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Character Strengths in Sport and Physical Activity

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1 CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

2 S. Bradley & P. Worth

3 We [the authors] were drawn to positive psychology and, in particular, strengths-use
4 as a result of a growing frustration with the insufficiency inherent within psychology literature
5 on 'fixing' mental deficiencies and weaknesses. Whilst traditional talking-therapy techniques
6 (e.g. Rational-Emotive Behaviour therapy) are effective in fixing distorted thinking and
7 behaviour patterns, clients may often emerge with an understanding of managing weakness
8 rather than an enhanced understanding of their qualities. Since working more closely with
9 strength-based approaches we have found that developing a better understanding of the
10 positive qualities associated with one's character, or that may evolve over time, to be
11 transformational, emancipatory and essential knowledge whilst in the pursuit of being our
12 best self, of which sporting performance and excellence is one part.

13 Character is so inter-woven into the fabric of what we consider sporting excellence to
14 be that it is often identified as a 'must have' amongst those seeking to realize and
15 demonstrate potential. To illustrate this assertion in the context of sport:

16 *"It's about making sure the players you bring in are strong of character and can do*
17 *the tasks we ask them to do when we haven't got the ball. For me it's not just about their*
18 *ability on the ball...the character of the person shines through."* (Steve Walsh, Head of
19 Recruitment for 2016 Premier League Champions Leicester City – BBC Radio 5 interview).

20 Steve Walsh's comments clearly indicate that an individual's character is perceived
21 to be as valuable to team outcomes as technical skill[s] in a high-performance context; yet
22 he also makes a more profound, and telling, statement in relation to the illuminating quality
23 and transformative nature of character [strength]. In describing character as something that
24 'shines through', he positions it as a positive quality that we attend and react to; thus it is
25 'energizing' to the individual (and the observer); and is, perhaps, a fundamental part of the
26 individual more readily associated with personal growth tendencies, rather than merely the
27 demonstration of survival and coping behaviour. We (the authors) believe that it is just as
28 important for athletes, coaches and parents to learn, and teach, how to thrive in life by
29 developing and using our character strengths (CS) to achieve positive human functioning as
30 it is to impart knowledge and teach technical skills associated with overcoming pressure and
31 adversity (Ryff and Singer, 2003).

32 The purpose of this chapter is to: 1) introduce the concepts of character strength and
33 optimal functioning; 2) explain the evolution of the strengths approach, identify how strengths

1 are defined and explore their raison-d'être; 3) present an overview of strength models; 4)
2 explore character strengths research in sport, exercise and physical activity (PA); 5) discuss
3 applied strengths development approaches and suggest recommendations for applied
4 practitioners in sport and exercise contexts. The intention is that the chapter offers
5 introductory views and experience as well as pointing towards a more nuanced
6 understanding of strengths, which may evolve over time.

7 **1. Character strength and optimal functioning.**

8 However one chooses to define character, it is undeniably associated with positive
9 outcomes such as moral behaviour, displays of grit, and achievement (Seligman, 2011).
10 Considering that the presence of character is often associated with success, and its absence
11 with failure, developing an enhanced understanding of the psycho-social processes and
12 qualities associated with character development and being the best we can be is a natural
13 focus and goal for those involved in sport, exercise and physical activity.

14 According to Niemiec (2013) there are a number of important principles for
15 understanding the best in people, which are based in the science of character:

- 16 • CS are at the heart of being our 'best self'. CS and conceptions of 'best self' vary
17 subjectively, socially and contextually.
- 18 • CS are interactive, interdependent and transactional in nature. It is likely that a
19 number of dynamic processes influence how strengths interact with and influence
20 each other.
- 21 • In order to be our 'best self' CS must be utilized optimally (i.e. in accordance with
22 Aristotle's golden mean – the right combination of strengths, expressed to the right
23 extent and in the right situation).

24
25 The principles outlined by Niemiec (2013) clearly identify that CS are intra-
26 individually stable, and thus similar to personality traits, but that they are also highly
27 contextual. It is important to note, therefore, that CS may develop through different
28 processes in different contexts - strengths which work in one context may not work in
29 another – thus influencing our language for strengths (see Activity 1.1).

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Activity 1.1: Identifying strengths

What are your 'strengths'? Linley (2008) suggests that two thirds of us cannot say, or even have a language for this characteristic of ourselves. In a sporting context this may be different. Consider what your strengths are across sport, exercise and physical settings.

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12 Optimal functioning, which is the predominant focus of positive psychology, consists
13 of a broad range of topic areas, for example: character strengths, meaning and engagement,
14 flourishing, positive emotions and wellbeing (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).
15 Essentially optimal functioning is concerned with individuals' capacity to be the best they can
16 be as well as their ability, and opportunity, to realize their true potential (Seligman, 2011).
17 Given that character, and more specifically CS, is inextricably linked with conceptions of 'us
18 at our best', psychological wellbeing and optimal functioning (Maslow, 1970; Seligman,
19 2011); it is essential that we seek to better understand the relationship between CS and
20 optimal functioning in sport, exercise and PA settings.

21 2. Strengths – background, definitions and rationale

22 *Background*

23 In 1998 Martin Seligman and colleagues began a scientific exploration into what is
24 right, rather than what is wrong with us. In doing so he identified three dimensions of
25 happiness: the pleasant life (i.e. focus on positive emotions, and thoughts, surrounding past,
26 present and future experiences), the meaningful life (i.e. developing CS and virtues in pursuit
27 of outcomes which transcend the self) and the good life (i.e. using our strengths to attain
28 virtues and lead an authentic life). Since then the psychology of strengths has attracted
29 interest from researchers and applied practitioners across education, business, sport,
30 coaching, PA and health settings.

31 *Definitions*

32 So, what are strengths? According to Linley and Harrington (2006) a strength is
33 defined as:

34 '*a capacity for feeling, thinking and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the*
35 *pursuit of valued outcomes*' (p.86).

1 Therefore, at a subjective level, how we think, feel and behave (in relation to our
2 character strengths), influences, and is influenced by, a multitude of psycho-social factors
3 which is likely to create a fairly unique set of strengths for each and every one of us. When
4 utilized the individual is capable of “delivering a high level of performance and experiencing
5 a sense of energy” (p. 67). The interpretation of strengths clearly positions strengths as
6 enabling, generative, authentic to the user and an important component of optimal
7 functioning.

8 *Strengths rationale – where they come from and why they matter*

9 Linley (2008) proposes that strengths evolve through a series of stages (presented
10 as distinct, but deemed to be overlapping):

- 11 • evolution (universally adaptive qualities),
- 12 • nature (heritable qualities from our parents),
- 13 • nurture (socialization experiences),
- 14 • chance (random and unpredictable occurrences), and
- 15 • adaptiveness (experiential learning).

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Activity 2.1: Exploring the evolution of strengths

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Consider how your own positive qualities have developed. Refer to the stages	19
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within Linley’s (2008) Origins of Strengths framework and reflect upon the role of	21
each stage in shaping your strengths as you see them.	22
	23
In discussion with a partner, compare how your strengths, and theirs, have	24
	25
developed. What are the similarities and/or differences? Inner influences? Social	26
influences? According to Linley (2008) it is likely that we will share many patterns	27
	28
of strengths, but that we display them differently based on our own unique	29
experience[s].	30
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What are the implications for sport psychologists and coaches of expanding our	32
vocabulary in this way, and working with these insights?	33
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36 It is certainly interesting to know where strengths might have come from but it is
37 equally pressing to consider their importance. Why do strengths matter?

38 CS are considered the foundation of human goodness and flourishing (Peterson and
39 Seligman, 2004) and show consistent positive relationships with life satisfaction and

1 wellbeing (Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2004). From a wellbeing perspective, strengths-
2 use represents an important predictor of both the affective and cognitive evaluation of one's
3 life (Subjective Well Being – SWB), as well as eudaimonic conceptions of growth and self-
4 actualisation (Psychological Well Being – PWB). Interestingly, the CS of hope, zest,
5 gratitude, curiosity, and love are consistently shown to be more positively associated with life
6 satisfaction (Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and SWB than strengths of the head (e.g.
7 judgment). Whilst, people who use their CS more have also been identified as having more
8 confidence, energy and vitality – SWB (Govindji and Linley, 2007), as well as being more
9 effective in achieving personal growth – PWB (Sheldon, Kasser, Smith and Share, 2002). In
10 our experience it is certainly the case that strengths-use is not only associated with
11 increases in clearly advantageous psychological and subjective states, but that fully
12 embracing CS into one's life can be transformative for the individual, their wellbeing and
13 achievement[s] (Linley, Nielsen, Gillett and Biswas-Diener, 2010).

14 In the context of PA and sport Lundqvist and Sandin (2014) identify physical activity
15 as generally facilitating wellbeing, whereas sport participation (especially at an elite level)
16 presents many more significant challenges (e.g. identity foreclosure, coping with injury and
17 performance-related issues) to athlete wellbeing. Athlete wellbeing is likely to be complex
18 and heavily nuanced based on various contextual factors (Brady and Shambrook, 2003),
19 which might differentially impact upon athlete SWB and PWB. For example, Lundqvist and
20 Sandin (ibid) point towards contextually dynamic influences upon athlete vitality and
21 wellbeing – the experience of vitality being related to SWB. Whilst in team sports, more
22 generally, Reinboth and Duda (2006) identify basic needs satisfaction and perceived
23 motivational climates as differentially influencing indicators of SWB and PWB. Given that
24 competitiveness, opportunity for social comparison and negative affective experience (e.g.
25 anxiety) might be inherent within many sport and PA contexts it appears warranted to
26 explore the role of CS in buffering against potentially negatively-valenced constructs and
27 facilitating wellbeing in sport and PA. Such endeavours are important for creating models of
28 wellbeing in sport and PA, which more accurately account for the complex demands and
29 challenges athletes face as well as the role of CS in facilitating athletes' thriving behaviours.

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31 **3. Strengths models**

32 Before we turn to describe leading models of strengths, we encourage you to identify
33 your own strengths (refer to Activity 1.1). Echoing Linley (2008) we believe that the
34 vocabulary for strengths may be infinite, and gaining a familiarity and confidence with our

1 own descriptions is an important first step in their use. This act of skill development stretches
2 our capacity for perception and insight in ways which we find have a direct influence on
3 relationships generally, as well as sport and PA contexts in particular.

4 Currently there are three dominant strengths models: StrengthsFinder 2.0©; Values-
5 In-Action (VIA) Strengths Classification; and R2 (previously Realise2). Those new to the
6 concept of strengths face the question of which model or models are the best fit. It may
7 involve one, or alternatively it may involve a flexible use of several measures. It is our
8 intention that the content presented here might be useful in informing choice regarding how
9 strengths are represented and understood, rather than arguing for one approach over
10 another. We encourage you to look further, via the internet, for the technical manuals of
11 these questionnaires.

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INSERT TABLE

1 **An Overview of Three Leading ‘Strengths’ Models and Psychometric Questionnaires**

	VIA	StrengthsFinder™	R2 (previously Realise2)
Origin / Source	<p>VIA Institute on Character</p> <p>www.viacharacter.org</p> <p>Individuals can take the questionnaire. Free to take and feedback provided on ranking and definition of 24 strengths.</p> <p>Additional cost for detailed report or feedback</p> <p>120 item on-line questionnaire (5 questions [per strength]).</p> <p>A ‘top five’ approach but all 24 strengths are fed-back.</p>	<p>Gallup Organization</p> <p>www.gallupstrengthscenter.com</p> <p>Individuals can take the questionnaire. Cost to take.</p> <p>Additional cost for detailed report or feedback.</p> <p>180 item-pair questions.</p> <p>Questions are timed / have a time limit.</p> <p>Output focuses on the ‘Top 5’ Signature Themes of talent.</p>	<p>CAPP & Co Ltd in the United Kingdom.</p> <p>www.r2profiler.co.uk</p> <p>Individuals can take the questionnaire. Cost to take. Charge varies with the level of feedback provided.</p> <p>180 questions.</p>
Definition of strengths			<p>The R2 defines strengths as “the things that we are good at and that give us energy when we are using them.” (R2 Technical Manual – quoted with permission)</p>

	VIA	StrengthsFinder™	R2 (previously Realise2)
	<p>'Character Strengths are the positive parts of your personality that impact how you think, feel and behave and are the keys to you being your best self.'</p> <p>(VIA Website)</p>	<p>The theory assumes talents are found in thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and that with effort and the development of knowledge and skills, these become strengths.</p> <p>(Hodges and Clifton 2004)</p>	<p>Strengths are assessed according to the three dimensions of Energy, Performance and Use – with each user receiving their feedback, revealing their 'realised' strengths, 'learned behaviours', 'weaknesses and unrealised strengths'.</p>
Number of Strengths	24 strengths clustered within 6 'virtues'.	34 talent themes	60 strengths.
Observations / Commentary	<p>Youth version is available.</p> <p>VIA website offers guidance and resources on strengths development.</p> <p>Concepts are based on detailed research in the main cultures and 'wisdom traditions' of the world likely to indicate these strengths are cross-cultural.</p>	<p>Talents and strengths are seen as stable and enduring qualities.</p> <p>A questionnaire for children and youth is available, (10 – 14 years).</p> <p>A book describing 'StrengthsFinder' is available and may contain a code for undertaking the questionnaire.</p>	

	VIA	StrengthsFinder™	R2 (previously Realise2)
	<p>Detailed manual available (Peterson and Seligman 2004).</p> <p>VIA website offers extensive information on research undertaken on the questionnaire in different fields of activity.</p>	<p>Donald Clifton and Marcus Buckingham have both written books related to StrengthsFinder and their experience to support the general public in relating to strengths use.</p>	<p>The questionnaire originates in the UK.</p> <p>Strengths are clustered in five ‘families’: Being, Communicating, Motivating, Relating and Thinking.</p> <p>Their definition implies three elements: ‘performance – how good we are at doing something; energy – how much energy we get from doing it; and use – how often we get to do it. For something to be a strength in this questionnaire, each of these three elements – energy, performance, and use – must be present.</p> <p>(Willars, J., Biswas-Diener, R., and Linley, A. 2010)</p>

1 4. CS in sport, exercise and physical activity

2 The purpose of this section is to introduce readers to the concept of strengths in
3 sport, exercise and physical activity, provide empirical background information, and prompt
4 further thought and exploration. The key areas of focus will be the research on strengths and
5 growth-related constructs in exercise, health and sports injury settings. There is also a
6 further, more pressing, debate to summarise in this section, that of the relationship between
7 'talent' and 'strengths'.

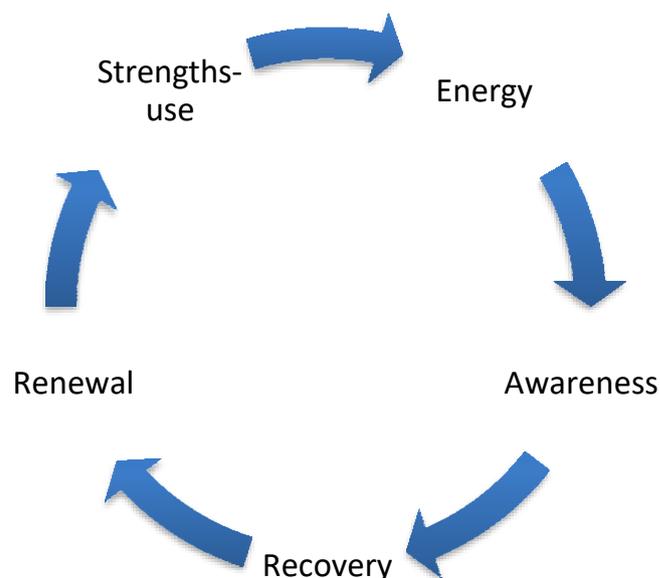
8 *Talent and Strengths:*

9 The relationship between talent and strengths is complex and despite much focus on
10 the interplay of talent and strengths (Buckingham and Clifton, 2001; Seligman, 2002), in
11 pursuit of optimal functioning and sporting excellence, the landscape remains somewhat
12 unclear with the language needed for this relationship still maturing. This is, in part, due to
13 the relative and different 'value' attached to each term across sport, business and education
14 settings, as well as the resultant confusion in terminology. The terms 'talent', 'talents' and
15 'strengths' have often been used interchangeably (Buckingham and Clifton, 2001), leading to
16 conceptual confusion, whilst a lack of clarity also exists regarding the nature and role of key
17 bio-psycho-social variables influencing the talent-strengths relationship (Seligman, 2002).

18 We propose that in the context of sport it is likely that natural abilities are the 'what'
19 (e.g. aptitudes, intelligences), whilst 'strengths' (e.g. VIA-CS) represent 'how' abilities may
20 be grown and displayed. In an effort to clarify, terminologically and conceptually, we refer
21 readers to Gagne's (2000) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT). The
22 DMGT proposes that our abilities (or 'gifts') are innate and require effortful training, support
23 and guidance over time to create talent. Talent is, thus, not exclusive to those in possession
24 of innate sporting capital, but instead the result of deliberate nurturing of psychosocial
25 variables across key development stages. According to Gagne (2000) talent refers to an
26 outcome of the aforementioned process within a specific talent domain (e.g. sport).
27 However, the manifestation of talent is not always predicted by the preceding identification
28 and development processes with research identifying 90% of eventual top-25 world-level
29 athletes not 'shining' during early development (Martindale, Collins and Daubney, 2005). The
30 efficacy of such processes may depend entirely on what one is looking for amongst talent-
31 potential. Domain-specific ability, motivation, commitment, mental toughness, creativity and
32 resilience all feature as must-haves, yet there is currently a paucity of research focusing on
33 the impact of CS in realising talent and optimal functioning in sport settings.

1 It is our assertion that the world of sport could encourage a broader understanding of
2 strengths and their influence upon talents over the athletic lifespan by those, and for those,
3 who later go on to 'shine'. We believe that strengths-use, in the context of sport and physical
4 activity, not only catalyses talent development, but that this strengths-focus both energises
5 and buffers against negative psychological outcomes experienced whilst engaged in learning
6 culturally valuable behaviours.

7 Significantly, we assert that learned behaviours - previously positioned as potentially
8 or implicitly constraining strength-based development (e.g. Linley 2008) - are a fundamental
9 part of how athletes manage to survive under pressure and can evolve over-time to become
10 strengths or facilitate the capitalization of unrealised strengths. It is worth recognising here
11 that sport and PA experiences shape character as much as our character shapes our
12 experience. The notion being that we have many kinds of strengths which emerge
13 longitudinally and unpredictably (some of which may exist initially as learnt behaviours), to
14 influence talent development and shape CS. For example, an athlete may possess the CS of
15 perseverance but lack the skills and learnt behaviours associated with effective
16 communication and time-management which allows them to be open to, and effectively use,
17 coach feedback to enhance their training and internalise such behaviours over time.
18 Therefore understanding which strengths are, as well those learned behaviours that may
19 develop to become, energising to the individual is essential for facilitating a process of
20 recovery, renewal and continued strengths-use (see fig 4.1).



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22 Figure 4.1 Strengths Cycle Adapted from Linley (2008), p.141.

1 Linley (2008) refers to the need for athletes to continuously move outside of their
2 comfort zones in order to build both capacity and capability [often involving the acquisition of
3 systematically learnt behaviours] whilst also allowing for recovery and renewal. The
4 proposition, therefore, is that strengths-use (which in itself is energising) can create a cycle
5 of recovery and renewal for athletes. Whilst, we concur with the main body of Linley's (2008,
6 p.141) original model, a new stage 'awareness' has been included to represent the need for
7 reflexive understanding of the strengths, and learnt behaviours, which are, more-or-less,
8 associated with personal energy renewal and recovery across different contexts. The
9 requirement for meta-learning and reflexive skills to be possessed by elite-level athletes
10 further points to the need for the development of self-regulatory abilities and awareness
11 gains to buffer against a wide range of challenging competitive sport demands. Athletes
12 developing such meta-skills may, thus, have more opportunity to experience renewal
13 through understanding how learned behaviours and strengths are productively applied and
14 capitalised upon to optimise the focus of talent development over time.

15 Therefore, the process of strength and talent development may begin with or include
16 instruction of learned behaviours, but should end with the capitalization of strengths as the
17 primary goal (Subotnik and Jarvin, 2005). Establishing what such a process looks like in
18 sport and PA settings, informed by existing empirically grounded talent and strengths
19 models, would appear a valuable next-step in understanding the talent-strengths
20 relationship.

21 *CS, Exercise and Health:*

22 Currently there is an absence of research considering the mediatory influence of CS
23 upon the relationship between important self-constructs and wellbeing in PA contexts. Given
24 that wellbeing and achievement in PA, sport and exercise contexts require a positive self-
25 outlook, with self-efficacy also positively related to changes in health-related behaviour
26 (Bandura, 2008) and the ability to sustain such behaviour change (Maddux, 2009), it would
27 appear somewhat remiss to overlook the influential role of character strengths CS. It might
28 be that CS-use (e.g. perseverance, self-regulation) positively influences confidence in one's
29 ability to persist and successfully complete tasks in spite of experiencing increasing physical
30 and psychological costs of fatigue.

31 According to Peterson, Park and Seligman (2006) the CS of bravery, kindness and
32 humour support wellbeing (measured by higher life satisfaction scores) amongst individuals
33 with physical disorders. Given that these strengths are more readily associated with action
34 than, say, wisdom and knowledge-based CS (such as love of learning and open-

1 mindedness), then personal agency beliefs, perceived autonomy, confidence and approach-
2 motivated behaviour might be influential mediators in the relationship between CS and
3 physical health.

4 A focus on CS-based interventions designed to enhance physical activity and
5 promote health could be useful in providing a more authentic and energising experience,
6 whilst simultaneously promoting a 'best-self' conception. Furthering our conceptual
7 understanding of the role of CS in shaping positive health outcomes through research and
8 applied interventions represents a significant challenge and priority-area for our discipline.

9 *CS and Injury:*

10 Injury is typically associated with negative consequences and perceived to be a
11 distressing occurrence within an athlete's life (Evans et al., 2006) due to the focus on
12 stressors, barriers to rehabilitation and potential negative outcomes (e.g. performance
13 impairment and sport/career termination). However, not every athlete experiences distress,
14 dysfunction and despair as a result of being injured or engaging in the rehabilitation process.
15 Some researchers have adopted a more balanced view of athletes' sport injury experiences
16 and have suggested that resilience and growth are as likely outcomes as dropout and
17 depression (Wadey and Evans, 2011).

18 According to Wadey et al., (2011) athletes engaging in more adaptive and growth-
19 related behaviours such as seeking social support, disclosing to others about their injury,
20 adhering to the rehabilitation program, learning about the injury and putting things in
21 perspective are likely to experience more benefits (e.g. increased resilience, enhanced
22 confidence, better coping skills). Gaining a better understanding of an athlete's CS profile or
23 signature strengths might be important in helping professional practitioners and support
24 personnel to structure interventions in order to maximise positive psychological benefits. For
25 example: knowing that an athlete scores highly in wisdom and knowledge strengths might
26 help orient the professional practitioner's intervention towards learning more about the
27 nature of the injury and knowledge of injury prevention.

28 **5. CS - Practical Applications and Conclusions**

29 The question of how to go about effectively developing and applying CS is not easy
30 to answer, as the literature within the field of applied strength-based psychology is relatively
31 young and still embryonic in its application in sport and PA contexts. A number of general
32 approaches to strength-based practice will be discussed, with reference made to applied
33 sport psychology examples where relevant, before presenting our conclusions.

1 Key to beginning to use CS optimally might be the development of strengths-based
2 language and strength-spotting skills. Similar to other researchers (e.g. Padesky and
3 Mooney, 2012), Linley (2008) advocates developing strengths-based language and using
4 client-generated metaphor in helping create and recall strengths-based practices and
5 qualities. Linley (2008) identifies a number of observable signs of strengths: loss of sense of
6 time, heightened energy and engagement, enhanced learning, task prioritization, and being
7 drawn to people or activities associated with strength-use. Linley also advocates developing
8 skills associated with 'strength-spotting' including observation and listening skills. For
9 example, it is likely that when an individual is capitalizing upon their CS they use more
10 positively-valenced language, they are more expressive, talkative and speak more
11 energetically, passionately and with a greater sense of purpose. From an applied sport
12 psychology practice perspective, practitioner listening-skills are centrally positioned (Katz
13 and Hemmings, 2009) and should, ideally, include strength-spotting alongside more
14 established counselling-based skills.

15 In sport settings it is feasible that the development of strengths-based language
16 might stimulate athletes to capitalize upon their CS and in so-doing overcome obstacles and
17 create opportunities for experiencing 'resonance' (Newburg et al., 2002) – an experiential
18 state characterised by a sense of connection between self and the outer world and
19 persistent pursuit of valued goals over time. It is also likely that environments affording
20 resonance experiences would provide further opportunity for significant others (i.e. coaches)
21 to be influenced and energised by the athlete's own unique talent (Poczwardowski, Barott, &
22 Henschen, 2002). Such transformational-relational benefits could be important within
23 performance sport settings, which are often characterised by intense, power-based
24 relationships. If such relational interactions, and created environments, do not take into
25 account the CS of the individual[s] it is possible that this might negatively affect
26 psychological processes associated with energy renewal, subsequent strengths-use and
27 ultimately the realization of potential (Bradley, Morgan & Worth, 2016).

28 Strength-based development practices (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) often
29 advocate using an 'identify and use' method - represented through an enhanced awareness
30 of one's CS (e.g. through completing a strengths assessment) and encouragement to
31 capitalize upon more frequent strengths-use (typically one's 'Top-5' or 'signature' themes).
32 Whilst such approaches are certainly beneficial to raising awareness of one's CS and
33 becoming familiar with developing a language for strengths, they may provide little
34 opportunity for developing an understanding of how strengths develop, interact with other
35 strengths, or are influenced by environmental and contextual variation. As a result, we

1 believe that the task of understanding strengths development is still maturing, and favour the
2 argument of Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minas (2011) that practitioners should focus on
3 moving from a 'use it more' approach to developing the meta-skills and self-regulatory
4 abilities to be able to know when, and in what amount[s], to use strengths optimally.

5 Whilst there are currently few models for strength-based practice in sport settings, we
6 will use Niemiec's (2009) Aware-Explore-Apply model as an introduction. Niemiec's (2009)
7 three-step process (fig. 5.1) involves developing an *awareness* of strengths and helping the
8 client build a language for strengths, *exploring* strengths through self-reflexive enquiry and
9 practitioner-guided questioning and *applying* strengths more optimally through action
10 planning, active self-monitoring and experimentation. Throughout the three phases of this
11 model Niemiec advocates using Linley's (2008) strength-spotting techniques mentioned
12 previously.

13
Figure 5.1: Aware-Explore-Apply Model (Niemiec, 2009)

- 14
- Aware – proposes that self-directed or therapist-supported awareness of strengths is the first step to change. Allows for a language for strength to be developed and begin attributing strengths to past and current behaviour.
 - Explore – facilitates a more reflective and deeper understanding of strengths through self-reflexive enquiry, journal-keeping and joint exploration (example – thinking about you at your best – which strengths were evident?)
 - Apply – forming an action plan for how to use strengths more in everyday life. Self-monitoring how strengths are used and vary across contexts, emulating role-models/paragons, practicing using strengths in novel and creative ways are some of the practical applications advocated.

Access the model through the web-link:

(<http://www.viacharacter.org/resources/ok-now-what-taking-action-with-strength-by-ryan-m-niemiec-psy-d/>) and consider the benefits and challenges of using the model as part of an applied sport psychology intervention.

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1 In a pioneering piece of applied work conducted with the Sri Lanka Cricket Team
2 Sandy Gordon employed a strength-based Appreciative Inquiry (AI) guided intervention
3 (Gordon, 2014). Gordon established core values underpinning process goal pursuit, created
4 a shared reality of 'what works' using AI and open-space technologies, enhanced player
5 responsibility and social support practices within training; in creating strength-based habits
6 associated with Sri Lanka Cricket at its best. Interestingly, a strategic planning technique,
7 allowing players to explore inter-individual perceptions of Strengths, Opportunities,
8 Aspirations and Results (SOAR) amongst team members, was also employed. We would
9 encourage more aspiring, and established, practitioners to look beyond traditional consulting
10 approaches and explore novel approaches from other discipline areas to advance practice.
11 Further scholarly contributions embracing a strength focus in applied sport contexts (Gordon
12 and Gucciardi, 2013) are also welcomed and applauded.

13 *Conclusion*

14 There is ample reason to believe that sport, exercise and PA settings provide fertile
15 ground for the development of strengths-based approaches and will provide further
16 opportunities for the exploration of strength-based practices. We would encourage any
17 student, coach or athlete to:

18

- 19 • Become familiar with the language of strengths, strengths-spotting in one's
20 self and others.
- 21 • Where appropriate measure strengths using available questionnaires.
- 22 • Explore the 'Strengths Cycle' and the process of 'Aware – Explore – Apply',
23 being reflexively aware of your experience and contextual influences
24 supporting or constraining strengths development.

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26 This area, within sporting practice, is sufficiently new that skill development and research in
27 the above three areas will represent a significant advance for our discipline.

28

29 This is appropriate professional development for any of us. As your experience develops, we
30 encourage you to revisit the other thinking and research summarised within this chapter. We
31 hope that this chapter will serve as a useful guide, or starting point, to the journey.

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