/who has contributed to this understanding and experience for you?
4. What theories/models do you see as connected to strengths based practice
5. How do you view strengths-based practice? Is it a distinct approach to practice?
6. What is your view of the current debate about pathologising/deficit based approaches on one hand and strengths-based practice on the other?

### **Transition to strength based practice**

1. What is your understanding of the transition process and who/what is driving the process?
2. What changes have you noticed (if any) in your practice with clients as a result of the transition?

### **Transitions/changes in supervision**

1. What changes (if any) have you noticed in your experience of supervision as a result of this transition?
2. Tell me about your experience of peer/supervision
3. Discuss the idea that all supervision could happen within peer supervision – what is your response to this?
4. What do you see, if any, as the implications for supervision for workers
5. What would you consider strengths-based supervision to be?
6. What implications might there be in the future as the transition consolidates?
7. What approach to supervision would best meet the needs of clients and workers in your view?

### **Ongoing dialogue with the organisation**

4. What dialogue/conversations would you like to occur with the organisation

- about the transition
5. What are the agency's expectations of supervisors during this transition?
  6. How closely should supervisor style and approach mirror the organisation's stated practice framework?

### **Additional Comments**

Additional comments or question from the Supervisee

### **Conclusion**

- **Discuss transcription process and opportunity to give feedback**
- **Discuss disposal of tape – return to participant?**
- **Ensure participant has contact numbers**
- **Thanks them for their time and participation**

**An Analysis of Supervision in an organisation with a vision of strength based  
practice**

**Interview Guideline – Individual Interview – Supervisees**

**Interview process:**

Review consent, any questions or issues to be clarified, practical issues including breaks in the interview

**Demographic Data**

Preferred name, age group, cultural identity, brief career history and professional association

**Organisational role**

Length of time in the Organisation, current role

**Supervision Content and Process**

Description of supervision, frequency and mode of supervision, focus in supervision, use of audio/video/transcripts, the supervision culture in supervision

**Supervision Framework**

Your history and experience of supervision of supervision, exploration of the links that you see between supervision and work with clients and a discussion of the approach that your supervisor utilises in supervision

**Strengths Based Practice**

Exploration of your view and experience of strengths-based practice

What theories/models do you see as connected to strengths based practice?

**Transition to Strength Based Practice**

Perceptions, implications and outcomes of the transition process for practice and supervision.

**Ongoing Relationship with the Organisation**

What dialogue/conversations would you like to occur with the organisation about the transition and your perception of agency expectations?

**Additional Comments/Questions****Conclusion**

- Discuss transcription process and opportunity to give feedback
- Discuss disposal of tape – return to participant?
- Ensure participant has contact numbers

**Thank you for your participation**

**An Analysis of Supervision in an organisation with a vision of strength based practice**

**Interview Guideline – Individual Interview – Clinical Manager**

**Interview process:**

- Review consent
- Any questions or issues to be clarified?
- Practical issues including breaks in the interview?

**Demographic Data**

1. Preferred name
2. Age group?
3. Cultural identity?
4. Brief career history
5. Professional association

**Relationship between the Organisation and External Supervisors**

1. How long have they been in the role within the Organisation
2. What are the processes in place for conversations with External Supervisors?
3. How would you describe the relationship between the Organisation and external Supervisors?
4. How would you describe the supervision culture within the organisation?

**Supervision Content and process**

1. Frequency of supervision
2. Mode of supervision
3. How would you describe the content/focus of supervision?
4. Any particular areas of focus?
5. Use of video/audio tape?

**Supervision framework**

1. What is your own history of receiving supervision?

2. What have been the key successes in your own supervision?
3. What are the significant influences on your supervision framework?
4. What theories and models underpin your supervision practice?
5. How connected are the models that you use in supervision practice to those that you use in your own work with clients?
6. What kind of supervision supports best practice with clients in your view?

### **Strengths based practice**

1. What do you understand by the term strengths-based practice
2. What is your experience of strengths-based practice? In your client work, in supervision?
3. What/who has contributed to this understanding and experience for you?
4. What theories/models do you see as connected to strengths based practice
5. How do you view strengths-based practice? Is it a distinct approach to practice?
6. What is your view of the current debate about pathologising/deficit based approaches on one hand and strengths-based practice on the other?

### **Transition to strengths-based practice**

1. What is your understanding of the transition process? Who/what is driving the process?
2. What changes have you noticed (if any) in the practice of your supervisee(s)
3. What changes (if any) have you noticed in your practice as a supervisor as a result of this transition?
4. What difference if any do you expect to see in work with clients as a result of this transition
5. What do you see, if any, as the implications for supervision practice for workers?
6. What would you consider strengths-based supervision to be?
7. What implications might there be in the future as the transition consolidates?

### **Ongoing relationship with External Supervisors**

1. What dialogue/conversations would you like to occur with External Supervisors about the transition?
2. What are the Organisation's expectations of supervisors during this transition?

3. How closely should supervisor style and approach mirror the organisation's stated practice framework?

**Additional Comments**

Additional comments or question from the Clinical Manager

**Conclusion**

- **Discuss transcription process and opportunity to give feedback**
- **Discuss disposal of tape – return to participant?**
- **Ensure participant has contact numbers**
- **Thank them for their time and participation**

**An Analysis of Supervision in an organisation with a vision of strength based  
practice**

**Interview Guideline – Individual Interview – Clinical Manager**

**Interview process:**

Review consent, any questions or issues to be clarified, practical issues including breaks in the interview

**Demographic Data**

Preferred name, age group, cultural identity, brief career history and professional association

**Relationship with External Supervisors**

Nature of initial and ongoing contact with External Supervisors and the relationship between the Organisation and External Supervisors

**Supervision Content and Process**

Frequency and mode of supervision, focus in supervision, use of audio/video/transcripts

**Supervision Framework**

Your own history of supervision, development as a supervisor and supervision framework. Exploration of the links that you see between supervision and work with clients.

**Strengths Based Practice**

Exploration of your view and experience of strengths-based practice

What theories/models do you see as connected to strengths based practice?

**Transition to Strength Based Practice**

Perceptions, implications and outcomes of the transition process for practice and supervision.

**Ongoing Relationship with External Supervisors**

What dialogue/conversations would you like to occur with External Supervisors about the transition and the Organisation expectations?

**Additional Comments/Questions****Conclusion**

- **Discuss transcription process and opportunity to give feedback**
- **Discuss disposal of tape – return to participant?**
- **Ensure participant has contact numbers**

Thank you for your participation

## Appendix C

### Sequence of Individual Interviews and Focus Groups:

- Supervisee One
- Supervisor One
- Supervisor Two
- Focus Group One
- Supervisor Three
- Supervisee Two
- Supervisee Three
- Supervisee Four
- Supervisee Five
- Supervisee Six
- Focus Group Two
- Clinical Manager
- Supervisor Four