

Does the new realm of positive psychology and strength-based strategies complement or clash with the remedial discipline of social control traditionally practiced in juvenile justice programs?

## Juvenile Justice and a Strengths Perspective:

# Complement or Clash?

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How is it that helping professions could have so extensively plumbed the depths of deficits and disorders without paying equivalent attention to health and happiness? Many welcome the balance of positive psychology, the strengths perspective, and coping and resilience studies. Although emerging from different disciplines, these approaches share many common aspects and seem to be unified by a common trait—they all represent a new science of “getting up.”

As a background for this discussion, four preliminary questions are posed:

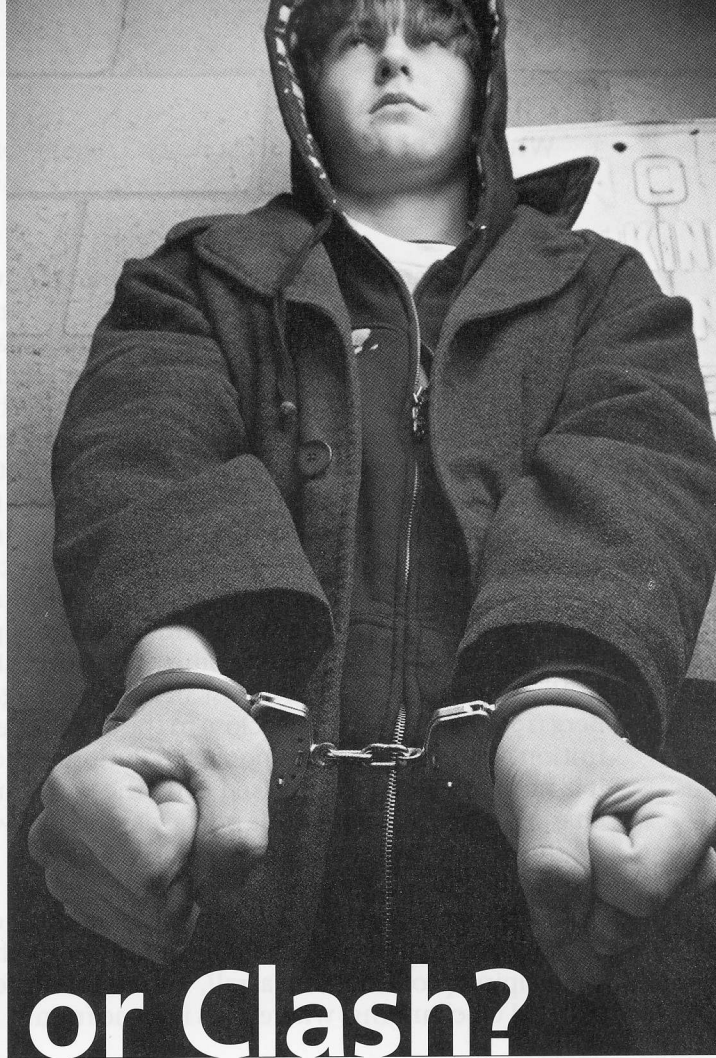
1. Why does juvenile justice focus almost exclusively on problems, failure, and flaws when strengths, resources, and aspirations propel law-abiding behavior?

Problems are important and certainly call for attention. Problems do not include directions on how to get past the trouble. Change comes from a person's place of power and strength.

2. Why is the focus on punishment when research has proven that the exclusive use of punishment—in the absence of treatment—increases a return to law-breaking behavior?

While recent meta-analyses (Gendreau, Goggin, Cullen, & Paparozzi, 2002; Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996; Gibbs, 1986; Taxman, 1999) are very clear that pure punishment makes things worse, the field of juvenile justice has found it difficult to transition away from harsh and heavy-handed tactics (Clark, 1998; Walters, Clark, Gingerich, & Meltzer, 2007). The bias toward punishment has been not only tolerated, but in some instances applauded:

*There is no reason to believe that offenders respond to fundamentally different principles of learning, thinking, and motivation than the rest of humankind. Confrontational approaches...become a self-fulfilling prophecy, engendering evasiveness and resentment while doing nothing to decrease the likelihood of repeat offenses. (Viets, Walker, & Miller, 2002, p. 27)*



3. Why do adults construct solutions solely from their point of view, when they are not the ones being asked to change?

Effectiveness rates for working with offenders have not improved since the 1960s (Clark, 2007). During this five-decade span, all interventions have had one frame of reference—namely, the professional’s point of view. Telling youth “why and how,”—why they should change and how to go about these alterations—has not brought the intended results. Typically staff with little or no formal training to help them understand human motivation continue to predominantly advise, castigate, and coerce. Burnett (2004) points out that it has now been almost 40 years since Matza’s influential call to adopt a method of “appreciation” to comprehend the subject’s view of the world. Almost fifteen years ago, Berg (1994) suggested, “Stay close to the client’s definition of the problem and possible solutions, since it is he or she who will be asked to do the necessary changing” (p. 36). Could this be the decade that we finally turn to this sensibility?

4. Youth only spend a tiny fraction (one-third of one percent or .3%) of their lifetime with the helping professional (Farrall, 2002). So, if they end up changing, where does it come from?

The bulk of change comes not from the actions of adults but from what the youth do. Most change is self-change. When will we begin an earnest investigation into the other 99.7% of a youth’s life to find what intrinsic reasons for change may exist—and what resources might power those changes?

### ***A Phrase Forever Linked: “Crime and Punishment”***

Crime. Punishment. To become aware of how culturally linked the two issues have become—and to understand how truly ineffective they are in tandem—is to begin to appreciate the central benefit for the application of the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1992) to this field (Clark, 1997, 2001). Hollin (2002) notes that the key points to focus on concerning punishment are the outcomes to be achieved.

If the goal is retribution—to answer law-breaking behavior with painful responses—then the punitive measures achieve that outcome. If the goal is incapacitation for public safety—lock someone up behind bars and thereby prevent them from committing any more crimes—then inflicting a loss of freedom will achieve that outcome as well.

However, if the field seeks to change behavior—to override anti-social behavior with prosocial behavior—then this outcome is highly unlikely.

Using punishment to change behavior is the foundation of deterrence theory. General deterrence is the notion that punishing delinquents will deter other members of society from committing crimes. Specific deterrence is designed to motivate long-term behavior change at the individual level. But new meta-analysis notes that punishment, in the absence of any treatment, increases illegal behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 2003; Walters et al., 2007). Thus at either level (societal or individual), “punishment demonstrably fails to motivate offenders to change” (Hollin, 2002, p. 246).



### ***The Two C’s of Probation History— Control and Compliance***

At its most elemental level, the field of juvenile justice is charged with public safety and preserving order. Is it strength-based to handcuff youth and lock up them up in a detention center? Yes, under certain circumstances. When someone is harming others, restraint is necessary to stabilize and bring into control those who are out of control.

Compliance, while part of a continuum of control, cannot rest as a final goal. Compliance is a way station, an incremental stop on the journey to behavior change. The court’s authority can always have juvenile youth parrot back ideal responses, but deference is not change. Conformity is not transformation. The process ideally develops in incremental stages: “I have to change, I need to change, I want to change.” Staff can choose to draw change from the “inside” or remain pressure-driven and superficial (Clark, 2008).

## The Three C's Of Strengths Perspective—Control, Compliance, and Change

Raising motivation levels and increasing a person's readiness to change requires a certain "climate"—

a helpful attitude and a supportive approach. This climate becomes grist for developing a helping relationship, which is imperative for enduring change to occur.

Motivation has usually been thought to be a characteristic of the youth—it is theirs to give ("cooperative," "workable") or theirs to withhold ("resistant," "poor attitude"). Within this model, the authority

becomes an enforcer, but not an active participant in the behavior change. Here is a common description of this traditional control orientation:

*I tell the youth what is expected of him and make it clear what the penalties will be should he fail to comply. We have regular meetings to verify that he is making progress on his conditions and I answer any questions he might have. If he breaks the law or shows poor progress on his conditions, I see to it that appropriate sanctions are assessed. Throughout the process, the youth is well aware of the behavior that might send him to the detention hall, and if he ends up there, it's his own behavior that gets him there.*

Reflected in this statement is an adult who is essentially cut out of the change process, except as an observer. The strengths perspective champions the idea that one does not have to wait for the youth to "get motivated"—motivation is interactive. Quite a lot may be done to raise motivation, even during brief interactions.



## Understanding Motivation

How one understands motivation directly affects what is done or not done to increase it. Understanding motivation involves five important issues:

1. Motivation is changeable. Motivation is not a fixed trait like height or eye color; it can be increased or decreased.
2. Motivation predicts action. Motivation to change is not a guarantee of action, but it does predict the likelihood that a person will change.
3. Motivation is behavior-specific. Classifying an adolescent as "unmotivated" displays a misunderstanding of how motivation works. Youth are always motivated by something—even if this is to get out from under the adult's supervision.
4. Motivation is interactive. Exchanges have the potential to increase or decrease the youth's confidence for change.
5. Motivation involves both internal and external factors, but internally motivated change usually lasts longer. Consider two teenagers who agree to complete a substance abuse evaluation. One agrees to the evaluation to avoid detention, while the other agrees because he is concerned that his drug use is causing family problems. Both may be compliant, but the second is more likely to make changes that lower the probability that he will engage in future delinquent behavior. Research repeatedly finds that internally motivated change is far more enduring over time (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Viets et al., 2002).

The findings regarding motivation suggest at least four conclusions:

1. The way an adult staff interacts with a youth can raise or lower motivation. Staff who practice from a strengths approach are mindful of the adage, "People do not resist change as much as being changed."
2. Often, the things assumed to motivate an adolescent simply do not. Thus, understanding motivation is a process of finding out what things are most important to a particular individual, as well as what plan will work best for attaining them.
3. Not all moments are created equally. There are "teachable" windows where people are more receptive to feedback from their environment and more interested in trying out new behaviors. Looking for these opportunities is a sensible first step.



4. A desire to achieve an outcome (importance), belief that it can be achieved (confidence), and belief that the new behavior is freely chosen (autonomy) seem to be the optimal conditions for change.

### **The Strengths Perspective— Embracing a Helpful Lifestyle**

Staff style can be a major factor in determining whether youthful offenders show resistance or readiness to change. One style can be “tough-as-nails” and coercive while another style can be more encouraging and motivational. One supervisor in a small probation department affirms this in his own experience:

*For the initial appointment, I can predict what kind of attitude the youth will show up with depending on which of the two intake officers this person met with. If I see one name, I know the person will be reluctant to come in and I'll spend a portion of my time trying to undo all of the damage that has been done. If I see the other name, not only do I know the youth will show, I know I will have a hard time living up to the positive image that this person created of a probation officer. It's like night and day—actually, more like heaven and hell!*

### **Accurate and Balanced**

While no responsible professional would knowingly allow inaccurate information to be presented, negatively skewed, unbalanced information is commonplace. Consider this scenario:

*You have run amok with the law, and you have admitted guilt. You are required by the court to meet with an official who will draw up a plan to report to the court as to how to resolve your situation—how you are to be sentenced. You are fortunate enough to be assigned an officer who seems fair and concerned about your case. As you meet in his office, he describes his role and begins to gather information about “who” you are (background information) and “what” you have done (law-breaking behavior). The official seems efficient and attentive. As you discuss your failures and your successes, you feel relieved and hopeful that this just may turn out okay. The interview concludes and your next appointment is your sentencing hearing.*

*When you arrive for your scheduled court appearance, you are handed a copy of the investigation report that has been filed about you, your life, and what the court should “do” with you. As you read the report, you are shocked to find that*

*the only information that has been recorded lists all of your failures and flaws. Very few, if any, of your strengths, past successes, skills, talents, or resources are listed. You are quickly called into the courtroom. Once your hearing is underway, should you find your voice to object to the unbalanced nature of this report, in all probability, the official would respond by claiming the report is accurate. There is a high probability that your objection would be dismissed.*

This supposed scenario is actually repeated on a daily basis in many programs for youth. The greatest problem with accurate yet unbalanced reporting is that only half of this youth has been described. The strengths perspective would caution that the most important half, the half that represents the greatest advantage for building solutions, is left ignored and more importantly, unused. Attorneys are not trained to appreciate a balanced view. Seligman (2002) reports:

*Pessimism is seen as a plus among lawyers, because seeing troubles as pervasive and permanent is a component of what the law profession deems prudence. A prudent perspective enables a good lawyer to see every conceivable snare and catastrophe that might occur in any transaction.*  
(p. 178)

For those familiar with court reports, the bias towards an exclusive focus on the youth's failures and flaws is easy to spot. Professionals who have moved to a strengths approach find a “clash.” In attempting to bring a balanced view of the delinquent youth, they can end up belittled. Those giving equal voice to adolescents' successes as well as their failures are dismissed as having become “too close” to the youth and having “lost their perspective.” The advantage of a balanced report is reframed as a negative, and the balance—so necessary for best decisions—is jettisoned.

### **Rejoinders from the Strengths Perspective**

Applying the strengths perspective to the four troublesome questions that opened this article provides the following solutions:

1. Shifting the focus from problems to strengths.

Exceptions are found in a growing number of departments that have begun to practice a strengths perspective (Clark, Walters, Gingerich, & Meltzer, 2006; Clark, 2007). To increase mediocre outcomes,

juvenile justice will need to learn how to elicit, amplify, and reinforce a juvenile's strengths. Further, these methods will need to become both customary and expected. Strengths assessments (both accurate and balanced) are readily available from the fields of forensic social work, positive psychology, and the strengths perspective. Organizational procedures and practice methods that increase cooperation, motivation, and a youth's readiness to change can be embraced.

## 2. Shifting from punishment to treatment:

A good share of mediocre outcomes can be traced to reliance on punishment to change behavior as well as the allowance of mere compliance to the authority to be positioned as a "good enough" goal. The strengths approach does not endorse "coddling" or "rewarding" challenging youth for their misbehavior. But it is essential that we abandon interventions that make this situation worse, move beyond compliance, and strive for positive behavior change.

Change must overcome several decades of a "get-tough" mindset. This requires adopting a positive climate within policy and procedures. The seasoned administrator knows the effort required here—this will not happen by calling a special staff meeting to make a declaration ("change by announcement"). Assistance is available by turning to a considerable body of knowledge and skills from the strengths approach.

## 3. Shifting from adult-constructed solutions to youth-involved solutions:

After decades of spinning and constructing interventions from our point of view (e.g., "This is what delinquents need"), Mary McMurrin (2002) suggests, "A different and potentially more useful perspective is to look at motivation to change from a youth's point of view" (p. 5). Programs will reap a windfall for changing their philosophy of intervention. The strengths perspective could well be construed as a "science" of utilizing an offender's perspective and intrinsic motivation. McMurrin continues, "Whether in compulsory or voluntary treatment, it seems that the most reliable way to influence behavior change is through an empathic, empowering approach" (p. 8).

## 4. Realizing change comes from strengths of the young person, not coercion of the adult:

One of the most comprehensive studies to date on the outcomes of probation services was completed

# HOW TO APPLY THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE TO JUVENILE JUSTICE

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by Farrall (2002) in the United Kingdom. Solutions did not come from those in authority but from the youth themselves (their motivation) and from changes in social contexts in which they lived.

## ***Taking Juvenile Justice "Back to the Future"***

The strengths movement in juvenile justice may seem to be a contradiction of terms, yet historical roots can be found in this field. Although juvenile justice has not rallied to strengths work to the extent of other disciplines, it can lay claim to being one of the first to try it. A historical view of probation by Lindner (1994) indicates that police officers were the first discipline in the late 1800s to work with probation clients. Police were quickly replaced by social workers who were favored because they brought a more positive focus to supervision. So too, with juvenile justice. Early youth pioneers developed youth-development models for adolescent work. Jane Addams, who was heralded for founding the modern juvenile court system in this country, promoted the principles of the strengths perspective. Unfortunately, the juvenile court system was not prepared to embrace the youth development principles Addams promoted.

What might happen if staff were hired and trained for their abilities to assist behavior change? What if large numbers were trained in seeking balanced assessments, increasing resources and intrinsic motivation, and viewing troubled youth in a more respectful way? How would it affect outcomes if all

stakeholders in crime were invited into a process of resolution and preparation for positive change? What if the central purpose of juvenile justice is not to enact vengeance, but to assist the readiness to change?

Is it so surprising that profound changes can happen, in professionals and in systems, in relatively short periods to time? Perhaps then today's juvenile justice practices will be looked back upon as archaic and people will ask in disbelief, "If we were trying to change a youth's behavior to make us all safer, how could this coercive mindset and heavy-handed practices ever have occurred?"

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