

**PSYCHOTHERAPISTS' VIEWS OF USING SIGNATURE STRENGTHS IN THE
WORKPLACE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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Abstract

There is limited existing knowledge of the benefits of using personal strengths to enhance various life domains, in particular, the work domain. Preliminary studies in education (Basom & Frase, 2004), psychotherapeutic interventions (Peseschkian & Tritt, 1998; Bandura, 1997), and vocational counselling (Bandura, 2001; Paulsen & Betz, 2004), report that incorporating one's personal strengths in the workplace can have numerous benefits both behaviourally and psychologically for individuals. A burgeoning area in psychology is positive psychology, it rests upon the premise that the best insight is gained by learning from exemplary individuals who excel in a given area. Among professions that lack attention in positive psychology research is psychologists, on a daily basis psychologists provide psychological services to numerous individuals and without proper self management may not reach their professional potential in their careers. Following this approach, the current exploratory study examined how experienced psychotherapists in private practice perceived how their signature strengths enhanced their work. Using grounded theory analysis, results confirmed that psychotherapists commonly reported 3 major benefits: meaningful work, enhanced energy levels, and enabling conditions within the work environment. These three metacategories formed the budding theory that psychotherapists, who chose to incorporate at least three of their five signature strengths, reported enhanced working environments and higher levels of competence and satisfaction with their work. Implications for future studies and professional development, using these preliminary results as a springboard are discussed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

For centuries, the modern world has documented humankind's interest in individual expressions of personal strengths and virtues. Historically, these inquiries have been expressed by leaders in philosophy, and more recently by psychologists and social scientists. For instance, a glimpse into the fifth century reveals early philosophers of moral philosophy such as Socrates and Plato who focused on understanding and achieving virtue (Nehamas, 1998). These discussions outlined virtues as being closely tied to strengths as virtues were viewed as the core characteristics valued by philosophers and religious thinkers, while strengths were identified as the cultural routes to achieve virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

In the past two decades, this topic has seen a resurgence of interest by academics; who have focused on learning how to cultivate personal strengths to enhance different life domains. To date, mounting support for applying personal strengths in domains such as work has been gathered from studies in education (Basom & Frase, 2004), career-decision making (Bandura, 2001; Paulsen & Betz, 2004), and psychotherapeutic interventions (Bandura, 1997; Peseschkian & Tritt, 1998).

As previously mentioned, the identification of specific behaviours that produce intrinsic rewards has been an approach that has been increasingly used in studies from several academic disciplines; additionally, this approach also has particular relevance to the practice of psychotherapy. Specifically, the work of psychotherapists involves facilitating the adoption of coping strategies that in turn enhance the clients' overall functioning. While the clients' challenges provide the intellectual stimulation that makes

this profession appealing to individuals, some of these challenges may develop into undue psychological strain if not adequately self-managed by psychotherapists (Iacovides, Fountoulakis, Kaprinis, & Kaprinis, 2003).

As a graduate student in Counselling Psychology, my fellow classmates and I are entering into a challenging field that has the potential to be rewarding, yet for previously mentioned reasons it is clear that without adequate preparation and maintenance, it also has the potential to be draining. A common strategy that is included in graduate training involves teaching clients the skills to mitigate psychological challenges by enhancing predominant character strengths they already possess (Martin & Hiebert, 1997; Peseschkian & Tritt, 1998; Rogers, 1953). In the past decade, this strategy has seen a resurgence of interest by academics in the field of psychology; it focuses on learning how to cultivate personal strengths to enhance different life domains. To date, practical applications of this strategy in work settings such as teaching (Basom & Frase, 2004) career-decision making (Bandura, 2001; Paulsen & Betz, 2004) and psychotherapeutic interventions (Bandura, 1997; Peseschkian & Tritt, 1998) have produced promising results.

Accordingly, the same skill that psychotherapists teach clients to use to overcome challenges may be the key to establishing a thriving work environment for themselves. While academic attention in this area is currently increasing, the size and scope of empirical data is still limited; therefore, the present research study described in the following pages addresses this line of inquiry. The following key questions drive this research.

Research Questions

1. How do experienced psychotherapists personally interpret, conceptualize, or make sense of their ability to incorporate their signature strengths in their work?
2. What psychological benefits do they report as a result of using signature strengths in the work domain?

Terminology

Experienced psychotherapists. For the purposes of the present study, this term is defined as psychotherapists who have practiced psychotherapy for a minimum of five years to ensure that an adequate degree of work-related experience is established. (A detailed discussion of the selection criteria for participants in the study is provided in Chapter 3).

How. The present study will assess behavioural, cognitive, and emotional aspects of practicing psychotherapy that psychotherapists report to be enhanced by using their signature strengths.

Psychological benefits. For the purposes of the current study, this will be defined as examples of personal accounts of positive psychoemotional affect that is work-related and that is attributed to the incorporation of one's signature strengths as reported by participants.

Report. This will be assessed through self-report using a semi-structured interview (see Appendix B).

Signature strengths. Seligman (2002) defines these as the core combination of character strengths that are unique to every individual; the five strongest character

strengths of 24 that are universally recognized are referred to as an individual's signature strengths. Signature strengths are identified based on the individuals' responses to items on the Signature Strengths Survey (see Appendix B).

Work. For the purposes of the current study, work will encompass various day-to-day responsibilities involved in maintaining a private psychotherapeutic practice. This can involve duties such as record keeping, writing clinical notes, communication with colleagues and paraprofessionals, professional development, psychotherapy etc...

Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology that is used when research calls for a case oriented perspective and aims to uncover meaning and social processes (Hollman et al, 2004). It is one of the most widely used methods in research in human sciences (Miller, 1990). Moreover, it is also used when several cases have the same outcome and need to be examined to see which conditions they all have in common in hopes of revealing necessary causes. Grounded theory is influenced by an emic understanding of the world where the use of categories are drawn from respondents themselves and focus on making implicit belief systems explicit (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Moreover, it is a useful method in analyzing interview data because it remains faithful to the everyday reality of a chosen area of study.

Relevance of the Research

The need for research on this particular topic is evident from several levels. The practical benefits of using and developing psychotherapists' signature strengths at work have yet to be illustrated in detail in current research studies. Additionally, psychotherapists have several important work responsibilities in addition to

psychotherapy where personal strengths can be applied to facilitate the maintenance of a private practice. These responsibilities can include professional development, collegial relationships, and report writing. To date, practical applications of each of Seligman's (2002) 24 identified character strengths used in interventions to promote professional development have taken place in educational settings, vocational settings, and in studies of the general population (Seligman & Petersen, 2004). These applications however, have failed to include psychotherapeutic settings, despite the match between psychologically based character strengths to the practice of psychotherapy. Therefore, to compensate for this gap in knowledge, the current study will focus on psychotherapists in order to continue to expand the existing knowledge using signature strengths in the work domain.

On an academic level, the positive psychology approach of the present study aims to reduce the gap in the existing literature by providing evidence to support the utilization of personal strengths as an effective strategy for psychotherapists who seek to maximize their professional potential. By interviewing psychotherapists who function at "optimal" levels, this study will outline optimal conditions that these individuals operate from.

Lastly, the need for quality service is increasing in demand for psychological services and continues to grow each year (Statistics Canada, 2002). The present study will help to satisfy this demand by gaining an in-depth understanding of the key dynamics of the profession and efforts to keep psychological services as effective and of the highest possible quality possible.

In summary, psychotherapeutic practice requires a high degree of psychoemotional engagement by psychotherapists that if not adequately managed has the potential to result psychological strain and a diminished ability to operate at an optimal

level. In order to ensure that psychotherapists are able to manage the unique challenges of their work and create a work environment that they can thrive in, it would be only logical to employ the same empirically proven strategies they impart to their clients and have shown success for professionals in other fields. Thus, following the approach of positive psychology, the aim of the current study is to explore the views of psychotherapists who are optimally employing their signature strengths in their professional practices.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This research study adopts the approach of what might be considered as a relatively new branch of psychology called positive psychology to examine the concept of signature strengths, yet upon inspection of earlier psychological theory and inquiry it is clear that this concept has garnered interest from established psychologists who have branched off from well-established areas within the larger field psychology. Accordingly, the research literature reviewed in this section reflects the development of signature strengths, first through early philosophical debates of character strengths and virtues, followed by an explanation of positive psychology, signature strengths, and then a discussion of the importance of expanding current research to focus specifically on implementing signature strengths within the work of psychotherapists.

The study of character strengths can be linked to early investigation into the concept of individual enhancement that has substantial roots in earlier psychological theory and research (Seligman, 2003). For example, Maslow's theory of self-actualization (1954) defines the ultimate state of being as occurring when people are maximally healthy and superior in attainment of capacity, [and as a byproduct] they are healthier and live more enriched lives than non-actualized people. Furthermore, Maslow stated that this optimal state is facilitated by making plans, goals, fulfilling one's potential, and being future minded. Similarly, in research from developmental psychology, Erickson (1963) posited that all strengths and virtues are adaptive strategies that result from the satisfactory resolutions of psychosocial conflicts. Additionally, Erickson stated that beneficial strategies become adopted as one's signature strengths

after positive experiences become a reliable outcome of repeating the behaviour. Moreover, Allport's (1961) interest in strategies to enhance the human condition touch upon using strengths as evidenced in his exploration of the development and integration of a healthy mature personality. Further, from his studies he came to recognize the healthy mature personality as qualitatively different from the "merely normal" individual. These examples of Erikson's and Allport's work offer examples of previous investigations in psychology where psychologically-based strategies were identified that were used to overcome challenges, respond proactively to conflicts, and promote psychological development in mature and healthy ways—these strategies have become more recently recognized in individuals as their key character strengths, otherwise known as signature strengths (Seligman, 2002). Previous efforts by pioneers in the field of psychology clearly link to current efforts to understand and use signature strengths, yet over time, the study of strengths and virtues has adopted more refined empirical methods and tools to lay down the knowledge in this area.

Positive Psychology

In the field of psychology, main branches such as behavioural, cognitive, and developmental psychology exist that are well established; however, a lesser known branch that has received increased academic attention is positive psychology. Positive psychology has been defined as the scientific pursuit of optimal human functioning (Seligman & Peterson, 2004). The science of positive psychology rests upon three main pillars; these pillars will be briefly outlined here and then described in further detail in the following paragraphs. The first pillar is the study of positive emotions; research in this area examines the value of concepts such as confidence, hope, and trust. The second

pillar involves the study of positive traits, primarily focusing on strengths and virtues, and abilities; for example, courage and leadership as well as intelligence. Finally, the third pillar examines the study of positive institutions such as democracy and strong families. As a whole, early findings provide support for these pillars that operate in a positive relay, where positive institutions appear to support strengths and virtues, which in turn support positive emotions.

First Pillar: Positive Emotions

Seligman (2002) states that the pleasant life or the life of enjoyment is what most North Americans think of when considering whether or not they are happy in the moment; this is a hedonistic or more short-term source of positive emotions, these are also known as optimal experiences. These can arise from activities that stimulate the human body's natural endorphins such as bungee jumping, or from applying cognitive strategies that foster positive thinking patterns that facilitate the experience of positive emotions. A growing amount of research has provided support for the ability of positive emotions to build psychological resilience within individuals against negative life events (Fredrickson, 2003; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Isen, 2001). Within this area, there is mounting support for Fredrickson's (2003) broaden-and-build theory where positive emotions seem to broaden an individual's momentary mindset, which then facilitates building of enduring personal resources on intellectual, physical, social, and psychological levels. For example, an individual who scores higher on a life satisfaction scale may be more likely to be interested in learning, improving coordination skills, actively maintaining relationships with others, and be more resilient in the face of adversity. Accordingly, the value of fostering positive emotions is proving to be a

worthwhile investment with a return that can provide individuals with the resources they need to make lasting improvements in their own lives.

Second Pillar: Positive Traits

In contrast, the good life is attained by using one's signature strengths to enhance one's ability to flourish in chosen life domains, which as an added byproduct, has also resulted in individuals who report lasting forms of positive affect (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, the good life comes through deep engagement in work, family life, or other domains, which is facilitated by the conscious choice to use one's signature strengths within these domains. The majority of ground breaking work on character strengths stems from the research of Seligman and Peterson (2004) who published the first version of a classification manual of character strengths that is akin to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illness (DSM-IV). They provided research-based evidence for the validity of each of the 24 strengths included in the manual. Further research by Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) provides support for the application of several character strengths in different settings such as work, leisure, depression, and well-being. As a whole, the studies provided support for the application of character strengths in each domain that ultimately resulted in increased positive emotions and decreased depressive symptoms in the general population. However, due to the relative infancy of this area of study within the field of psychology, very few studies exist that clearly delineate the appropriate applications and benefits of each of the 24 character strengths. As each of these strengths can each be applied to any life domain, the amount of future research required to yield conclusive results is still vast.

Third Pillar: Positive Institutions

Finally, the meaningful life comes from devotion to an institution or a cause greater than oneself where an individual finds a deeper meaning or purpose such as viewing work as a calling, as opposed to an obligation. This is the life of affiliation where individuals gain a sense of belonging by being a part of something larger or greater than themselves. This can be drawn from membership in a strong family, democracy, or even an educational institute. Research in positive psychology also finds early support for this area of study (Gillham, Reivich, Freres, Lascher, Litzinger, Shatte, & Seligman, 2006; Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Shatte, Seligman, Gillham, & Reivich, 2003). This third pillar is what acts as the foundation that supports the ability of character strengths and positive emotions to flourish.

Summary

Of the three pillars, Seligman claims that the concepts from the second pillar, using one's signature strengths to achieve the good life is the kind that everyone is capable of; this involves first identifying one's strengths and then using them in work, love, friendship, and other important life domains. The universality of the good life is due in part to the fact that it involves the greatest amount of personal choice and is less limited by external circumstances or access to external means. Therefore, individuals from virtually any culture, age category, or social standing can apply the basic concept of using one's signature strengths within his or her lifestyle. Preliminary studies support these claims that the average individual can acquire the good life by using their signature strengths; however, a great deal of exploratory research is still required to understand

how each individual character strength can be used in order to maximize the practical and psychological benefits.

Signature Strengths

The attention to positive psychology research is due in part to the support of the former American Psychological Association president, Martin Seligman. Seligman has dedicated the majority of his current research to the study of positive psychology, mainly in the area of character strengths. These are defined as “positive traits that are reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours” (Seligman, 2002, p. 8). Through his research he concluded that all strengths exist in degrees within each individual, and strengths that are most prominent can differ amongst individuals. Each individual’s five strongest character strengths are what constitute one’s signature strengths, thus creating a unique combination for each individual (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). An individual’s signature strengths are determined from an empirically compiled database of 24 character strengths (see Appendix B). Examples of such strengths include integrity, valor, originality, and kindness. Specifically, Seligman concluded that in order for character strengths to be included in the database they must be “valued in almost every culture, they be valued in their own right, not just as a means to other ends, and they are malleable” (Seligman, 2002, p. 132). Moreover, strengths in general are believed to be “buildable and voluntary in that they also involve choices about when to use them, whether to keep developing them, and whether or not to acquire them” (p. 136). Additionally, the value of exploration and development of these three pillars lies in the fact that they already exist within every individual, and once realized, they can be used to enhance any life domain.

Practical Implications

Several important implications from positive psychological research have arisen from promising findings that are growing in strength and number. These reside on an individual as well as an institutional level. Once clearly identified, both individuals and institutions can foster the application of signature strengths to enhance and maintain optimal levels of functioning. Growing evidence exists to support the strategy of applying an individual's signature strengths in the field of educational instruction, social work, and clinical practice in psychotherapy (Bandura, 1997; Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Peseschkian & Tritt, 1998; Rogers, 1953). Therefore, the benefits of these efforts are starting to be realized within the helping professions and can become even more effective with deliberate practice.

As previously mentioned, the small body of research that exists in applying positive psychology in the work domain has sprouted from specialties that involve the main thrust in positive psychology, that is, using evidence based practice. For example, a recent study in the field of education used strengths as a strategy to enhance the work experience of teachers in classroom settings (Basom & Frase, 2004). Additionally, the researchers found that teachers reported higher levels of confidence in their ability to teach and increased satisfaction with their jobs. Related studies by Bandura (2001) and Paulsen and Betz (2004) applied a strengths approach to explore career-decision making with university students. Results revealed that students who received this approach reported elevated levels of satisfaction with the decision making-process and increased confidence with their ultimate career choices. This strengths-based approach has also gained empirical support in the field of social work (Greene, Lee, & Hoffpauir, 2005;

Kraus, 2005). The guiding approach to social work involves teaching clients to use their strengths to build resistance against negative life events. Additionally in psychotherapy, psychotherapists trained in cognitive behavioural therapy tailor interventions to individual clients based on their character strengths as a way to expand their problem-solving repertoires and increase their ability to solve future challenges independently (Bandura, 1997; Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). It was also found that clients with high levels of curiosity who were encouraged to incorporate this strength into their therapy sessions reported greater intrinsic motivation for treatment goals, had better adherence to treatment and better outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Based on existing support for the use of signature strengths as an effective strategy in several professions, and in light of the fact that it is already used with clients who receive psychotherapy, it is a logical step to expand the existing research to include psychotherapists themselves as a means to enhance their training as teachers of the strategy, as well as to ensure that they are all expert firsthand users.

As previously outlined, the only significant caveat to the accessibility of the good life involves a self-awareness of one's strengths; Gold and Roth (1993) define self-awareness as "a process of getting in touch with your feelings and behaviours" (p. 141). Interestingly enough, self-awareness in itself has proven to be a strength that has also been shown to be beneficial to psychotherapists' professional development. For example, a recent study identified self-awareness as one of nine ethical practices of master therapists (Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff, Mussell, & Vye 2005). Through in-depth interviews the therapists identified the need for self-awareness in order to promote self-

care strategies, resolve and avoid countertransference, address personal and physical needs, and minimize risk of harm to clients. Self-awareness was also found in a study on work satisfaction (Seligman, 2002), which revealed that the most satisfied individuals were those who made a conscious effort to incorporate personal strengths such as creativity, social intelligence and leadership into their work. These individuals were also found to appropriately match their abilities with life challenges that arose. Seligman (2002) concluded that individuals who self-identified that they were happier in their work also felt a greater degree of agency in their work, chose to engage in more meaningful work and relationships in the workplace, as opposed to solely focusing on superficial indicators of achievement. It has also been found that there is a positive impact on psychotherapists' level of competence as practitioners with those who are able to self-initiate continual learning to enhance their professional skills in efforts to remain up to date with current clinical and theoretical trends (Ford, 1999). Finally, characteristics that are associated with character strengths such as being self-directed and possessing internal drive appear in professionals who hold accountability to standards and responsibility for life-long learning as their core values (Strickland, 1993). These results support the importance of self-awareness of one's strengths, in order to successfully apply one's signature strengths in chosen areas.

Another aspect that involves self-awareness involves the type of work setting that a psychotherapist selects to work in. Each work setting can be carefully chosen by individual psychologists to suit their professional interests. One aspect that varies between therapeutic work settings is the type of clientele seen on a daily basis; for example, in schools psychologists are more likely to work with children or adolescents

who have behavioural disorders; whereas, psychologists in private practice are likely to work with clients who have experienced traumatic events (Saleebey, 1996). Client trauma is a key example of a type of psychological strain that requires the use of effective strategies to assist psychologists in maintaining an optimal working environment. This type of secondary exposure is referred to as vicarious trauma and is unique to professions that work intimately with clients who have experienced a traumatic event first-hand. This type of psychoemotional strain is often placed under the umbrella of stress, which encompasses terms such as critical incident cumulative stress, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma, all of which can have a profound effect on a psychotherapist's ability to perform effectively at work. In a study on health professionals, one third reported a high risk of developing vicarious trauma and half reported a high risk of developing burnout (Rudolph, Stamm, & Stamm, 1997). Vicarious trauma has also been found to disrupt psychotherapists' worldview, identity, and spirituality (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995b). Additionally, psychotherapists with poor strategies to counteract negative aspects of psychotherapy reported symptoms of intrusive thoughts and avoidant behaviours (McCarthy, Frieze, & Hanson, 1999). The constant challenges of psychotherapy in different work settings makes for a stimulating and rewarding profession to work in; however, different work-settings bring on psychological challenges that are unique to each one. Therefore, failure to use appropriate strategies for challenges in specific work settings can threaten a psychotherapist's ability to thrive at work; therefore, further research that can illuminate such strategies will enable psychotherapists to quell the negative aspects in specific work settings in order to allow for continual development of their professional skills.

Relatedly, previous studies reveal that psychotherapists' who do not incorporate strategies to enhance their work can detrimentally affect their clients, especially when it comes to facilitating therapeutic change. For example, in a study by McCarthy and Frieze (1999), psychotherapists who were not satisfied at work were found to exhibit behaviours that caused clients to feel that the quality of care they received was substandard and contributed to client dropout. Moreover, unsatisfied psychotherapists were also more likely to choose maladaptive strategies during interactions with their clients that in turn reduced the quality of client care. Furthermore, psychotherapists who lacked the skills to improve their work were also found to be less able to help clients solve their presenting issues (p. 42). Psychotherapists who lack the skills to manage the stressors involved in their work can pose as a potential threat to the safety of the clients they treat. This alone, is a serious enough consequence for researchers to feel the need explore the possibilities of using signature strengths in psychotherapeutic practice.

On the other hand, psychotherapists who actively used behavioural strategies reported improved work environments and higher levels of well-being. For instance, therapists who had more time to practice self-care were shown to be less at risk for the negative aspects of helping others (Stamm, 2002). Similarly, findings revealed that individuals with higher self-reported work satisfaction also had more effective coping and problem solving strategies, were more knowledgeable in how to set up optimal environments, made conscious efforts to maintain high levels of social supports, and had beneficial attitudes towards work (Huebner & Vredenburgh, 1999). The use of proactive strategies was also found to increase compassion satisfaction; this involves individuals who want to help partly due to the satisfaction they experience from helping others

(Kraus, 2005). These proactive strategies have also been found to act as a buffer against negative psychological effects (Lerias & Byrne, 2003). Moreover, these strategies were found to offset symptoms of psychoemotional strain by promoting physical health and well-being. Lastly, the use of proactive strategies have been shown to be effective in the prevention and reduction of psychoemotional strain related to the practice of psychotherapy, they also appear to go hand-in-hand increased positive affect within the work environment. The positive relationship between use of strategies and positive emotions lends support towards the early findings of using signature strengths as a proactive strategy to enhance work experiences for psychotherapists; therefore, it also adds validity towards continuing to expand the exploration into this area of research.

Existing research also reveals that a high degree of self-awareness, effective coping skills, and positive experience of work correlate with years of experience as a practicing psychotherapist. For example one study revealed that experienced psychotherapists reported the highest levels of positive emotions at work over time and consistently rated their job satisfaction higher than younger less experienced psychotherapists (Huebner & Vredenburg, 1999). Additionally, older psychotherapists were found to be less likely to experience burnout when working with clients who had substance abuse issues (Glicker, 1983). Finally, interviews with several “Master” therapists who were identified by their colleagues as outstanding in their field, found that each therapist had at least five years of psychotherapeutic experience (Skovolt & Jennings, 1995). Through experience, psychotherapists have been shown to utilize skills that reflect the use of signature strengths in their work; these are the same individuals who were recognized by peers and colleagues as outstanding. Therefore it is necessary to

gather personal accounts of how individuals like these have successfully implemented and benefited from using their signature strengths in the workplace.

In the past decade, efforts have taken place within the field of positive psychology to increase the relatively small body of literature that exists to identify and describe the value of incorporating positive strategies to enhance the work domain. The preventative properties and benefits of proactive strategies are supported through a study by Isen (2001), who found that physicians who were subjected to strategies aimed to induce positive affect were found to be quicker to integrate case information and were less likely to rely on initial assumptions or come to premature closure on their diagnosis. Similar to the practice of medicine, the practice of psychotherapy can also be enhanced using strategies that increase psychological wellbeing. On a practical level, the employment of character strengths can enhance several areas of psychotherapy such as rapport building with clients and colleagues, as well as ongoing measures to promote professional development. Moreover, upon visual inspection, all of Seligman's 24 identified character strengths can be applied in varying degrees to enhance psychotherapists work responsibilities. For example creativity can be used in psychotherapy, rapport building, and professional development, while persistence can be applied towards ethical practice and professional development. Similarly, studies on "flow" examined individuals' ability to align their skills and interests with challenges in various life domains such as family, leisure, and work. One study in particular found that those who matched their signature strengths with appropriate challenges also reported the highest levels of happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In the same vein, a positive relationship was found between strengths and life satisfaction where those who incorporated their signature strengths into

different life domains reported higher levels of overall life satisfaction (Park, Seligman, & Petersen 2004). It is evident that there is growing support for the practical and psychological benefits of using signature strengths to enhance the workplace; however, there needs to be a clearer understanding of how and which strengths are used by psychotherapists' to combat specific responsibilities within psychotherapy.

In addition to studies that support general psychological benefits of incorporating character strengths in the workplace, other studies reveal specific factors that contribute to the benefits of creating opportunities for individuals to augment their work domains. For example, individuals in fields such as administration, sales, and engineering, reported high levels of happiness at work as a result of consciously following their professional interests, they exhibited a breadth of personal competencies and strengths, and functioned in work environments that fostered freedom, challenge, meaning and a positive social atmosphere (Henderson, 2000). It has also been found that writers who were provided with an atmosphere that supported creativity were more productive, engaged, and report higher well-being (Nickerson, 1999). As well, work organizations that provided flexible management enabled individuals with high levels of curiosity to increase learning opportunities, were more engaged and attentive, displayed more goals perseverance, and increased capacity for complex decision making (McCrae & Costa, 1997a). Another study revealed that individuals who were able to apply their love of learning at work were more likely to withstand the frustrations of challenge and negative feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978). Likewise, individuals who experienced more positive aspects at work were also found to be more creative and flexible, in addition to be more

productive, engaged and enthusiastic in their work, absent less, and serves as better mentors and role models (Keyes, 1998).

More specific to psychotherapists, a review of existing research on determinants of job satisfaction revealed the following six categories: feelings of effectiveness, ongoing self-development, professional autonomy-independence, opportunities for emotional intimacy, professional-financial recognition and success, and flexible, diverse work (Kramen-Kahn & Hansen, 1998). Additional benefits of incorporating character strengths for psychotherapists include increased cognitive flexibility, creativity, open-mindedness, problem-solving abilities, thinking-efficiency, and improved interactions with others.

Overall, several studies offer supporting evidence for the value of examining ways to increase stimulating work environment that in turn support psychotherapists' ability to function at optimal levels. This reflects the third pillar of positive psychology, the formulation of positive institutions that support positive strengths and emotions. Therefore, with effective supports in place, negative factors in the therapeutic workplace can become increasingly manageable and viewed more as professional challenges rather than a threat to one's productivity at work. These findings reflect both the overall importance of instilling positive institutions to support optimal work environments through practical opportunities to incorporate character strengths in the workplace.

Summary

In light of empirical support for the benefits of character strengths to enhance the work domains of professionals in various teaching and helping professions fields, the present study will explore the perceptions of experienced psychotherapists who use their

signature strengths within their work. Psychotherapists are professionals who hold a high degree of the self-awareness necessary to put their signature strengths in successful practice, while at the same time, this particular profession is also constantly seeking effective strategies to manage psychological strain that accompanies their type of work. Additional research exists to show the potential damaging effects on clients and psychotherapists themselves who do not actively maintain their ability function well at work. Lastly, some evidence suggests that different strengths may be appropriate to combat different challenges and the overwhelming byproduct of using one's strengths to the fullest is an increase in positive emotions. While academic attention to the topic of character strengths is currently increasing, the size and scope of empirical data is still limited. Thus, due to the exploratory phase of research in the area of signature strengths, the exploratory approach of the present study is both highly appropriate and necessary.

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

This segment focuses on the research methods used in the study. It consists of two main parts: (1) Pilot Study and (2) Main Study. The procedures are described for the reader in detail to enhance understanding and to assure that appropriate procedural guidelines were followed throughout the course of the study.

Pilot Study

Rationale

The purpose of performing a pilot study was to perform a preliminary trial using the semi-structured interview format (see Appendix A) and the signature strengths survey (see Appendix B) to uncover any potential barriers to attaining meaningful data in the main study.

Participants

According to Simonton (1999), a specific topic is best understood by examining a subgroup of individuals who are representative of a larger group; examining the experiences of using character strengths in a psychotherapeutic setting falls under this definition of a subgroup. Simonton also stated that subgroups possess direct access to the construct under examination, thereby making them the most appropriate group of individuals to study. In light of this information, the present study selected experienced psychotherapists because they were more likely to have developed the use of their signature strengths as strategies to confront work-specific challenges than less experienced colleagues. Skovolt and Jennings (1997) reported that psychotherapists with extensive experience were also more likely to have developed the level of awareness that

is necessary to incorporate the majority of their personal strengths than less experienced psychotherapists. Accordingly, the present study selected psychotherapists with the same minimum of five years of experience. The five year minimum amount of experience was used in a similar qualitative study of experienced psychotherapists (Skovolt & Jennings, 1997). Although existing research is scant in terms of the relationship between a higher number of years of experience and personal views of using signature strengths, Jennings, Goh, Skovolt, Hanson, and Banerjee-Stevens (2003) found a psychological difference by way of a positive correlation between years of experience and self-reported confidence in counsellors and therapists in their overall skill level. Therefore, the range of experience in the present sample ensured that it represented a minimum standard of work experience while at the same time keeping the sample within a relatively homogeneous psychological stage in their careers. Third, for the exploratory purposes of this study, this level of complexity would go beyond the scope of what is necessary and appropriate.

The term *psychotherapist* was selected to represent chartered psychologists who provide therapy to clients in private practice on at least a part-time basis. This term was chosen over similar terms, such as *counsellor* or *therapist*, to make the term *psychotherapist* exclusive to individuals who have demonstrated the ability to meet a minimum standard of training and practice. Additionally, chartered psychologists who are licensed to practice are held accountable to meet minimum standards by a regulated body. This delineation separates this specialized population from other therapists or clinicians who provide psychological services, such as social workers, counsellors, physicians, or unregulated individuals who charge for psychological services.

Lastly, all participants were required to be self-employed at least part-time. This criterion increased the homogeneity of the sample that in turn ensured the generalizability of the final results to a larger population of similar practicing psychologists. Examining the unique dynamics of this group from those who were entirely employed by larger companies or agencies will also isolate psychologists in private practice from other psychologists whose professional practices may be influenced by employers' policies and procedures. Factors that do not influence a psychologist's experiences in private practice would not be relevant to aims of the present study; therefore, psychotherapists who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study.

Sampling

This study employed a snowball sampling procedure where psychotherapists who were licensed to practice in the Greater Toronto Area had the same probability of being selected from the listing provided by the Ontario College of psychologists. For the pilot study, three participants were interviewed; this reflects the pilot study procedure used by Perry and McLaren (2003) in a comparable qualitative study. The aforementioned authors found that this was an adequate number of respondents to provide feedback and represent the variability of the potential participants in their main study. The initial three participants were asked each to recommend three peers who could be contacted to take part in the main study. Participants continued to be asked to recommend their peers until grounded theory analysis reflected an adequate degree of information had been gathered to provide the researcher with an in-depth understanding of the topic under examination.

Signature Strengths Survey

The Signature Strengths Survey (Seligman, 2002) was designed to measure the core combination of character strengths that is unique to every individual; the five strongest character strengths of a possible 24 are referred to as an individual's signature strengths (see Appendix B). The psychotherapist participants were required to respond to items that measure 24 different character strengths listed under 6 different subheadings: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humility and justice, temperance, love, and transcendence by selecting likert-type choices (1= Very much unlike me; 2 = Unlike me; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Like me; and 5= Very much like me). Once the items for each character strength are summed, the score for each character strength ranges from 2 to 10. The five highest scores indicate the strengths that are most apparent in the participant based on their answers. Sample question items include "I am always curious about the world," and "When the topic calls for it, I can be a highly rational thinker." The participants were required to complete the survey before participating in the interview portion of the study.

Interview Structure

Rubin (1995) outlines three main types of interviews that are most commonly used to gather information: unstructured qualitative interviews, semi-structured interviews, and standardized interviews. Of the three, the semi-structured interview was the most appropriate for the purposes of the present study because it consisted of a framework that allowed for focused, conversational, two-way communication. Secondly, it was used both to give and receive information. The three main purposes of this method were to obtain specific qualitative information from a sample of the population, to gain

general information relevant to a specific issue, and to gain a range of insights on a specific issue.

For this study the semi-structured approach provided a detailed picture of individual experiences of using signature strengths within a specific life domain as well as ensuring that the same key information was gathered from each participant. This structure also allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of signature strengths as a construct, and to discriminate and clarify psychotherapists' unique experiences of applying them in various aspects of their work. This qualitative format provided a balance of a rich, comprehensive account and structure that allowed for a deep level of understanding while still providing data that was comparable across other participants within the same subgroup. Alternate methods such as a case study approach would have gathered data that is highly unique to the individual or smaller group of individuals under examination and thus inappropriate for the purposes of the present study; on the other hand, a structured-interview format would have rendered the data too defined and would have been void of any subjective experience thus losing the depth required to form an adequate level of understanding of the topic under examination (Del Barrio, 1999).

Interview Questions

A basic interview schedule was tested during pilot interviews using open-ended questions, and follow up questions when necessary (see Appendix A). These questions were revised from Henderson's study (2000) on individuals who reported high levels of satisfaction from incorporating their personal interests in their work.

Data Analysis

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), analysis of qualitative data can be performed using a variety of standardized methods. Moreover, when research in a particular area is limited, researchers use methods that will contribute to furthering the development of the knowledge base in that particular area of study. In light of this information, the present study used grounded theory as it was the most appropriate method for gaining an in depth understanding of the benefits of using of signature strengths in the psychotherapeutic work setting.

Grounded Theory

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the use of a semi-structured interview allows for the use of constant comparative analyses, which is a fundamental element of grounded theory analyses and in turn will increase the likelihood of producing meaningful results. Although there are several reliable ways to analyze interview data, grounded theory is used when the research calls for a case-oriented perspective and aims to uncover meaning and social processes (Hollman et al, 2004). It is one of the most widely used methods in research in human sciences (Miller, 1990). Moreover, it is also used when several cases have the same outcome and need to be examined to see which conditions they all have in common in hopes of revealing necessary causes. Grounded theory is influenced by an emic understanding of the work where the use of categories are drawn from respondents themselves and focus on making implicit belief systems explicit (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Moreover, it is a useful method in analyzing interview data because it remains faithful to the everyday reality of a chosen area of study. For these

reasons, grounded theory analysis was the chosen method for the exploratory nature of the present study.

Modifications

As stated by Van Teijlingen and Hundler (2001), a key purpose of the pilot study was to enable the researcher to utilize feedback from participants to refine the main study. The first participant in the pilot study reported that she felt as if she wanted to change certain answers to make her appear more socially desirable to the researcher who may be looking over her answers. To increase the potential for honest feedback, the participants who followed were informed that the researcher did not need to look over their answers and that they would only be required to discuss their signature strengths; any other comments about the survey would be completely voluntary. The pilot study also facilitated the smooth execution of the main study through first hand implementation and review. A procedural example included providing clearer instructions when distributing consent forms and surveys. Two participants handed in their surveys seven days and five days before their interviews took place; this resulted in a heterogeneous length of time between filling out the surveys and completing the interviews. As a result, participants who followed were instructed to complete the surveys on the day of the interview and bring it with them to refer to during the interview; thus, ensuring that the length of time between completing the survey and the interview was kept to as homogeneous a time period as possible for all participants. Byrne (2001) states that modifications such as these add to the validity of the data and establish a more systematic approach to data collection for the main study.

In summary the insights the pilot study produced were used to refine the procedure and research questions of the main study to create a more refined system for gathering the most relevant data. According to Van Teijlingen and Hundler (2001), a pilot study also supports the reliability of the method used by enabling the researcher to perform preliminary comparisons and analysis of data gathered from the participants; resulting in increased validity of the main study

Main Study

Sampling

This study employed a snowball sampling procedure where psychotherapists who were licensed to practice in the Greater Toronto Area had the same probability of being selected from the listing provided by the Ontario College of Psychologists. Three participants were initially selected to be interviewed; these participants were asked to recommend three peers each to be contacted to take part in the main study. Participants continued to be asked to recommend their peers until grounded theory analysis reflected an adequate degree of information had been gathered to provide the researcher with an in-depth understanding of the topic under examination. In total, ten participants were interviewed.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was first granted by the Human Subjects Research Ethics Committee through the University of Lethbridge, Alberta. The study sample consisted of chartered psychologists in Ontario who were randomly selected from a list of practicing professional provided by the Ontario College of Psychologists. Potential participants were contacted via telephone, email, or in-person. They were

provided with a brief explanation of the study and were asked if they would be willing to participate (see Appendix C). A package was mailed, faxed, or handed to those who agreed to participate that included a consent letter, the Signature Strengths survey, and list of interview questions that were to be asked during the face-to-face interview (see Appendices A, B, C). The informed letter of consent also described the purpose and uses of the information gathered. Signed agreement to participate and permission to tape record the session was obtained from the participant and confidentiality was assured. Participants were informed that the general purpose of the thesis was to examine psychotherapists' perceptions of work. Lastly, all participants were offered access to the thesis upon its completion. Within one week from the date that the participants mailed, handed back in person, or faxed the signed consent form to the researcher, the participants were contacted to schedule a time to meet at their respective offices to complete the interview portion of the study.

Participants

Once identified, this subgroup was recruited from the directory of practicing psychologists provided by the Ontario College of Psychologists. After completing the Signature Strengths survey and identifying their signature strengths, potential participants were asked to indicate how many of their signature strengths they believed to use in their professional practice. To continue in the second part of the study, participants were required to report using at least three of their five signature strengths. This criterion identified individuals who had the most experience using signature strengths and were qualified to provide a high degree of insight into the topic at hand. Additionally, this criterion also reflects one of the three main pillars of positive psychology, which aims to

learn from exemplary individuals who are most knowledgeable in a particular life domain in order to eventually be used to teach others how best to enhance similar circumstances.

In addition to the criteria outlined in the pilot study, the selection criteria for the main study also included:

- a. Adults, 18 years of age or older
- b. The ability to understand and speak English
- c. Licensed to provide psychotherapy by a provincial or national regulated body
- d. Minimum of part-time private practice in psychotherapy for 5 years and a maximum of 15 years
- e. Report using at least three signature strengths in professional practice

Ten interviewees were involved in the study and are described as follows.

Interviewee #1 was a single Caucasian female in her late thirties, who at the time of the interview, lived in Toronto. She reported that she has operated a private practice part-time, for 10 years. Her main work is in assessments, but she also provides psychotherapy in the area of health psychology. Her theoretical approach was cognitive behavioural.

Interviewee #2 was a Caucasian male in his early forties, currently married and living in Toronto. He reported that he has been in private practice part-time for 12 years, providing psychotherapy in the area of health psychology. His theoretical approach was a combination between existential and cognitive behavioural.

Interviewee #3 was a Caucasian male in his mid thirties, currently married and living in Toronto. He reported that he has been practicing for six years, working in

private practice part-time, providing assessments and psychotherapy for various adult populations. His theoretical approach was eclectic.

Interviewee #4 was a single Middle Eastern male in his mid thirties, who at the time of the interview was living in Toronto. He reported that he has been in private practice part-time for five years, providing psychotherapy for various adult populations. His theoretical approach was eclectic, with a heavy emphasis on cognitive behavioural.

Interviewee #5 was a Caucasian male in his mid forties, currently married and living in Toronto. He reported that he has been practicing for eight years, working in private practice full-time, providing assessments and psychotherapy for various adult populations. His theoretical approach was a combination of cognitive behavioural and Rogerian.

Interviewee #6 was a single Caucasian female in her early thirties, who at the time of the interview was living in Toronto. She reported that she has been in private practice part-time for five years, providing assessments and psychotherapy for various adult populations. Her theoretical approach was Adlerian.

Interviewee #7 was a single African American woman in her mid thirties, who at the time of the interview was living in Toronto. She reported that she has been in private practice part time for five years, providing psychotherapy and assessments for various adult populations. Her theoretical approach was cognitive behavioural.

Interviewee #8 was a South East Asian man in his early thirties, currently married and living in Toronto. He reported that he has been in private practice part time for seven years, providing psychotherapy in the area of health psychology. His theoretical approach was eclectic.

Interviewee #9 was a Caucasian male in his early forties, currently married and living in Toronto. He reported that he has been in private practice part-time for 10 years, providing assessments and psychotherapy in the area of health psychology. His theoretical approach is eclectic.

Interviewee #10 was a single Caucasian male in his early thirties, who at the time of the interview was living in Toronto. He reported that he has been working in private practice full-time for five years, providing psychotherapy for various adult populations. His theoretical approach is a combination of solution focused and cognitive behavioural.

Signature Strengths Survey

Each participant was instructed to complete the Signature Strengths survey before participating in the interview segment of the study; this was to ensure that all participants were equipped with the same working definition of signature strengths before discussing their strengths in the interview stage. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete and self-score. The paper-and-pencil version ensured that each participant filled out the survey in a uniform format, thus maintaining similar dynamics while completing the survey.

Interview

Open-ended questions were posed to elicit information about each psychotherapist's experience of using signature strengths within different aspects of their work. The first guiding question was "describe the strategies you use to incorporate your signature strengths at work." Follow-up questions were used if the participant did not spontaneously provide the information. Follow-up questions were used for confirmation of responses provided as necessary or to ensure that all relevant areas of exploration were

covered if not already addressed by the respondent. In a recent comparable study, Hollman, Ek, Olsson, and Bertero (2004) successfully gathered meaningful data from conducting qualitative interviews that ranged from 30-60 minutes in length. In light of this success, the present study conducted interviews that resulted in the same range in length, although none of the interviews were prematurely concluded; instead, interviews were conducted without pre-established time constraints and came to a natural conclusion. Interviews were recorded using a tape cassette recorder and transcribed verbatim by the researcher or a transcription service.

Data Analysis

Building on the description of Data Analysis provided in the Pilot Study section, the main study continued to use grounded theory to analyze the transcribed interviews. Each interview was transcribed within 48 hours to maintain a high degree of accuracy. The coding process commenced after the first interview was completed. The first step consisted of open coding; this included identifying, naming, categorizing and describing phenomena found in the text. The next step was axial coding, which involved using inductive and deductive thinking to draw parallels between codes in an effort to establish generic relationships and causal relationships. Next, selective coding was used to identify a category to become the core category that tied together all other categories. The final stage was to produce a substantive theory of the experience of signature strengths, as it appeared to occur in the work domain of psychotherapists.

Summary

As with qualitative methods in general, grounded theory allowed for a focused analysis of psychotherapists' experiences of using their signature strengths. As a result, it

provided intricate details of a phenomenon that would be otherwise difficult to attain using alternative qualitative methods, while quantitative methods were simply inappropriate to use during this stage of exploration.

Chapter 4: Results

Review of Key Terms and Procedures

The following chapter will be couched upon the framework provided by the previous chapter: methods, and will go on to illustrate a preliminary descriptive theory that answers the first research question, how do experienced psychotherapists personally interpret, conceptualize, or make sense of their ability to incorporate their signature strengths in their work? The second half of this chapter will present and interpret a theoretical framework that attempts to organize the results of the study into a cohesive, illuminating whole, thus answering the second research question, what psychological benefits do they report as a result of using signature strengths in the work domain?

The framework itself consists of three metacategories or selective codes, 12 categories or axial codes, and 24 subcategories or properties. The technical meanings of the aforementioned terms --selective codes, axial codes, and properties -- were defined in the previous chapter. Each theme is presented in three separate sections, at the beginning of each section is a list of bullet-points of the concepts contained within the overall theme. This is followed by a brief explanation of the overall theme, an interpretation of the data, and supporting extracts from the interviews.

Main Themes

The analysis focuses on the following three main themes, which emerged from the study:

1. Meaningful
2. Energy
3. Enabling Conditions

Theme 1: Meaningful

- Enlightened self-interest
- Balance of emotions
- Continual learning
- Positive attitude
- Acknowledging weaknesses
- Spirituality
- Heightened self-awareness

The majority of participants noted that their work was meaningful to them on several levels. For example, participants characterized gaining meaning through vicarious means by way of the clients they treated, personal awareness of their own enhanced professional connections with colleagues, enhanced spiritual development, and increased professional growth. The following categories go on to discuss each participant's experiences in detail.

Enlightened self-interest. Several participants characterized personal meaning as involving cognition, behaviour, and the outcome of combining the two in the practice of psychotherapy as personally meaningful.

For most of the participants, personal meaning was enhanced by specific psychological benefits involved in this specific work setting, the first benefit is through vicarious means. The following quotation reflects these sentiments: "If they are able to reduce -- I am not trying to be cute -- but if they are able to reduce the ugliness in their lives, that's nice in a philosophical sense" (Interviewee #6).

For some of the participants, meaning came from the feeling of having a job that holds some degree of power and influence. This sentiment is illustrated in the following extract: “You’re really making important decisions on behalf of other people and it is kind of an ego boosting thing” (Interviewee #1).

For other participants, meaning is drawn from aspects of the work that satisfy personal pursuits. This type of meaning is demonstrated in the following: “Psychotherapy captures all of the things that for me make life worth living” (Interviewee #5).

At the same time, many participants reported that this sense of meaning seemed to align with their personal values. The following quotation provides an example of the type of meaning that may represent why certain individuals are drawn to the profession in the first place: “There seems to be a basic truth that people who stay in the helping professions do so because altruism is something that is important as a value to them” (Interviewee #6).

In addition, the following extract demonstrates that participants had a combination of feelings that created meaning for them, this involved both direct positive feedback as well as making them feel as if their professional efforts were contributing to a greater cause: “Especially after the feedback I get from clients and I say I think I helped this person and that’s what makes me feel good inside when I have done something for humanity” (Interviewee #7).

Clearly, participants reported using their signature strengths in an array of aspects that contributed to achieving an enlightened self-interest that in turn created a meaningful experience in the workplace.

Balance of emotions. Another related category in this domain is the ability of signature strengths, when used within the practice of psychotherapy to balance positive and negative emotions. According to six participants, making the effort to build positive feelings in the workplace helped to reduce the impact of naturally occurring negative emotions involved in this line of work. Some participants reported an increased ability to establish connections with difficult clients as is illustrated in the following:

Um, I'm going to say curiosity would be a big one, that keeps me going um, that's the one that kind of gets you over the hump of y'know it wasn't a very good session today, or I'm seeing this person today ugh, that's the kind of thing that I meet them, if I can find stuff that's interesting, stuff that gets me interested, that keeps me going so I think that's a big one. (Interviewee #3)

Several of the participants also felt that when they were able to use their strengths to maintain healthy work demands and stress levels, they were able to achieve more overall. The following quotation demonstrates this sentiment:

So to me that's a thing to consider. And that's the foundation of it and when you can have that kind of equanimity about your work, it then makes all the other stuff a whole lot easier to accomplish. (Interviewee #5)

Another participant reported that strengths used to promote emotional balance also promote a healthy perspective in work, as is illustrated in the following: “[Signature strengths] help me – I think they help me not give up. They help me try to see things differently” (Interviewee #7).

Some participants also reported that their signature strengths helped them move forward during difficult times so that they did not get stuck in negativity. This is

illustrated in the following: “I don’t dwell on the losses and the failures that I’ve experienced and I can you know, grieve ... move on-quickly through humour and having some valor and courage” (Interviewee #9).

Here, participants identified several ways that signature strengths facilitated the ability to make meaningful changes in order to maintain a balanced work life.

Continual learning. Another way in which participants reported to draw meaning from using their signature strengths was through enjoyment of continual learning. Five participants identified love of learning as one of their signature strengths; this strength was satisfied through ongoing opportunities through their work for professional development. This shared experience was depicted in the following quotation: “I feel like I’m continuing to grow and develop” (Interviewee #2).

Another participant remarked that this profession was also an unending source of learning: “You’re never done, ha-ha, you’re never done. You think you’re done, you’ve got a degree, and you’ve got the license, um but you’ve never done” (Interviewee #3).

Some participants reported that psychotherapy is a dynamic profession that is always coming out with new resources to learn from. This is illustrated in the following quotations. Interviewee #6 expressed, “I try to keep abreast of new ways of helping clients in this population.” Interviewee #7 commented, “I’m just filled by learning and um I think psychotherapy is like that, it’s kind of a learning process, um people are learning new ideas, behaviours, and so forth.” Another participant reported that this strength contributes to providing better treatment for the clients: “So I’m learning all along the way what it is that works for the client” (Interviewee #8).

It is clear that participants used their signature strengths to seek out continual opportunities to learn in order to satisfy both personal and professional interests that are meaningful to them.

Attitude. Six psychotherapists frequently cited how they used their signature strengths to keep a positive attitude within the practice of psychotherapy. Some participants reported the ability to maintain a healthier amount of perspective. For example, Interviewee #2 commented, “It’s been great; I’ve never had any times in my life where I’ve been really depressed or anything like that I’ve just always had a very optimistic viewpoint.”

Other participants noted that they were able to see the larger meaning in their daily work. This is demonstrated in the following example:

I think the other way that I use it is sort of um sort of allows me to have a more playful attitude when working with various individuals, realizing that um, it’s a serious job you’re doing stuff that you kind of help a bit but you can’t do everything, you can’t fix everybody’s problem, you can’t solve everything so there is a sense of humour not just joke way but in a sense of you also have to take it lightly and kind of go in and do the best you can. (Interviewee #3)

Another participant noted the importance of possessing a particular signature strength and how it was helpful in this particular profession: “I mean hope and optimism is definitely one of the most important ones ... as a psychotherapist, if you are pessimistic you won’t be able to help people” (Interviewee #4).

Some participants reported that signature strengths can provide confidence to successfully build a rapport with clients. As Interviewee #7 mentioned, “Having the

social skills to quickly say ‘Okay, I can take care of this. I can handle-know how to relate to this person.’” Interviewee #10 commented, “I have confidence in this work.”

Another participant reported that signature strengths help to build a more realistic attitude about one’s role within the client’s treatment:

Just being here makes a difference and making a difference doesn’t always mean everyone’s happy. You know making a difference means someone is you know more knowledgeable about their body. And their nutrition’s improved. Or that that they’re actually talking to their wife about sex-so it’s not just about being happy all the time. (Interviewee #9)

Several meaningful outcomes were identified from using signature strengths to build a healthy attitude that participants adopted in order to thrive in this specific profession.

Acknowledging weaknesses. This category refers to the participants’ common report that the ability to acknowledge one’s weaknesses enhances their ability to practice psychotherapy. Specifically, the first main benefit that many participants reported by using their signature strengths was the increased ability to identify weaknesses. This is demonstrated in the following: “I’m painfully aware of my weaknesses as well as my strengths, so I try to match those as best I can” (Interviewee #1).

Other participants reported that they were able to achieve the next step after identifying their weaknesses, which is accepting them. The following quotation illustrates this: “problem-focused-mainly because of the clientele I’m dealing with, you know, for the recognition that there are certain issues that I will never be very good in dealing with” (Interviewee #6).

Essentially, participants were able to use their signature strengths to understand their weaknesses and then take an informed approach to dealing with them.

Spirituality. Related to the category where many participants stated that they were able to acknowledge weaknesses, the next category reflects participants' sentiments that using signature strengths allows them to tap into their sense of spirituality in the work domain. The following quotation illustrates how participants attempted to incorporate personal interests in spirituality into their work: "I'm reading more new age spiritualism. That's something that I tried to uh, to sometimes bring into practice, more existential issues, meaning of life, purpose" (Interviewee #2).

For others, spirituality was an interest that was longstanding throughout their personal development. The following excerpt reflects this: "Yeah, I mean for me, it is always about spirituality... That kind of thing is something that's always been really interesting, a real interest of mine" (Interviewee #4).

Other participants reported that spirituality grounds their professional practice. This is shown through the following quotation: "That's the way I see it. That doesn't go well with self-control, but appreciating of spirituality. I do have a-it may not come across, but I do have a spiritual base to it" (Interviewee #8).

In this case, participants revealed that their signature strengths helped them to pursue their spiritual interests in various ways to enhance their practices.

Heightened self-awareness. The final category includes a common experience reported by six participants. The first sentiment includes using signature strengths to maintain a healthy appreciation of personal circumstances. The following quotations illustrate this sentiment. Interviewee #1 noted, "Um, I also think this is something that

feeds back for me ... I'm grateful that something like that hasn't happened to me."

Interviewee # 2 commented, "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't feel thankful of what I have and where I'm at and the way I was raised and the opportunities that I had."

These statements were two examples of gratitude, a signature strength that clearly assists participants in creating meaningful experiences at work.

Another participant noted that increased self-awareness has enabled him/her to take action to practice self-care strategies: "I am helping myself in meeting that need, in recognizing that need within me, attempting to meet it" (Interviewee #5). Once aware, this participant took decisive action to be personally responsible for working towards personally meaningful goals.

Another participant reported that he/she was better able to recognize which work responsibilities were better suited to him/her: "So they're suggesting that I would be appropriate for a leadership role. I'm totally now interested in administrative leadership of any sort, because that's not me" (Interviewee #8). Here, an appropriate match between work responsibilities and signature strengths is clearly related to meaningful work.

Additionally, other participants reported experiencing increased level of awareness of their competence. Interviewee # 9 commented, "I think I've come into my own and I have awareness of my conscious competencies relative to my skill set." Interviewee #10 stated, "I question my own, ah, ego strength, self-esteem and all those other issues -- yeah, but oh, you know, the reflective practitioner is very important to know where, where your tolerances are."

It is clear that the participants used their strengths to increase their awareness of their competencies, which they deemed important aspects of creating a meaningful work experience.

Summary. In addition to the multitude of ways in which participants reported that they drew meaning from their work, it was also noted that the practice of psychotherapy was used to feed the existing signature strengths that clients used to create meaning, which were already present within the individuals. Thus, participants' responses that fell within this domain addressed both the content and the process of attaining personal meaning through the practice of psychotherapy. A basic implication is that meaning represents a prominent, essential component of the experience for these participants, and as a result became one of the three metacategories in this developing theory.

Theme 2: Energy

- Activation
- Affective enhancement

In addition to many reports that signature strengths facilitated personal meaning in the practice of psychotherapy, as described in the previous section; participants also disclosed that the experience of using signature strengths in psychotherapy involves a kind of energy – that is, the internal drive, energy from others, and affective enhancement associated with the enhanced work engaging them as a result of their activated signature strengths. The interviewees repeatedly underscored this dimension of their experience of using signature strengths -- as a source of energy.

Activation. In fact, the participants' accounts of energy were described as an active, positive dimension. The following remark reflects the general experience that they

seek out the variety and uniqueness that accompanies each client in order to can produce a source of energy:

I seem to never get tired, um, meaning I've never [inaudible] a patient, you never ah, you work in generalities, assessments give you generalities um, you read the theories, you read all the stuff gives you generalities but when you actually meet the person those generalities kind of, they're true up to a point but then there's a lot of unique stuff and I never seem to get tired of discovering what that is.

(Interviewee #2)

Participants also described the benefits of drawing energy from colleagues.

Interviewee #7 commented, " Yeah, that's the same. If there's energy, I mean, you feed off of each other's energy and passion and commitment for the work that you're doing."

Interviewee #10 noted, "I think that if you bring an energy into a workplace environment, people will feed off of that and you know you'll feed off of them."

These statements show how participants have learned to use their strengths to see the value in working with colleagues as a team, and how this dynamic can be a source of energy for a sustainable practice.

Affective enhancement. This next category refers to the felt vigor and salience of the energizing affects that participants reported to experience as a result of using their signature strengths in psychotherapy. Six participants noted this as being a particularly poignant outcome of their efforts. The following quotations illustrate a positive relationship between energy and positive emotions:

I have a real zest for what I do and I really enjoy it. (Interviewee #1)

It comes from my love of the work and my love of helping and nurturing and that's a really strong sort of personal um characteristic of me and uh that comes out quickly. (Interviewee #2)

That's just sort of how I am, a thrill for life and a thrill for what you're doing and um, just being happy to be there. (Interviewee #5)

In addition to positivity about practicing psychotherapy, another shared experience involves participants who reported positive emotions from possessing signature strengths and using them at work. This is illustrated in the following quotation: "Positively. I am happy that I have these particular strengths and if I see those strengths" (Interviewee #7). Clearly, this reflects how participants have embraced the use of their signature strengths in their professional practices.

Summary. Participants' common reports underscored the active, energizing component of this model which they felt enabled them to work longer hours, were increasingly ready to tackle challenging clients, and fuelled their desire to continue to pursue professional development opportunities throughout their careers. Thus, this concept also represents a prominent, essential component of the experience for these participants, and as a result became the second component of three overarching metacategories in this developing theory.

Theme 3: Enabling Conditions

- Professional support network
- Challenging
- Role models/mentors
- Career path

One of the most salient results of the study was the participants' illuminating explanation of the goodness-of-fit between signature strengths and the conditions that psychotherapy possesses in which to use them. This third and final metacategory rounds out the explanatory model presented here to illustrate how it contributes to the budding theory. Key categories that combine to create enabling conditions for participants in this study include: ability to maintain professional support networks, challenging work, role models/mentors, and key points along their career paths. The following categories illustrate these conditions further.

Professional support network. This category speaks to four participants' reports that signature strengths enhanced the ability to connect with peers and colleagues. Interviewee #1 commented, "[Social intelligence] helps me manage my relationships better with staff." Interviewee #7 explained, "So you're excited about learning something new and you're asking questions and getting dialogue going and your questions are generated. So I find that that just enhances collegial cohesiveness."

Another aspect that participants noted was a greater ability to contribute to the team. This is demonstrated in the following quotations. Interviewee #8 commented, "I think I have this ability to adapt and adjust and take care of something. I mean, I can- team members have found me reliable and I am pretty consistent." According to Interviewee #10, "Working as a team is very important, but I've always been a social person. Leadership and teamwork and social integration." It is clear that participants used signature strengths such as social intelligence and leadership to enhance their social working environment.

Challenging. While aspects such as healthy collegial relationships are important to daily functioning, this next category reflects reports from six participants that signature strengths in psychotherapy provided a sound platform to launch from in order to meet challenges that keep them engaged in their work on a longer term basis. The following quotations indicate the cognitive complexity involved in this line of work:

I mean, to be able to piece it all together and to incorporate all of the data that you've got in front of you to come up with some rationale for why [clients] are the way they are. (Interviewee #1)

Yeah, it's hard. It's not always easy. I wish it was. Well, no I don't, if it was I'd be bored. (Interviewee #2)

I mean that's just part of being a psychotherapist, part of being a good therapist. You're making judgments all the time, you're constantly thinking, examining, [inaudible] sort of keeping an open mind about things. (Interviewee #3)

The following statements represent the fine balance between satisfying and cognitively taxing work. As Interviewee #5 explained, "It's that kind of challenge I think, of being able to operate on several different levels at the same time, that can be both a thrill when you are able to do it, but it's also very taxing." Interviewee #8 added, "Yeah and I find it pretty you know, it was just a good challenge and I challenged his beliefs." A statement by Interviewee #9 reflects the challenge involved with constantly working with unique individuals that keeps the positivity going: "It's kind of exciting, always slightly different."

All of the aspects identified in this category that participants reported to contribute to the positive challenges associated with their work, were fueled, facilitated and enhanced by their strengths.

Role models/mentors. This category involves four participants' common report that past interactions and experiences with key people in their lives in a way that helped them shape the way they approach life, or helped guide them to the field of psychotherapy. Some participants noted parental influence. The following quotations represent this early inspiration. Interviewee #2 described, "I'm a very optimistic person, uh, that's from my mom, my mom's a super optimist." And Interviewee #9 commented, "Well, my mother is a mental health nurse."

Another source of influence over vocational direction came from academic figures in participants' lives. The following quotations illustrate this source of motivation. Interviewee # 5 explained, "The person who actually turned me onto clinical psychology was your friend from York. He was the man -- pointed me in the right direction. Sometimes all it takes is, you know, just one key person." Interviewee #10 noted, "I've worked with lots of people that were great. My undergraduate supervisor really encouraged me to complete a really extensive undergraduate program, and with her perseverance I published four papers and did a number of conference presentations."

Here participants reported the strength of the influence of role models and mentors in shaping the direction of their careers. These people also appeared to encourage the participants to follow careers where they now recognize that they are able to use the majority of their signature strengths.

Career path. This next category refers to the commonly related report that this enabling condition resulted from learning about one's signature strengths through previous vocational experiences. Five participants reported that their signature strengths helped to lead them to their current place in psychotherapy. The following excerpt demonstrates the journey that many participants reported:

I started off as most psychologists do, um performing therapy work, um, you do learn assessment work ... then started working more in practices that served victims of motor vehicle accidents and more independent assessment work ... I found that's what I really like to do. (Interviewee #1)

Another aspect that many participants reported involves how fostering their strengths influenced the direction of their career. The following quotation illustrates this concept: "When I was in graduate school and uh, I didn't have a lot of confidence, of being a psychotherapist...and I sort of gained knowledge of a particular type of therapy...and I became a competent therapist" (Interviewee #3).

Strengths also acted to guide participants' careers, as Interviewee #5 described: I think it ties in part in the kinds of things that I've done. So I've always been interested when people handle aversive situations that-and what it is that makes some people be able to handle those aversive situations better than others.

For some participants, a reduction of stimulation of their signature strengths can indicate the need to take action to change their work circumstances so that this is no longer the case. Interviewee #8 described this feeling: "Yeah, I recently... honestly I'm feeling like, okay. I'm not finding it challenging right now -- so I find that I need to move forward."

Other participants reported that this vocation allowed them to tap into their self-reflective strengths. The following quotation illustrates this:

I got involved [in psychotherapy] because I thought I'd learn something about myself. I never did academically, but indirectly, ah ... and maybe my quest to learn about myself became generalized to working clinically to helping other people learn more about themselves. (Interviewee #9)

Summary. This metacategory reveals common experiences expressed by the psychotherapists in this sample who identified various cognitive, psychological, and emotional benefits as a result of the presence of certain enabling conditions within the practice of psychotherapy that facilitated their ability to apply their signature strengths.

Benefits of Signature Strengths in Psychotherapy

To conclude this chapter, this section presents the participants' answers to the second and final research question, "What psychological benefits do [psychotherapists] report as a result of using signature strengths in the work domain?" The participants' statements clearly recognized the expression of signature strengths as having a highly positive influence on their personal assessments of the quality of their work. The following excerpts highlight the commonly cited sentiment that signature strengths enhanced the degree of personal meaning gained from their work and improved the treatment process:

[Using my signature strengths] keeps me engaged in my work, facilitates rapport building with clients, enhances treatment process, helps prevent negative emotions from building up inside. (Interviewee #2)

[Signature strengths] can be used to create new therapeutic techniques, increase my ability to recognize weaknesses and try to improve them, enhanced flexibility, and continual learning. (Interviewee #4)

[Signature strengths] are the core characteristics of being therapeutically effective. (Interviewee #6)

In addition to enhanced meaning and treatment, these quotations also highlight the opportunity for participants to identify and improve personal weaknesses.

Another common experience included a more direct answer to the first research question, where participants reported an increased the overall general sense of being a better practitioner:

I think [signature strengths] just make me a better therapist and, uh, I don't know what else to say about that. (Interviewee #7)

Well, I think it has made me a better therapist. It certainly has made me willing to continue adjusting and correcting in ways that are most likely to bring about the best outcome for the client. (Interviewee #9)

I've had very good feedback.(Interviewee #10)

Clearly, when used in the work domain, signature strengths can afford both specific and overall benefits to professionals who use them.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The previous chapter presented a descriptive qualitative model of how the participants in this study appear to interpret their experiences of using their signature strengths in the practice of psychotherapy. The study yielded an abundance of insightful information and conceptual complexity. Following this process, I will continue with inductive abstraction that was first introduced in Chapter 4, in an attempt to identify some deeper implications of the model which will provide increased coherence and comprehensibility as well as establish its place with respect to the field of positive psychology.

This chapter's discussion will address the following: (a) analysis of relationships among the selective codes; (b) revisiting positive psychology literature; (c) limitations and delimitations of the study; (d) areas for future research; and (e) concluding remarks.

Analysis of Relationships Among the Selective Codes

In the last chapter, I presented a descriptive framework of the participants' personal constructs of using signature strengths in psychotherapy, consisting of three overarching dimensions – Meaning, Energy, and Enabling Conditions – and their supporting categories and properties.

It is evident that these metacategories surfaced from the analysis, yet careful reflection on how these selective codes are rooted in and derived from the raw data can provide explanations as to how these metacategories or selective codes appear to relate to one another. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), the relationships can now be inferred between the selective codes to represent the meaning they hold in this theoretical

model. From this analysis, the aim is to outline how participants formed the explanatory roles of these factors within this specific work domain.

To review, the Enabling Conditions metacategory refers to the personal and contextual factors enabling the individual to express their signature strengths within the practice of psychotherapy. Based on the participants' experiences, these factors do not conceptually adhere to using signature strengths the same way as the other two metacategories; in other words, to enable x does not mean to be x. Enabling factors towards the incorporation of one's signature strengths in psychotherapy are akin to sun, water, and soil, basic elements necessary for a plant's ability to grow in a given patch of a garden; furthermore, when in abundance, these elements appear to help them flourish. This suggests that enabling conditions occupy a foundational place in the budding explanatory sequence, as illustrated in Figure 1.

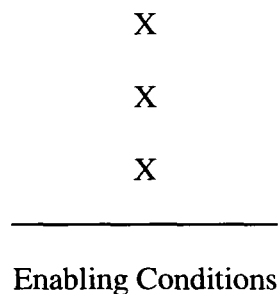


Figure 1. Selective codes relationships: Initial

In this context, meaning refers to the personal fulfillment of beliefs and alignment with one's worldview that are expressed through one's signature strengths. As touched on briefly in the previous chapter, it speaks to the passive and experiential qualities that participants report as a result of applying signature strengths. This is what Seligman terms as "the meaningful life" (2002); it is the second pillar of positive psychology that involves using one's signature strengths to facilitate knowledge, power, or goodness.

Applying this concept to the present discussion suggests that the reports of meaningful work occupy a different level in the proposed explanatory scheme –a higher position – to indicate in a visual sense that it stems from the nourishment of enabling conditions (Figure 2).

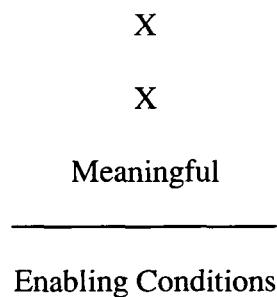


Figure 2. Selective codes relationships: Second

Based on the participants' reports, energy, the third identified metacategory requires a place in the following representation. Energy encompasses the vigorous affect, motivation, and overt activities commonly attached to the overall experience. The primary feature distinguishing this dimension of using signature strengths in the workplace from the Meaningful dimension is its' active nature. That is to say, Energy primarily pertains to what, and how, the participants manage the experiential information. Therefore, the Energy component of using signature strengths in the workplace seems to be viewed by the participants as a latter stage of a motivational process stemming from the interaction between various enabling conditions (e.g., continuous learning) and one's experiential process (e.g., using new techniques in psychotherapy). The next layer in this schema is presented in Figure 3.

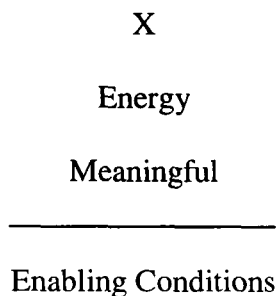


Figure 3. Selective codes relationships: Third

The final component of this explanatory scheme includes the outcome of this process, that is, enhanced psychotherapeutic practice. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the final element of the model represents what was uncovered through the participants' reports, that being the gestalt of the experience of incorporating one's signature strengths in the practice of psychotherapy. At this stage, the individual's experience rises out of the marriage of his or her internal world (thoughts, feelings, and experiences) and the external world (objects, people, and places). It is the product of the individual's overall work ethic and is placed in the following position in the model (Figure 4).

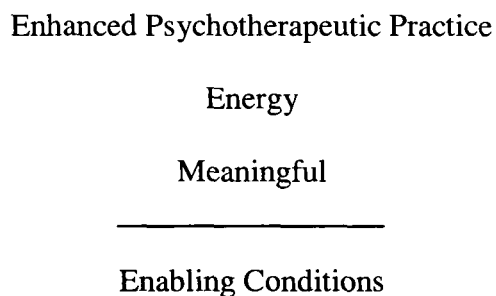


Figure 4. Triadic model of signature strengths in psychotherapy

I have presented the proposed organization of interrelationships among the selective codes vertically to suggest a dependent relationship between the metacategories. The direction of this relationship being based upon, the present sample of

psychotherapists, for who the lower levels in the schema are for the most part are necessary though not sufficient conditions for the higher levels; whereas, in this case, the lower levels are not sufficient conditions for items in the higher levels and therefore would not be appropriately represented in a horizontal schema that would indicate a linear cause-effect model.

In essence, according to this explanatory account of using signature strengths in the practice of psychotherapy, without the basic meaningful associations as mentioned in the previous chapter, the likelihood of an increase in an individual's energy level would be lower. Similarly, if the appropriate enabling conditions (social, internal, external) are devoid from the individual, it is less likely that there would be an optimal level of meaning associated with the workplace, or increased meaning reaped from the work in and of itself.

Revisiting Positive Psychology Literature

In Chapter 2, I discussed the scientific framework of positive psychology, which supports the understanding, measurement, and development of character strengths. At this point it is worthwhile to revisit the topic to anchor the model derived from this study within a positive psychology framework.

First, it became evident that the triadic model presented here requires a foundation used upon enabling conditions such as collegial support, freedom/flexibility, career/work experience, challenging work, opportunities for learning, and so on. This finding supports the third pillar of positive psychology that aims to identify positive institutions.

The second level of the present model involves meaningful work, that is, work that aligns with personal beliefs, attitude, ability to balance positive and negative emotions, and so on. This finding reflects the second pillar of positive psychology, the study of positive traits (strengths and virtues, natural abilities).

The third level of this model includes energy, for example, affective enhancement, renewed interest, and confidence. This finding reflects the first pillar of positive psychology, positive emotion.

Clearly, many of the concepts described above are comparable with those described in the broaden-and-build model (Fredrickson, 2003). Both models involve an active approach, in the sense that participants take steps to broaden the amount of meaning in their work, which as a result builds enduring personal resources within the workplace. For example, both models have a positive influence on the following personal resources, intellectually individuals report that they continue to create opportunities for learning and problem solving, socially they form and maintain bonds with clients and colleagues, and psychologically they report building resilience, optimism, and work towards goals. One difference between the two models is that participants in this study did not report specific physical benefits or changes as a result of using their signature strengths in their work.

In relation to existing literature in the field of positive psychology, the results of this study support Seligman and Peterson's (2004) findings that signature strengths can be used as a beneficial strategy to facilitate one's ability to function optimally in the work domain. Results also support Seligman's (2002) findings that state that signature strengths are "buildable and voluntary in that they also involve choices about when to use

them, whether to keep developing them, and whether or not to acquire them” (p. 135). For example, participants reported that they consciously chose to use and develop their natural sense of humour within their work as a strategy to enhance relationships with clients and colleagues. In fact, this signature strength in particular was the most commonly cited strength that was implemented as a clinical and professional strategy to enhance relationships with clients and peers, and to facilitate the therapeutic process with clients. Other most commonly reported strengths included love of learning, perspective, spirituality and zest, all of which helped to form the main themes that emerged from this study. For a list of all signature strengths cited by participants, see Appendix D. Interestingly, all but two of the 24 strengths in total -- ingenuity and prudence -- were identified by participants as signature strengths. However, they fell under the categories of wisdom and knowledge, and temperance respectively, which were identified several times by several participants.

The results of this study can also contribute to the existing knowledge and start to widen the scope of research in the area of individual enhancement in professional fields such as education, social work, and vocational counselling.

Another significant result that came from participants in this study supported commonly reported results from existing studies that emphasize the importance of having a high degree of self-awareness in order to apply strategies to enhance their work in the practice of psychotherapy (Ford, 1995; Jennings et al., 2005; Seligman, 2002). For the present study, the strategies involved applying their signature strengths.

An interesting component of positive psychology research is dedicated to understanding the byproduct that arises when signature strengths are incorporated into a

life domain, that being, increased happiness. Seligman describes three main types of happiness, the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life, of the three he states that everyone is capable of achieving the good life if they make efforts to incorporate their signature strengths into primary life domains such as work, leisure, and family. In this study, all of the participants were required to meet the criteria that they reportedly used at least three of their five signature strengths in the work domain. Of particular interest, five participants' reports of the meaning and spirituality drawn from their work indicated that they also satisfy the dimensions of the meaningful life – the attachment of signature strengths to a larger cause, or a calling. Further, Seligman posits that this type of lifestyle has the potential to have the most powerful and motivating effects of the three. This may serve as valuable fodder for future research.

Unique to the practice of psychotherapy and professions that provide psychological services is the potential to experience vicarious trauma through poorly managed emotional reactions to clients presenting problems (Rudolph et al., 1997; Saleeby, 1996). Participants in the present study reported that they managed these negative responses by using their strengths to gain a healthy sense of perspective in their work that could provide enough emotional distance to continue to provide professional support to clients, and maintaining a balance of positive and negative emotions associated with work.

Finally, existing studies provide evidence to support the psychological benefits of providing individuals with enough flexibility in their work to be able to pursue personal interests within their professional scope of practice (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978; Henderson, 2000; McCrae & Costa, 1997a; Nickerson, 1999). This is also supported in the findings

of the present study where several participants stated that they were able to pursue spiritual interests, and shifting focus from providing psychotherapy to increasing frequency of conducting psychological assessments.

Summary

The present study used a positive psychology approach to examine experienced psychotherapists' personal construals of using their signature strengths to enhance their work. Main findings included enhanced ability to consciously develop and use their signature strengths in the work domain, increase their level of self-awareness for professional purposes, balance positive and negative emotions, and have the flexibility in their work to incorporate personal interests. All of these findings support previous conclusions from existing studies; therefore, this study can help to pave the way for further studies in psychotherapy in hopes of eventually using the findings for pedagogical purposes.

Limitations and Delimitations

As this is a qualitative research study, consisting of only ten participants, there are certain methodological constraints regarding the interpretation of the results. These will be outlined in addition to other limitations that surfaced from the data-collection and analysis stages of the study.

First, this study does not suggest cause and effect relationships between the metacategories. Instead, it presents a preliminary descriptive theory of how a small sample of individuals who practice psychotherapy interpret their usage of signature strengths in their private practices. Also, the study addresses only the subjective dimension of the phenomenon. In a methodological sense, it was not devised to uncover

the causes, or statistical correlations with, signature strengths in the workplace.

Moreover, this study was not intended to factor in individuals' personality traits or other influential factors that orbit the participants' awareness of the experience of applying their signature strengths in the work domain. Additional research using longitudinal methods and assessing religiosity in addition to the aforementioned concepts may also increase generalizability.

Another limitation may relate to the validity of the participants' personal explanations of outcomes of using signature strengths in the work domain, as these are not possible to confirm based upon self-reports and qualitative interviewing styles used in this study. Alternate ways to validate participants' responses are presented in the section to follow.

Second, it is worth noting that eight of the ten participants were male, six Caucasian, and ages ranged from 28 to 58. As a result, there are some limitations regarding the generalizability of the present findings. It is possible that a larger sample that represents a different balance of gender, ethnicity, or age groups; practicing psychotherapy, may provide differing accounts of their experience of using signature strengths in their practice. Of these factors, cultural background may prove to be one of the strongest influences on how individuals interpret their actions, their motivation, and their affective response (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Diener, 2002).

Finally, the range of work responsibilities represented by participants in this study was diverse, from psychological assessments to family therapy. As a result, key issues about how different populations and focuses within the practices may differently influence the experience of using signature strengths in psychotherapy remain relatively

unexplored. For example, the psychotherapist dealing with several clients simultaneously may view the use of their strengths differently than the one who's using them to assess and treating a child who is a victim of abuse. I address these and additional generalizability issues further in the next section.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Upon examination of the current findings, questions are naturally raised regarding their generalizability. Does this model adequately represent the larger psychotherapist populations? Do most psychotherapists interpret and experience using their signature strengths at work in the same way? Do individuals in other helping professions interpret using their signature strengths in a similar way? These were the questions that immediately came to mind. The answers to these questions may lie within studies that use larger samples with more diverse representation of participants, divided into several age ranges, to represent a broader range of experiences from the psychotherapeutic community, and such studies may take the form of quantitative investigations.

Next, the participants reported that their experience of using signature strengths in psychotherapy was conceptualized as a process that is extended throughout their careers and influenced by numerous events, interactions, changing beliefs, rather than pinpointing a single, static event or feeling. As the attention of this study focused on years of experience, age range was not included as a criterion for the sample; nonetheless, it is worth noting that the age range spanned 30 years, it would be interesting to divide participants by generation to examine reported benefits from using signature strengths in the workplace. Further research could follow these lines of inquiry.

Another area of inquiry may address concerns regarding the construct validity of the semi-structured interview questions. Although pilot testing was carried out to address this concern, only three participants were used; due to the small sample size of both the pilot study and the main study, further research using cluster analyses of the results may be in order.

Another topic for future interest may focus on *scaling* of the relationships among the current model's metacategories. The figure presented in the discussion section did not ascribe differing weights or values, as provided by the participants in this study. Likert-scale-type questions may serve as one way to investigate this issue.

The last item that arose from the data that could provide profitable research would be to compare past generations of psychotherapists' experiences of using their signature strengths in their work. Several participants in the present study reported using and drawing from spirituality in their practices. As the world and particularly the city of Toronto become increasingly multicultural, the expanding knowledge and interaction with Eastern meditation, philosophy, and attitudes may influence theoretical underpinnings in modern-day psychotherapeutic practices in the West. An effective way to examine the current *Zeitgeist* may be to use narrative analyses or autobiographical material that provide historical/generational differences in approaches to the practice of psychotherapy.

Conclusions

The introductory chapter presented an explanation of my personal and academic reasons behind conducting an original research study on the experiences of using signature strengths in psychotherapy. It provided me with an opportunity to engage future

colleagues in fascinating discussions about the practices they excelled at and why they enjoyed the profession I have recently entered. The second benefit of this study was the ability to structure it using a positive psychology model, which is to study exemplary individuals within a specific category to learn how they conceptualize and approach an issue, in order to eventually disseminate to others. This is similar to a mentorship, an approach that has stood the test of time due to its effectiveness.

On another personal note, the ten participants interviewed for this study represent a first-hand mentorship model for this researcher. Their reports revealed fairly consistent, in-depth appreciations of the phenomenon and provided valuable insight into the product of many years of training and expertise. The participants also provided fascinating leads for others to conduct further research into areas such as quantitative studies, statistical analyses and validation, and multicultural influences that would fit nicely into the small body of existing literature that was discussed in Chapter 2. Finally, it was reassuring to note that one's signature strengths, however unique to every individual, can find a place in such an important life domain to assist people in creating, authentic, engaging and stimulating activities, as long as they rest upon a basic humanistic underpinning. As a weary Master's student, this experience leaves me with a renewed sense of hope and inspiration that there are numerous readily available ways to bring happiness and positivity into the lives of many. It only seems like common sense to have psychotherapists continue to lead the way.

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Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Describe the strategies you use to incorporate your signature strengths at work.
2. In what ways do you feel that your signature strengths help you to deal with the challenges involved in your line of work?
3. What areas/aspects of your work do you feel have been most positively enhanced by using your signature strengths at work?

Appendix B. Signature Strengths Survey¹

For each statement, circle the number beside the response that most closely matches your current opinion.

Wisdom and Knowledge

1. Curiosity/Interest in the world

a) The statement “I am always curious about the world” is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) “I am easily bored” is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. _____

This is your curiosity score.

2. Love of Learning

a) The statement “I am thrilled when I learn something new” is

Very much like me 5

¹ From *Authentic Happiness*, by M. Seligman, 2002, pp. 140-160.

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I never go out of my way to visit museums or other educational sites" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. _____

This is your love of learning score.

3. Judgment/Critical thinking/Open-mindedness

a) The statement "When the topic calls for it, I can be a highly rational thinker" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I tend to make snap judgments" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your judgment score.

4. Ingenuity/Originality/Practical intelligence/Street smarts

a) "I like to think of new ways to do things" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "Most of my friends are more imaginative than I am" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your ingenuity score.

5. Social intelligence/Personal intelligence/Emotional intelligence

a) "No matter what the social situation, I am able to fit in" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I am not very good at sensing what other people are feeling" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your social intelligence score.

6. Perspective

a) "I am always able to look at things and see the big picture" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "Others rarely come to me for advice" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your perspective score.

Courage

7. Valor and bravery

a) "I have taken frequent stands in the face of strong opposition" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "Pain and disappointment often get the better of me" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your valor score.

8. Perseverance/Industry/Diligence

a) "I always finish what I start" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I get sidetracked when I work" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your perseverance score.

9. Integrity/Genuiness/Honesty

a) "I always keep my promises" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "My friends never tell me I'm down to earth" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your integrity score.

Humanity and Love

10. Kindness and generosity

a) "I have voluntarily helped a neighbour in the last month" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I am rarely excited about the good fortune of others as I am about my own" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your kindness score.

11. Loving and allowing oneself to be loved

a) "There are people in my life who care as much about my feelings and well-being as they do about their own" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4
 Neutral 3
 Unlike me 2
 Very much unlike me 1

b) "I have trouble accepting love from others" is

Very much like me 1
 Like me 2
 Neutral 3
 Unlike me 4
 Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your loving and being loved score.

Justice

12. Citizenship/Duty/Teamwork/Loyalty

a) "I work at my best when I am in a group" is

Very much like me 5
 Like me 4
 Neutral 3
 Unlike me 2
 Very much unlike me 1

b) "I hesitate to sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of groups I am in" is

Very much like me 1
 Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your citizenship score.

13. Fairness and Equity

a) "I treat all people equally regardless of who they might be" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I hesitate to sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of groups I am in" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your fairness score.

14. Leadership

a) "I can always get people to do things together without nagging them" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I am not very good at planning group activities" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your leadership score.

Temperance

15. Self-control

a) "I control my emotions" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I can rarely stay on a diet" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your self-control score.

16. Prudence/Discretion/Caution

a) “I avoid activities that are physically dangerous” is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) “I sometimes make poor choices in friendships and relationships” is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your prudence score.

17. Humility and Modesty

a) “I change the subject when people pay me compliments” is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I often talk about my accomplishments" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your humility score.

Transcendence

18. Appreciation of beauty and excellence

a) "In the last month, I have been thrilled by excellence in music, art, drama, film, sport, science, or mathematics" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I have not created anything of beauty in the last year" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your appreciation of beauty score.

19. Gratitude

a) "I always say thank-you, even for little things" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I rarely stop and count my blessings" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your gratitude score.

20. Hope/Optimism/Future-mindedness

a) "I always look on the bright side" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I rarely have a well-thought out plan for what I want to do" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your optimism score.

21. Spirituality/Sense of purpose/Faith/Religiousness

a) "My life has a strong purpose" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I do not have a calling in life" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your spirituality score.

22. Forgiveness and Mercy

a) "I always let bygones be bygones" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I always try to get even" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your forgiveness score.

23. Playfulness and Humour

a) "I always mix work and play as much as possible" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I rarely say funny things" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your humour score.

24. Zest/Passion/Enthusiasm

a) "I throw myself into everything I do" is

Very much like me 5

Like me 4

Neutral 3

Unlike me 2

Very much unlike me 1

b) "I mope a lot" is

Very much like me 1

Like me 2

Neutral 3

Unlike me 4

Very much unlike me 5

Total your score for these two items and write it here. ____

This is your zest score.

Summary

At this point you will have calculated each of your twenty-four strengths yourself. Write your score for each of the strengths below, then rank them from highest to lowest.

Wisdom and knowledge

1. Curiosity____
2. Love of learning____
3. Judgment____
4. Ingenuity____
5. Social intelligence____
6. Perspective____

Courage

7. Valour____
8. Perseverance____
9. Integrity____

Humanity and love

10. Kindness____
11. Loving____

Justice

12. Citizenship____

13. Fairness___

14. Leadership___

Temperance

15. Self-control___

16. Prudence___

17. Humility___

Transcendence

18. Appreciation of beauty___

19. Gratitude___

20. Hope___

21. Spirituality___

22. Forgiveness___

23. Humour___

24. Zest___

Typically you will have five or fewer scores of 9 or 10, these are your highest strengths, at least as you reported them. Circle them. You will also have several low scores in the 4 (or lower) to 6 range, these are your weaknesses.

Now that you have had some time to digest your survey results, please indicate how many of your signature strengths you feel that you use in your private practice _____/5

Appendix C. Participant Consent Form

Psychotherapists' Views of Signature Strengths in Psychotherapy

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Psychotherapists' Views of Signature Strengths in Psychotherapy that is being conducted by Katherine Atkinson. Katherine Atkinson is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by phone (416) 728-7701. or Dr. Rick Mrazek, Chair, HSRC (403) 329-2425.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master's of Education: Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Noella Piquette-Tomei. You may contact my supervisor at (403) 394-3954.

The purpose of this research project is to explore the views of experienced psychotherapists who report to use their signature strengths in their private practices. Signature strengths are determined by calculating the five strongest personal strengths for each individual using a self-report measure. One's signature strengths are drawn from a bank of 24 strengths that are universally recognized across cultures. The insight that can be drawn from this research is highly valuable because psychotherapists are in the professional position to be exposed to countless clients, colleagues, and students over the course of their careers; depending on the quality of their work and the attitudes and beliefs that they hold towards their professional conduct they can have a profound positive or a negative effect on many individuals they interact with. Thus, due to the wide exposure and influence involved in this profession, this study can contribute to the small body of existing literature by gaining an indepth understanding of the benefits of using signature strengths in the practice of psychotherapy as perceived by psychotherapists who use them firsthand.

Research of this type is important because research in the area of Signature strengths is still limited, yet existing studies show support for lasting benefits of using one's signature strengths in life domains such as work. Exploring the views of experienced psychotherapists who use at least 3 of their signature strengths in psychotherapeutic practice can provide valuable insights from those who use them firsthand. These insights will contribute to expanding and deepening the understanding of this topic in order to help psychotherapists enhance their skills by using their natural strengths and as a byproduct, enhance their enjoyment of their work.

You are being asked to participate in this study because the purpose of this study is to learn more about the views of experienced psychotherapists who use their signature strengths in their professional practice. Specifically, it will help to advance the understanding of psychotherapists' perceptions of how their signature strengths enhance their practices.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include filling out a survey that assesses your character strengths and ultimately suggests what your top five strengths are--these being your signature strengths. This will take approximately 15 minutes to fill out and self score. Following the completion of the survey you will return the survey to the researcher via mail/fax and if you meet the criteria to continue, you will be contacted in one week's time to participate in a 30-60 minute interview.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, the largest inconvenience may be time constraints since participants are required to fill out a survey as well as participate in an interview.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include becoming more aware of your signature strengths and as a result, start to incorporate them more often in your work practices.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study you may request that your data will not be included in the analyses.

In terms of protecting your anonymity your name will not be attached to your survey or transcribed interview; instead, you will be assigned a number as an identifier that only Katherine Atkinson, the primary researcher can use to trace back to your name.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by keeping it in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home that only the researcher has access to.

Other planned uses of this data include preparation for academic oral and poster presentations, and will be submitted for publication in academic journals for educational purposes.

Data from this study will be disposed of after five years. After that time, the files will be shredded.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways via participation in oral and poster presentations at academic conferences and also through submission for publication in academic journals.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting Dr. Rick Mrazek, Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant *Signature* *Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix D. Results Summary Table

Signature strengths	Number endorsed
Wisdom and knowledge	
1. Curiosity	1
2. Love of learning	8
3. Judgment	2
4. Ingenuity	0
5. Social intelligence	4
6. Perspective	5
Courage	
7. Valour	1
8. Perseverance	2
9. Integrity	3
Humanity and love	
10. Kindness	1
11. Loving	2
Justice	
12. Citizenship	1
13. Fairness	1
14. Leadership	1
Temperance	
15. Self-control	1
16. Prudence	0

17. Humility	2
Transcendence	
18. Appreciation of beauty	3
19. Gratitude	2
20. Hope	4
21. Spirituality	5
22. Forgiveness	1
23. Humour	8
24. Zest	5
