

Agency in Vulnerable Families: A Critical Response to Goh

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The article titled “Vulnerable Families as Active Agents of Their Own Change Process: A Bidirectional Perspective” (April 2015, pp. 145–154), by Esther C. L. Goh, posits that clients from vulnerable families are often overlooked as active change agents. The article’s aim was: “to introduce . . . constructs to capture the processes whereby clients from vulnerable families participate in the change process as active agents together with input from the social workers” (Goh, 2015, p. 145). Goh, (2015) also asserted that “the strengths perspective, being an ontological standpoint, largely remains on an abstract level and does not provide sufficient conceptual tools to aid social workers in identifying strengths so as to engage the clients from vulnerable families” (p. 146). The article promises to “augment” the abstract strengths-based approach and close the gap between this “ontological standpoint” and the practical tools of social work (Goh, 2015). The article uses qualitative data from a case management program in Singapore to achieve its goals.

The article falls short of its goals. First, it is highly questionable that the strengths-based approach is no more than an ontological standpoint. Also, it is unclear what ontology has to do with the article’s thesis. Second, the concrete tools offered to help social workers identify strengths are mostly case examples of problematic boundaries between social worker and client. Finally, the article’s solution to operationalize the strengths-based approach, and therefore increase client agency, is to have a positive social worker–client relationship. This solution is obvious and part of the long-standing, established foundation of social work theory and practice. It is not an innovative idea based on new qualitative data gathered by the author.

STRENGTHS-BASED IS PURELY ONTOLOGICAL?

Ontology (n.d.) is defined as “the branch of metaphysics that studies the nature and existence of being.” Ontology’s secondary definition is simply “meta-

physics” (*Ontology*, n.d.). According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, metaphysics is concerned with phenomena outside the physical realm, such as questions of God or a prime mover (van Inwagen & Sullivan, 2015). This encyclopedia explains that *ontology*, or the study of being, is concerned with questions about whether physical and metaphysical phenomena really exist (Hofweber, 2014). For example, ontology could involve questioning whether the universal concepts of “good” or “yellow” really exist (Hofweber, 2014). An ontological standpoint might be: “I posit that ‘good’ really exists” (see Hofweber, 2014). It is hard to understand how the strengths-based approach is merely an ontological standpoint. Is Goh’s article questioning the existence of the strengths-based approach? Is her article trying to say that the approach does not exist in any meaningful way?

Strengths-based practice first developed at the University of Kansas as a case management approach for working with adults with severe and persistent mental illness (Rapp, 1993; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). The University of Kansas scholars certainly posit that their strengths-based approach is existent (as opposed to nonexistent), and you will not find many social workers who question the meaningful existence of the strengths-based model. In fact, strengths-based practice is a highly specific, practical approach that includes concrete tools. These tools include listing client strengths in written assessments, allowing clients to decide their own case plan goals, and writing goals and objectives that state how the social worker and client will increase clients’ current strengths (Rapp, 1993; Weick et al., 1989). Strengths-based work includes highly specific and easily operationalized concepts, including the belief that all clients have the capacity for growth, and that the community is a vital resource to build up client strengths (Rapp, 1993; Weick et al., 1989).

The article’s assertion that the strengths perspective is purely an abstract ontology that provides

social workers few concrete tools to help vulnerable families is disingenuous to the scholars and practitioners of strengths-based practice and a misuse of the term “ontology” (see Goh, 2015).

WHAT ARE THE CONCRETE TOOLS?

The article offers case examples from the program in Singapore to explain the concrete tools available to social workers, to augment the strengths-based approach. The first example is a client who considered the social worker “like [a] family member,” and described the relationship as “intimate” (Goh, 2015). Professional boundaries and understanding of roles are problematic if the client views the social worker as a member of the family. In this case, the social worker has not been effective in establishing the social worker’s professional role. Even the author acknowledges, “These descriptors seemed to cross traditional perceptions of professional relationships” (Goh, 2015, p. 148). However, the author chose this example to show how the social worker–client relationship should be used to identify strengths and increase client agency (Goh, 2015).

In another example, the client reported that her social worker would “agree to anything” regarding her children’s needs, “or even their wants.” The client reported, “So whatever I asked for, she agrees with it” (Goh, 2015, pp. 148–149). This too is problematic and pushing the boundaries of typical social work practice, which is grounded in specific goals and interventions to further those goals (see Compton, Galaway, & Cournoyer, 2005).

In this example, the social worker has not been effective in educating the client on the social worker’s role, and the purpose and limits of services. The social worker is not engaging in strengths-based work to increase client agency by giving the client whatever she wants. Giving the client whatever she wants could make the client more dependent on the social worker.

In another example, the article states that sampled clients had been receiving services for two to 10 years, with a mean of 5.14 years. “Hence, sustaining a long-term relationship was key to effective help” (Goh, 2015, p. 150). This too could be problematic. Social work services are meant to be temporary and endure only as long as necessary to meet the stated goals, with a focus on transitioning clients to independence and natural supports (Compton et al., 2005; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2013). “Social workers should terminate services

... when such services ... are no longer required” (NASW, 2015, pp. 14–15). Yet, in this example, the “key to effective help” was keeping clients in services for many years, even a decade or more, until they viewed the social worker as a “member of the family,” which is contrary to the goal of client agency.

In the final example, a client relapsed on drugs and was serving jail time. The client reported feeling bad that her behavior negatively affected her children, and she was also very focused on how her behavior would personally affect her social worker (Goh, 2015). She reported feeling embarrassment and guilt at having caused her social worker “a very big problem” (Goh, 2015). She stated that she had betrayed her social worker. The client reported that she finally made the choice to abstain from drugs because, “How am I going to face her [the social worker]?” (Goh, 2015, p. 151). The passage concludes, “This sense of guilt toward her social worker and toward her children acted as a restraining force to keep her from the temptation of drugs” (Goh, 2015, p. 151).

It is problematic for any client to engage in positive behaviors to please the social worker. It is especially concerning that this client has abstained from drugs to avoid feeling guilt and shame when she has to “face” her social worker. No clients should ever feel they have betrayed their social worker by relapsing. If this client is staying abstinent to avoid guilt when facing her social worker, then her primary motivation for staying abstinent ends when the social work relationship ends. Although the client does report that her children are a motivation as well, she discusses the social worker as though the social worker is of equal importance. This client could be harmed by termination of services or transition to a new social worker.

These are the examples the article provides to give social workers specific, concrete tools for strengths-based work, and therefore recognize clients as active change agents. The application of this qualitative data to the article’s goal weakens the thesis of the article.

A GOOD RELATIONSHIP IS THE ANSWER?

Goh’s (2015) article has two thesis questions. (1) How can we recognize vulnerable families as active change agents? and (2) What concrete tools can we give social workers to implement strengths-based practice, since strengths-based practice is purely ontological? The article promises to give original qualitative data from a case management program in

Singapore to bridge the gap between strengths-based ontology and social work practice, and capture the processes by which vulnerable families are active change agents.

The article concludes that a positive social worker–client relationship is the answer to both thesis questions. The author cites a 2003 study by Krumer–Nevo that found social worker–client relationships can sometimes be negative. The article then states, “The bidirectionality between the social worker and the client [their relationship], demonstrated by the evidence of this article, does not have to be negative. Instead, it can be a source of strength, where positive energy begets more positive responses” (Goh, 2015, p. 153). In summary, the original qualitative data from this research study found that social worker–client relationships do not have to be negative; they can be positive. Furthermore, being positive increases client agency.

This finding is an important truth for the practice of social work but falls short of delivering new insights. It is a basic tenet of social work theory and practice that social workers should develop positive relationships with their clients (see Compton et al., 2005; NASW, 2013). Countless primary texts state this explicitly, including the *NASW Standards for Social Work Case Management* (NASW, 2013). In addition, NASW has six core values, and two of them—the importance of human relationships and dignity and worth of the person—directly imply that a positive social worker–client relationship is expected (NASW, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The article’s first thesis question—How can we recognize vulnerable families as active change agents?—is a worthwhile question to pursue. The case management program in Singapore is a good setting to explore this question. The article encounters problems when it states that the strengths-based perspective is purely ontological and then uses poor case examples to remedy this perceived problem. This article could be improved by staying focused on its primary thesis and pursuing deeper insights to help social workers increase agency in vulnerable families. **SW**

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