CHAPTER 2

Making the Most of Human Strengths

Kelly Bowers

Take a moment and answer these questions: What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? If you were to sit down and create a list of both, which list would be easier for you to do? Which list would be longer, the list of your strengths or the list of your weaknesses? It seems to me that as a society, we focus almost exclusively on weaknesses and deficits. Within my field of psychology, in particular, our theories historically have been rooted in weakness, with a preoccupation with repairing the worst things in life (Seligman, 2002). The literature is inundated with language associated with weakness. We say someone is depressed or anxious or worse, psychotic. We talk about how someone lacks social support or has poor social skills or loose boundaries. We are for all practical purposes a science and practice focused on weakness. Many psychologists, me included, argue that by only focusing on weaknesses, psychologists have perpetuated a helping process that is out of balance (Lopez & Snyder, 2003). The positive psychology initiative, which began a few years ago, serves as a shift within psychology from a sole focus on weaknesses to a more comprehensive perspective, including positive characteristics of individuals and environments (e.g., home, school, companies). Simply stated, positive psychology seeks to help the whole person, examining and promoting strengths and managing deficits, maintaining that human strengths are as real as human weaknesses.

Think back to when you were very young and things didn’t seem as serious or overwhelming. Didn’t you gravitate toward things you were good at? For some, it was athletics or being competitive and working on a team; for others, it was art or seeing things abstractly and finding beauty in things. What were you good at, what did you enjoy doing? Growing up, I
found that my parents encouraged me to participate in activities in which I excelled: being empathic, meeting new people, organizing others, and making lists. Although I was certainly aware that I had areas of weakness, these weaknesses were not emphasized to the degree that my strengths were. As an adult, I have often reflected on these experiences. I have wondered how people learn what they are good at and what they do with that information. In my profession, I have witnessed many instances in which an individual’s understanding of what he or she is good at has created positive change in that individual’s life. It is not surprising, then, that the idea of individual strengths and their application has become my life’s passion. Fortunately, the study of individual strengths is now a growing interest area within the field of positive psychology as well as within business and leadership development. This chapter focuses on the definition of a strength, the benefits of using strengths, and some ways in which individuals might capitalize on their personal strengths.

STRENGTHS: WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW TO FIND THEM

When determining the definition of strengths, Donald Clifton, one of the foremost scholars in this area, conducted research based on one simple question: What would happen if we studied what is right with people? (Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005). Clifton believed that talents could be operationalized or defined and investigated. In an attempt to better understand this concept, Gallup conducted a systematic study, interviewing over two million people in a variety of professions about their strengths. These individuals were the “best of the best” in their respective lines of work. The goal of these semistructured interviews was to gain information from excellent performers regarding what they were doing (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). It was through these interviews that the anatomy of a strength became evident.

According to Tom Rath (2007), Clifton’s grandson, a strength is consistent and near-perfect performance on an activity. This definition is comprised of three factors: talents or naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior; knowledge, which consists of facts and lessons learned; and skills, or the steps of an activity. These combine to create your strengths. Additionally, two principles are embedded in this definition of strengths. First, for a cluster of activities to be labeled as a strength, they must be performed consistently; that is, the strength is a predictable part of an individual’s performance. Second, the strength does not need to be present in all aspects of an individual’s life in order for the individual to excel. Embedded in this definition is the assumption that by maximizing on strengths, an individual will excel. In StrengthsFinder 2.0, Rath (2007) provided an equation for strengths: namely, talent (the natural way of thinking, feeling or behaving) multiplied by investment (or the time spent developing skills) equals strength (Figure 2.1).

According to Rath, focusing solely on weaknesses is not as effective as sharpening strengths. So, a question you might ask yourself is this: When you get your report card, which grades are you (or your friends/family)
likely to focus on, those that are considered below average and that may illustrate your weaknesses, or those that are above average and may illustrate your strengths? Often our society focuses on weaknesses to the exclusion of strengths. According to strength research, examining or sharpening our strengths may be more beneficial.

A common language is needed to describe talents; there is already a rich and varied language for human weakness. Terms such as psychosis, depression, and schizophrenia hold meaningful differences among both professionals and nonexperts. Language of human strength, however, is sparse. Instead of specific and meaningful terms, generalizations that fail to convey universal significance are utilized. For example, “people skills” may mean different things to different people and hold varying connotations depending on the person possessing that strength. The development of a common language would aide in the understanding of strengths.

With the understanding of strengths comes a set of personal benefits. These benefits may take a variety of forms but typically are linked to well-being. For example, research indicates that high levels of hope (a universal strength) are related to better performances in academics and athletics as well as to superior therapy and physical health outcomes. Additionally, the universal strength of social connectedness has been linked to lower mortality rates, increased resistance to communicable diseases, and faster recovery from surgery (Snyder & Lopez, 2002).

IDENTIFICATION OF STRENGTHS

With the knowledge that strengths are a part of understanding the best in people, psychologists have begun attempts at generating systems to identify strengths. One such identification system, the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2004; Rath, 2007), was developed by Gallup. The purpose of the Internet-based Clifton StrengthsFinder is to assist individuals in identifying their personal talents as a means to increase personal and career successes through utilization of strengths. The Clifton
StrengthsFinder attempts to simulate real-world, spontaneous reactions to situations by providing the respondent with pairs of statements that they must respond to by choosing one statement over the other within a 20-second time limit (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The Clifton StrengthsFinder then sorts the statements and reflects the most dominant patterns of behaviors or talents. Upon completion of the measure, the participant receives a printout of five “signature strengths” with a paragraph describing each strength (see author’s strengths, Appendix A). There are a total of 34 themes of the Clifton StrengthsFinder (see Appendix A in Chapter 1 of this volume). The Clifton StrengthsFinder has proven to be both consistent and accurate as a measure of strengths (Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005).

STRENGTHS PROGRAMMING

With an identification system in place, the next step in investing strengths was to create and implement strengths-based programming. Organized efforts in both creating and executing strengths-based programming are less than 10 years old, and the programs vary greatly. Some of the commonalities include the use of The Clifton StrengthsFinder (described previously) as a measure of strengths and of the StrengthsQuest book (Clifton et al., 2007) as a program guide for students. Most programs utilize trained facilitators (university staff, faculty, upper level students) to conduct strengths-enhancing exercises. And many programs attempt to track the potential effects of participation in a strengths-based program on academic achievement and retention. Last, the relationship between facilitators and students appears to be of vital importance (Lopez, Janowski, & Wells, 2004).

Many schools, colleges, and universities are currently in the process of developing or implementing some type of strengths program. For example, at Kansas University (KU), some freshmen students enrolled in an orientation seminar participate in the Kansas University Alliance for Identifying and Mentoring Strengths (KU AIMS) program in which students take the Clifton StrengthsFinder online, are provided with their signature strengths and a paragraph describing their signature strengths, and then attend three standardized strengths-mentoring sessions with trained psychology graduate students who have previously taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Lopez, Tree, Janowski, & Burns, 2004). In these sessions, the students learn about their individual strengths and how to best utilize these strengths in their everyday lives. Students are given a copy of the StrengthsQuest book and complete a variety of homework assignments ranging from emailing friends and family with their strengths to elicit feedback to actively using one strength during the week. In addition, students are asked to write reaction papers on their personal strengths as part of their orientation seminar, which helps to synthesize their strengths-related knowledge.

Similarly, at Baylor University, a large Baptist university, students participate in a strengths-based development program titled Chapel Friday StrengthsQuest Presentation. Freshmen who attend the summer orientation (as well as some parents) take the Clifton StrengthsFinder measure, receive their signature strengths and a paragraph describing their top
strengths, and participate in the fall six-week Chapel Friday curriculum. These Friday sessions, which comprise small groups of students, are led by faculty and staff who have been trained on the StrengthsQuest program. The goal of this program is to help students identify their personal calling or mission associated with their personal strengths. Specifically, one part of the six-week program is a strengths session in which each of the strengths is discussed in detail (E. Hulme, personal communication, November 19, 2004).

One of the most prominent strengths-development programs takes place at Greenville College. Donald Clifton and Gallup partnered with Greenville College to make this school the first college or university to incorporate the Clifton StrengthsFinder in an ongoing study of student and faculty development. The Clifton StrengthsFinder was first administered to freshmen entering Greenville for the 2000–2001 academic year. When students finish the online test, they are given a printout of their top five strengths along with a narrative describing each strength. Each instructor is then asked to devote at least three class sessions to the Clifton StrengthsFinder results. Often class work and assignments focus on the students’ application of their strengths. Later in their academic careers (typically their senior year), students participate in an interdisciplinary capstone course, which involves students working in small groups that must reflect a variety of academic majors and a constructive mix of students’ strengths. This allows the students not only to be able to use their own strengths, but also to learn about other student’s strengths and how to work with those strengths. All faculty and staff utilize the strengths perspective across campus, including extracurricular activities and health services.

THE BENEFITS OF KNOWING YOUR STRENGTHS

The question I am asked most when talking with people about strengths is “Why do I need to know my strengths?” This is a legitimate question. Why use your strengths if they are of no benefit to you? In terms of quantitative research results on the benefits of strengths, most studies are based on students’ self-reports or paper and pencil methods in which students are asked to reflect on their experience with the strengths programming. According to Anderson (2004), patterns of responses to open-ended questions and scaling questions concerning the benefits and influences of strengths-based programming include the following: increased awareness of talents (knowing/understanding talents, communicating about strengths/talents, explaining successes); increased personal confidence (more confident in personal abilities, recognizing how to be a leader based on talents and strengths); increased academic confidence (utilizing strengths in academics, optimistic about academics/careers); increased motivation to achieve (identifying personal motivating factors, willingness to work for goals); increased confidence about the future (clear future goals, realistic ability scaling); increased use of talents (applying talents in academics and in personal life, coping with difficulties based on talents); development of strengths (understand the theory of strengths development, feel responsible to maximize personal talents); improved interpersonal understandings and relationships (noticing talents and strengths in others, communicating with others
better); and other impacts of strengths awareness (valuing self, becoming more authentic).

A recent study conducted by Williamson (2002) with college freshmen enrolled at a private, faith-based university found similar results to those found by Anderson (2004). Students who participated in a strengths-based development group (who received information on their strengths) were compared with those who did not receive the strengths information. Those students in the experimental strengths-based development group took the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and participated in two one-hour advising sessions with trained strengths coaches. These students, at the end of the first semester, had higher grade-point averages overall than did those students in the control group and met the minimum standards set for first-semester students more often than did those students in the control group.

Linda Cantwell (2006) from Tabor University measured the differences between strengths-based teaching and traditionally taught sections of public speaking. Students in the experimental group were more academically engaged and exhibited higher levels of learning course content and higher levels of performance. In addition, the strengths-based approach generated a series of behavior patterns that are exemplary of what most educators hope to see in their students (i.e., good attendance, punctuality). The main differences in the teaching methods included the following: (a) Feedback for the control group focused on areas in which the students performed least well and areas in which they needed to do the most work in order to improve; (b) In the strengths-based experimental section, students were given an inventory to identify their strengths and talents and were shown how they could apply their strengths to learn about and improve their performance; and (c) Feedback for the strengths-based experimental group focused on what the students did best, what strengths they had that caused their performance to be high in those areas, and how they could intentionally apply their strengths to increase performance (Cantwell, 2006).

In addition to quantitative research, qualitative narrative data from students support these benefits of strengths programming. According to Eileen Hume (personal communication, November 19, 2004), a strengths program leader now at Azusa Pacific University, students report positive outcomes as a result of participating in strengths programming. One student, after completion of the strengths program, stated: “This useful information undoubtedly has given many students on campuses a better understanding of their place in life and perhaps some prospective areas to which they may shape their academic studies.” Indeed, my experience with college students was similar. Several students approached me after talking with me about their strengths. One student said, “These strengths are just so me. I can really use them everyday because they are just a part of who I am. I can be successful with them.”

**CAPITALIZING ON STRENGTHS**

It is evident from the literature that individuals who are able to identify their strengths benefit from this knowledge in a variety of ways. However,
this tells us little about the process of utilizing them. How do individuals apply their strengths after they have identified them?

To explore this, I spent some time in conversations with strengths programming directors discussing what they see in their students. The directors work with students on a daily basis and therefore get an opportunity to really examine what goes on after students identify their strengths. Invariably, these directors identify students who, after identifying their strengths, become excited about this knowledge and build on their strengths daily and in a meaningful way. Taking fictitious people and places, for example, let’s assume that John Doe, a freshman at Strengths University, participated in a strengths-development program designed for all incoming freshmen. John, like the other students, took the Clifton StrengthsFinder online and received a printout identifying his signature strengths. He then spent a few weeks in class discussing these strengths with trained instructors and completed both class assignments and homework assignments designed to help him think about his strengths. According to the instructors, John was very enthusiastic about this new information and creatively applied it to his everyday life, utilizing his strengths in several arenas: academics, social endeavors, and extracurricular activities. John was living his strengths each day. The question then arises is this: What made John go from the identification of his strengths to the utilization of his strengths in his daily life? It is from this Point A, the identification of strengths, to Point B, the enthusiastic application of strengths, that captures the notion of capitalizing.

Capitalizing is defined as turning something to one’s advantage (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2003). By capitalizing on strengths, individuals turn personal strengths into personal advantages. For example, once a student identifies his or her strengths, the student then incorporates these strengths into daily life, which leads to personal advantages (i.e., academic success, interpersonal confidence, career interests). What might help to explain the capitalizing process? Chickering’s (1969) theory of college development and a few positive psychology theories help shed light on this phenomenon. First, related to college student development, Chickering’s seven vectors of college student development illuminate the unique developmental tasks of the college student. According to this theory, college students continually rotate among the following tasks: developing competency (confidence one has in one’s ability to cope with what comes and to achieve successfully what one sets out to do); managing emotions (manage the key emotions of aggression and sex and broaden their range of emotions); moving through autonomy to interdependence (disengage from parents and simultaneously recognize the importance of others); developing mature interpersonal relationships (increased tolerance and respect for those of different backgrounds, habits, values, and appearance, and a shift in the quality of relationships with intimates and close friends); establishing identity (the swing vector—first vectors needed to help identity develop—identity development leads to the next vectors of change); developing purpose (the individual develops answers not only to the question, Who am I?, but also to the question, Who am I going to be? Not just, Where am I?, but also, Where am I going?); and developing integrity (the clarification of a
personally valid set of beliefs that have some internal consistency and that provide at least a tentative guide for behavior). Chickering’s theory asserts that students address these developmental tasks as they move through their college years, and the social function of universities helps to provide students with a sense of direction. Ideally, the students can strive to integrate their vocational needs and personal aspirations with higher order social needs. The individual will conceive him/herself in the broader picture of things. Again, these developmental stages provide a greater degree of understanding for the population of college students in terms of their developmental process, but they do not explain the capitalizing phenomenon.

In terms of positive psychological theories, hope theory, developed by Rick Snyder (1994), is a model that might help to explain capitalizing. Hope theory begins with the assumption that human actions are goal directed (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002). Goals may be short term or long term. In order to reach goals, individuals must generate routes to those goals. This process is labeled pathways thinking; it is the perceived ability to generate workable routes to desired goals. For example, for an individual with the goal of getting an “A” in algebra, one pathway might be to study each night for one-half hour. Another pathway might be to get the help of a tutor. The motivational component in hope theory is agency, or the perceived capacity to use pathways to reach desired goals. The agency then is the belief that “I can do this” and “I am not going to be stopped” (Snyder, Lapointe, Crowson, & Early, 1998). This theory states that positive emotions should flow from successful goal pursuits (Snyder et al., 2002). With the premise that all individuals are goal directed, the identification of strengths may assist with goal achievement through greater pathway and agency generation, allowing an individual to capitalize on strengths in an effective manner.

Similarly, self-efficacy may assist in understanding the phenomenon of capitalizing. Self-efficacy centers on people’s beliefs in their abilities to produce desired effects (Bandura, 1977) or, simply stated, an individual’s belief that he or she can accomplish something and be successful. The beliefs are important in the amount of effort that people choose to exert toward an activity (Maddux, 2002). These expectancy beliefs, as they are labeled, develop over the life span through our performance experiences, vicarious experiences (seeing others do things), imaginal experiences (pretend play), verbal persuasions (what do we tell ourselves; what do others tell us), and physiological and emotional states. Maddux (2002) has reported that individuals with high self-expectancy beliefs are able to perform and manage difficult situations calmly. This theory maintains that when one is equipped with a strong belief in his or her capacity for achievement, there are few limits to what can be accomplished. Therefore, self-efficacy may play a role in the application of strengths, such that students with high self-efficacy may be more confident in their ability to utilize their strengths.

A third psychological theory that may help explain capitalizing is Barb Frederickson’s (2002) “broaden and build” model of positive emotions. Simply stated, this theory holds that positive emotions appear to expand people’s ability to think of options and build their personal resources. The
first claim of this theory is that positive emotions widen the variety of thoughts and actions that come to mind. For example, positive emotions such as joy and contentment produce more thoughts and actions than negative emotions such as fear and anger (Frederickson & Branigan, 2005). The second central claim of the broaden and build theory is that this widening of options builds people’s enduring personal resources. Using this framework, the possible positive emotions gained by individuals through the identification of strengths may enable these individuals to widen their utilization of strengths (i.e., using them across a broad spectrum of areas).

Interviews with College Students

Although theories help people think about the process of capitalizing, they do not fully explain how an individual goes from identifying his or her strengths to applying these strengths enthusiastically in daily life. There appear to be certain key pieces to the capitalizing framework. Recent research (see Janowski-Bowers, 2006) investigated the missing pieces of the capitalizing phenomenon through interviews of college students who had participated in strengths-development programs in college and who had been nominated by strengths programming directors to meet certain criteria (i.e., could name and describe their strengths, actively used their strengths in one or more area of their life). These students were the “best of the best” in terms of strengths utilization, and it was the hope that through the research, a process of capitalizing might occur.

The interviews, which were tape recorded and then transcribed, included questions related to basic background/demographics, strengths-development programming, signature strengths, application of strengths, capitalizing, and perceived benefits of capitalizing. Several interesting themes arose from the coding of the eight interviews of college students (Table 2.1).

Three overarching constructs appear necessary for the capitalizing process to occur: (a) continual social support, (b) experiences of success, and (c) the reinforcement of personal strengths. For the capitalizing process to occur, students need to feel continual support, to have some successful experiences (in school specifically), and to feel as if their strengths really do work for them. These three constructs are interrelated and overlapping. They do not occur in a linear fashion, one after the other (Figure 2.2).

This figure illustrates the equal value held by each of the theoretical constructs, social support, successes, and the reinforcement of individual strengths. It is through the ongoing and cyclical relationship of these constructs that capitalizing may be achieved.

Under each of these constructs are themes that were repeated by many of the participants with specific statements that the participants used in their interviews. For example, under the construct of social support, one of the repeating themes was “I have many supports in my life,” meaning that the students (all 100% according to Table 2.1) identified this as being important in their ability to capitalize on their strengths. The specific statements that the participants used to describe this traditional upbringing
Table 2.1
Theoretical Constructs, Sensitizing Concepts, and Text-Based Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Background of consistent support</th>
<th>87.5%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Praising their traditional upbringing</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. My parents are still happily married</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. My community was a stable environment for me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My mom is supermom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. I have many supports in my life</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. My parents are always there for me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My friends support my life decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Spirituality is important to me</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Spirituality is the strongest source of support for me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My church/spirituality helps define who I am</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>II. I have experienced success in life</strong></td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. I have success in academic settings</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I am active in school activities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I am a student leader</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. School is fun; I like school</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I have always met/exceeded my academic goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. I have experienced success in life</strong></td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Strengths as integral to personal identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I thought “Oh yea, that sounds like me”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Other people said “That is so you”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I live my strengths because that is who I am</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Strengths are useful to me</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Strengths help me understand others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I understand myself through my strengths</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It is helpful to know what you are good at, as opposed to what you are not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I feel more confident using my strengths</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages indicate the portion of participants who made similar statements and or used similar phrases as those in the table.

included “My parents are always there for me” and “My friends support my life decisions” (Table 2.1). During the interview, one student stated, “I feel very fortunate that I have the parents that I do—they are very supportive and have always been there with me to help me accomplish all the goals that I have accomplished thus far....”

Regarding the second overarching construct, students’ experiences of success, that was identified based on the interviews, the repeating theme was “I have success in academic settings.” The specific statements that the participants used to describe this included “I am active in school activities,” “I am a student leader,” “School is fun; I like school,” and “I have always met/exceeded my academic goals.” So again, students are reporting that for them to engage in utilizing their strengths (capitalizing), they identify that having success in their school life is important. This may be through sports, leadership, academics, etc. One student in the interview stated, “A
part of it just stems from I’m one of those people that I like a variety of activity and so, you know, I played every sport that I could, I joined every club that I could, I mean, I did everything from like president of student council to a class officer, I was, you know, I was in four different sports. I did National Honor Society.…” Another student talked about how much she enjoyed school: “I love school, I enjoy going to school every day, I enjoy learning about something I love.…"

The third construct that seems vital for the capitalizing process to occur is for students to feel reinforced by their strengths. This simply means that students feel strong when they use their strengths, and knowledge of strengths helps them make sense of the world. For example, one of the repeating themes was “Strengths are useful to me.” The specific statements that the participants used to describe this included “Strengths help me understand others,” “I understand myself through my strengths,” “It is helpful to know what you are good at, as opposed to what you are not,” and “I feel more confident using my strengths.” The students identified that they capitalized on their strengths because they were beneficial to them. In a particularly interesting interview, one student reported, “I think that there are certain things that for some different reason there’s things that I’m just not good at, so instead of me spending all my time trying to work on that and improve that, it’s much more effective and much more beneficial for me to go and use what I’m good at to excel in that area instead of trying to bring everything up to par, taking those things that are already above par and excelling at those are in the long run much more beneficial, and so I have seen that by using that, that will help me, and I believe that that will help me to excel in those areas throughout the rest of my life.…” Another student noted that knowing about strengths helped him to understand other people in his life and how to interact with them: “Knowing other peoples’ strengths really helps me in being able to know how I am
going to react around people, or knowing why other people might act the way they do.” What these quotes tell us is that students capitalize on their strengths when they feel as if their strengths (or understanding strengths in general) help them. When the students feel reinforced by their strengths, they are more likely to use them again in the future.

This research provides a solid framework from which to define the process of capitalizing. Capitalizing on strengths can be defined by continual social support, experiences of successes, and the reinforcement of strengths. It is my opinion that these constructs of social support, successes, and reinforcement of strengths are necessary but not sufficient for capitalizing to occur. If one or more of these constructs were missing, the processing of capitalizing might look quite different. For example, let’s suppose a student lacks social supports in his or her life. Without the support of parents, friends, mentors, and/or churches, students may lack a certain amount of positive affect. Pulling from Frederickson’s (2002) broaden and build theory, the lack of positive affect may discourage the student from being open to new ideas, activities, and additional resources. Moreover, I believe that a change in the capitalizing process may be seen with the absence of any of the three constructs of social support, successes, and reinforcement of strengths in which the students identified as being vital in living their strengths.

CONCLUSIONS

The research on strengths has moved from its infancy stage, the definition of a strength (consistent and near-perfect performance on an activity) to the identification of strengths with the Clifton StrengthsFinder, to the development of a variety of strengths-based programming. Now we are learning more about the process by which individuals actively apply their strengths called capitalizing. Although having covered significant ground, strengths research in general is still a new area within positive psychology and therefore has many avenues open for research. Future research endeavors may seek to conduct more interview studies to consider the current theory of social support, experiences of success and reinforcement of strengths, or to identify additional important factors of capitalizing. Moreover, from a college student development perspective, as well as from a programmatic perspective, it may be important for strengths programming leaders to examine if these factors exist in their students’ lives and to lend resources to help students capitalize on strengths.

Finally, with the expansion of positive psychology theory and practice, there are likely new perspectives that may help to illuminate this process and/or to direct future research. Throughout the research pursuits of strengths over time, one basic paradigm remains constant: Studying what is best and bravest is just as important as understanding what is worst and weakest (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). I believe it is our challenge to investigate what we are good at, what we are passionate about. It seemed to work when we were kids; maybe we can get back to that point.
PERSONAL MINI-EXPERIMENTS

Discovering and Capitalizing on Your Strengths

Use the exercises below to learn more about your strengths and to share them with your friends, family, teachers, and coworkers.

Personal Reflections: Spend some quiet time making a list of your strengths. Write down anything that comes to mind; don’t edit yourself. Jot down activities that you have historically been good at, or enjoyed doing. You might even consider writing a personal strengths story in which you tell about a time in your life or an activity you performed during which you felt like you really used some of your strengths. While you are writing, think about the emotions attached to these strengths and the activities.

Guess your Strengths: Using Appendix A in Chapter 1 of this volume, look over the Clifton StrengthsFinder strengths and put a mark next to those words that seem to stand out to you as being a possible strength. When you complete the exercise below, you can see how accurate you were.

Discovering Your Strengths: In just under an hour, you can identify your signature personal strengths by completing the Clifton StrengthsFinder online. This inventory is discussed in this chapter, and it is a wonderful (and scientific) tool that will help you learn more about yourself. It may be helpful to purchase the StrengthsQuest book or StrengthsFinder 2.0 as a manual to provide additional knowledge on strengths.

Use the Strengths Language: After identifying your strengths via The Clifton StrengthsFinder, use the strengths language to tell others about your strengths and to talk with them about their strengths as well. Many people find it useful to share a common language with friends and family.

Making the Most of Your Strengths: There are numerous strategies for capitalizing on your strengths (see https://www.strengthsquest.com). For now, we would like you to capitalize on one strength. Pick one of your strengths and try to use that strength five times a day for five days. Your 25 attempts to capitalize on that strength have the potential to bolster it and create a habit of using that strength more each day.

APPENDIX A

Kelly Bowers’s StrengthsFinder Results
- Positivity
- Maximizer
- Achiever
- Strategic
- WOO

REFERENCES


