

FACILITATING POSITIVE CHANGES IN SELF-CONSTRUCTIONS

JERALD R. FORSTER

Department of Education, University of Washington, Seattle

The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) is a systematic set of procedures designed to facilitate an increase in positive self-constructions. It was used to facilitate positive changes in self-descriptions as measured by the Adjective Check List. The DSAP encourages the participant to identify good experiences, which are used to elicit personal constructs. These constructs are distilled to a select group, labeled as dependable strengths, and cross-verified by a listing of supportive experiences. The DSAP is explained and elaborated with the concepts and correlates of personal construct psychology. Research is cited to support the DSAP's focus on positive experiences and its promise for increasing positive self-constructions. A case is made to focus on positive events when eliciting personal constructs for use in anticipated self-roles.

Self-esteem and the understanding of self-construction are topics of special interest in the current psychological and educational literature (Gurney, 1987; Markus & Wurf, 1987). The concern about the negative effects of low self-esteem has been manifested in several ways, including the use of tax revenues to create and operate the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility (Gelman & Raine, 1987). In *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos (1989) reviewed the literature connecting self-esteem with failure in school, teenage pregnancy, crime, violence, chronic welfare dependency, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Several influences, including a high interest in how to increase self-esteem were combined in the initiation of a research and demonstration project called the Dependable Strengths Project (DSP) at the University of Washington. One influence was an interest in studying the effects of methods developed by Bernard Haldane during 40 years of practice as a human development innovator (Haldane, 1988; Haldane, Haldane, & Martin, 1982). Haldane's methods have been widely used, and adapted versions of his methods have been described in such popular books as *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (Bolles, 1989). Another influence brought to the project was the theories, methods, and research of personal construct psychology (PCP). Such

282

J. R. Forster

an influence was needed because Haldane's methods have evolved in a pragmatic way without a recognizable theoretical base. The potential advantage of using PCP was recognized because of similarities between Haldane's methods and those used by Forster (1985) to study personal goals by means of modified repertory grid techniques and ideas flowing from constructive alternativism.

ELABORATING ON THE METHODS

Initial goals of the DSP called for the study and elaboration of methods that had evolved from Haldane's experience. The literature of PCP provided a fertile set of constructs and methods for addressing these goals.

Kelly's (1955) fundamental postulate and its corollaries proved useful for explaining many of Haldane's methods and elaborating on others. The Construction corollary, which states that a person anticipates events by constructing their replications, offers a solid rationale for focusing on several past events during the early part of the method. Haldane called these past events *good experiences*, and they serve as the foundation for subsequent steps in the method, named the Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP). Participants in the DSAP are asked to identify at least 16 good experiences, events when they did something well, enjoyed doing it, and were proud of what they did. Personal constructs elicited by looking for similarities and differences in various good experiences are identified as *strengths*.

The Organization corollary, which assumes a construction system embracing ordinal relations between constructs, is useful for explaining how a person's strengths may be organized. The DSAP emphasizes exercises in which participants clarify the relative importance of their elicited strengths by prioritizing them. It is assumed that these constructs are organized under a superordinate construct of *self-not self*.

The Choice corollary, which emphasizes the extension and definition of the person's construction system, suggests reasons why participants in the DSAP benefit from articulating their strengths. Articulated strengths provide a person with extended ways of anticipating events that use strengths.

The Experience corollary indicates that a person's construction system varies as he or she successively constructs the replications of events. When the DSAP participant studies several replications of good experiences, and owns the strengths that explain those experi-

ences, that person articulates constructs that explain why these particular experiences differ from other experiences. As the participant considers additional good experiences, his or her construction system expands and extends.

The Modulation corollary, which speaks to the permeability of the person's constructs, provides an explanation for the extension of a person's self-structure as the result of focusing on good experiences and themes elicited from those events. This corollary provides an interpretation for why participants might describe themselves with more positive self-descriptions after completing the DSAP. Permeable self-constructs would allow participants to make these changes as a result of an effective intervention.

The Sociality corollary, which describes the extent to which one person may play a role in a social process with another, guides another important component of the DSAP. In this component, a participant describes several good experiences to a few other participants. The listeners in turn identify and communicate several constructs they have noticed that may describe the strengths of the first speaker. This is a powerful component of the DSAP and its power is explained at least partly by the focus of several persons on the construction processes of another person and the subsequent roles they play in the social processes of that person.

Although several of Kelly's corollaries are useful for explaining how and why the DSAP benefits its participants, Landfield's (1988) concept of the *validating agent* provides yet another explanation. It is proposed that participants in the DSAP articulate new or modified self-constructs and these "strengths" become incorporated in self-roles that can become healthy validation agents. The focus on good experiences and dependable strengths increases the likelihood that positive self-constructs will become more prevalent, and this helps participants take more responsibility for their own validation. Obvious benefits accrue from the use of personal construct theory when studying self-constructs and how they can be changed. One valuable exposition is Bannister's (1983) lucid account of how the "self" can be understood more fully using the theoretical framework of personal construct theory. For example, Bannister's description of core role constructs elaborates on the nature of those constructs that are most central to self-identity:

To anticipate the events of our own behavior, we use core role constructs—those constructs in terms of which we centrally define ourselves, constructs that govern the maintenance of self. When we explain our values, our philosophies, our characters, our dreams of

future, our vital histories, and so forth, we use constructs that have a particular significance for our pictures of our selves. (1983, p. 381)

The core role constructs mentioned by Bannister are the intended focus of the DSAP. The DSAP is designed to increase the likelihood that the participant will describe him- or herself with more positive self-constructs, especially by the strengths articulated with the assistance of the DSAP. It is hypothesized that this will happen because the dependable strengths articulated in the DSAP will become more closely aligned with that person's core role constructs. A number of the DSAP activities are directed to that end, including one in which the participant is asked to support the validity of each claimed dependable strength by means of at least two criteria. The first criterion calls for replication evidence. The participant is asked to identify at least three good experiences in which that strength was a crucial factor in making the good experience happen. A second criterion is that the person must state a clear-cut preference for using that particular strength in an anticipated life-style or work situation that is highly desired. The description of self in terms of dependable strengths that meet these criteria indicates that these constructs are highly valued and clearly reliable. Participants in the DSAP are also asked to prepare a self-descriptive report that uses these dependable strengths as the base for convincing others of qualifications for expanded career roles. Mock job interviews are practiced using these reports as the primary basis for the interview.

The DSAP, after it was elaborated with the aid of PCP theory and methods, was summarized in the DSAP-S (Haldane & Forster, 1988), a short form of the process. The four steps of the DSAP-S are as follows:

1. "Recall your good experiences." The participant identifies 16 good experiences, which were events experienced with joy, pride, and a sense of accomplishment. These events are similar to elements in modified repertory grid techniques.
2. "Identify dependable strengths you used in your good experiences." The participant elicits a wide variety of personal constructs, which are called *strengths*. A variety of activities and guidelines are used to help the participant elicit these constructs. The most powerful activity is usually the group exercise, wherein two to four fellow participants listen to the target person talk about several good experiences. The listeners then communicate the strengths they identified while listening to the target person.

3. "Organize and prioritize your dependable strengths." The participant prioritizes identified strengths and applies two primary criteria for selecting five to eight strengths that are called *dependable strengths*. The criteria include replication in at least three good experiences and anticipated use of the strength in desired work.
4. "Provide evidence that your most valued strengths are dependable." The participant tests the reality of these strengths by describing several past events in which each strength was demonstrated. The participant also prepares a self-report that describes him- or herself in terms of these dependable strengths and provides substantiating evidence.

I (Forster, 1989) have provided a rationale for the DSAP that draws heavily on PCP theory and concepts. I hypothesized that the DSAP intervention increases the likelihood that the participants describe themselves in terms of their dependable strengths. If this is the case, self-descriptions should reflect more positive characteristics.

Several studies of DSAP outcomes were conducted during the initial year of the DSP. The primary focus of these outcome studies was the measurement of changes in self-description. The most important question guiding the investigations was "Do individuals who participate in the DSAP describe themselves in more positive ways after completing the process?"

STUDYING THE EFFECTS OF THE DEPENDABLE STRENGTHS ARTICULATION PROCESS

Three workshops were conducted by the DSP staff during the first phase of the project in 1988. Although the workshops followed a basic format in which the DSAP procedures were implemented, the number of contact hours and the scheduling of those hours varied from one workshop to another. The first workshop was conducted in one 8-hr day. The second was 12 hr long, split between consecutive Saturdays. The third had 13 hr of contact time scheduled over a Saturday and two evening sessions during the subsequent week. There were no significant differences in the measured outcomes of the three groups, and the results are reported as a combined group.

The participants were 30 adults who were solicited for the career

exploration workshops through the University of Washington's Extension Division catalogue. There was no fee for participation.

The participants were given the Adjective Check List (ACL; Gough, 1983) before the beginning of the workshop and after the completion. The ACL is a listing of 300 adjectives that can be used to describe an individual. Participants also responded to a workshop evaluation form at the end of each workshop.

A comparison group of 33 adults who did not receive the DSAP intervention responded to the ACL two times during a period comparable to that of the workshop. Members of the comparison group were university students enrolled in a measurement and evaluation course designed for prospective teachers.

RESULTS

Changes in the raw scores of selected ACL scales are reported in Table 1.

The five scales of the ACL were selected prior to the scoring of the scales because of their relevance to the intended purposes of the DSAP. The Self-Confidence scale was selected as the scale most likely to detect changes in positive self-constructions. The Favorable scale and the Unfavorable scale were two other scales expected to be sensitive to changes in self-esteem. Scores on the Unfavorable scale were expected to decrease. The other two scales scored for this study were the Achievement and the Adult scales. Both of these scales are said to measure qualities encouraged by the DSAP because they correlate with positive self-constructions and effective coping skills. Intercorrelations reported in the ACL manual (Gough, 1983) show high positive correlations between various combinations of the Favorable, Self-Confidence, Achievement, and Adult scales. These same scales show high negative correlations with the Unfavorable scale.

All but one of the preselected scales showed significant change in the predicted direction when the pre- and postintervention measures of the workshop participants were compared. The postintervention measure of Unfavorable responses was not significantly lower than the preintervention measure.

The results of the comparison group showed no significant changes in the selected scales. It should be noted that the comparison group was not selected in the same way as the intervention group and did not meet the requirements of a control group. The comparison group members had higher initial scores on the selected

scales than did the intervention group members. However, the lack of change in the comparison group demonstrates that the changes in ACL scores shown by the workshop intervention groups were not merely the result of retaking the ACL.

The responses of participants on workshop evaluation forms at the close of the workshops provided additional evidence that the participants experienced positive outcomes. All of these participants responded with affirmative ratings when asked if they had better knowledge of their strengths, skills, and talents as a result of the workshop. Ninety percent also indicated that their self-confidence had been boosted by the workshop.

TABLE 1 Means and Standard Deviations for Selected Adjective Check List Scales Administered to a Strengths Workshop Group ($n = 30$) and a Comparison Group ($n = 33$) Before and After Intervention

Scale/group	Raw score		Paired t value	
	Before	After		
Favorable Strengths	M	45.8	52.1	3.96*
	SD	16.2	13.0	
Comparison	M	54.1	51.2	-1.6
	SD	11.3	17.2	
Unfavorable Strengths	M	8.2	6.5	-1.6
	SD	8.4	10.1	
Comparison	M	5.3	4.6	-1.9
	SD	3.9	4.2	
Self-Confidence Strengths	M	8.6	11.6	6.14*
	SD	5.5	4.8	
Comparison	M	11.6	11.5	-0.14
	SD	4.2	4.2	
Achievement Strengths	M	11.5	13.9	3.6*
	SD	6.7	5.3	
Comparison	M	13.2	12.7	-0.65
	SD	4.8	5.6	
Adult Strengths	M	6.4	8.8	4.3*
	SD	6.4	5.8	
Comparison	M	9.0	9.6	1.2
	SD	9.2	4.8	

* $p < .001$ using two-tailed tests.

DISCUSSION

The DSAP is an intervention designed to increase a participant's positive self-constructions. The results of the initial studies indicate that participants described themselves with more positive adjectives after the intervention than they did before it. Because follow-up studies measuring self-descriptions several months after the intervention have not yet been conducted, the long-term effects remain unverified.

Because the DSAP was refined and elaborated with the theories and methods of PCP, its effects should also be evaluated with criteria and methodology that are compatible with those of PCP. It could be argued that self-descriptions obtained from a checklist of 300 "supplied" adjectives is not the optimal way of detecting meaningful changes in self-construction. However, significant changes in these *indirect* measures of self-construction are likely to reflect some type of positive change if the choices reflect descriptors that are commonly used in the culture of the respondent. As Fransella (1981) pointed out, the Commonality corollary suggests that people in similar cultures will construe some events similarly, and so share certain constructs. Although the descriptors on the ACL are not the most direct indicators of a person's self-construction, they can reflect meaningful changes in a person's self-constructions. It is noteworthy, however, that subsequent studies of DSAP effects are using methods that are more compatible with constructivist principles. Forster, Schwartz, and Severson (1990) described the full range of studies being conducted in the DSP, including case studies and other approaches that emphasize changes in personal meaning.

Although the short-term effectiveness of the DSAP has been demonstrated, it remains to be shown that the DSAP is a more effective process for increasing positive self-constructions than other methods that have been or could be designed. Future studies are needed which investigate the relative effectiveness of different types of interventions, isolating components in order to determine which methods of facilitating positive self-constructions are the most efficient and effective. These studies should also investigate the differential effects of the intervention on individuals who have vastly different ways of construing their worlds. For example, studies are needed to determine if people with unusually positive self-constructions react to the DSAP differently than do people with self-constructions that are more negative.

One issue that needs further investigation is the relative effectiveness of using only positive events or experiences from the partici-

part's memories versus using negative experiences or combinations of positive and negative experiences. Most therapeutic interventions emphasize a person's negative experiences, at least during the entry phase. These negative experiences are often used to elicit the person's constructs for making sense of experiences and describing problems. These personal constructs become the focus for clarification and change. In other words, most psychological and educational interventions are problem oriented rather than strengths oriented. There is a need for additional investigation on the relative effects from focusing on positive events in a person's life, rather than the more negative ones, when conducting therapeutic interventions.

Support for focusing on positive experiences can be found in two recent reviews of research by social psychologists (Isen, 1987; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Isen reported a number of studies showing that positive experiences leading to positive affect can have a substantial influence on both social behavior and thought processes. Included in these reports was evidence that positive affect influences flexibility in cognitive organization, a process that could permit the restructuring of a person's core role constructs. Such a finding would be predicted by Kelly's Modulation corollary. Taylor and Brown review research suggesting that a tendency to focus on positive aspects of the self may be adaptive for mental health and well-being. They use the term *illusion* to describe the tendency to have unrealistically positive self-evaluations. Taylor and Brown cite a variety of studies to build a case that positive illusions contribute to mental health, motivation, and persistence.

Additional support for an emphasis on positive focusing has been assembled by Schwartz (1986), who reported, "Recent cognitive-behavioral research suggests that functional groups are characterized by approximately a 1.7 to 1 ratio of positive to negative coping thoughts, whereas mildly dysfunctional groups demonstrate equal frequencies of such thoughts" (p. 591).

An implication of the research cited by Isen, Taylor and Brown, and Schwartz is that individuals benefit most from focusing on positive experiences and their related thoughts and feelings, rather than their negative counterparts. Yet most therapeutic intervention strategies direct attention to the person's past negative experiences.

The present study provides evidence that a constructivist intervention focusing on positive self-constructions can lead to an increase in positive self-descriptions. These results, combined with evidence in the psychological literature describing the benefits of focusing on positive self-construction, suggest that personal construct theorists and practitioners should devote more attention to

constructing that emphasizes positive events. Constructive alternativism provides a natural base for such a focus because it encourages new constructions that lead to more effective adaptation and coping. A review of the PCP literature uncovers very little attention to the advantages and disadvantages of focusing on positive or negative events and their related constructions.

There have been indications that PCP theorists are aware of the advantages of focusing on the positive. Bannister (1975) characterized successful therapy as a process wherein a person reconstructs his or her past and discerns in it new themes that suggest a more hopeful future. The DSAP focuses the attention of participants on the discernment of new themes that can portend a satisfying and hopeful future.

Nemeyer (1987) described the following case, which provides an excellent example for demonstrating the outcomes facilitated by the DSAP:

I am currently supervising the therapy of Todd, a young man whose overarching view of himself focused on his being socially inept and powerless to determine the direction of his own life. Yet, as therapy progressed into its third month, it was clear to both his therapist and me that he had made striking progress at a behavioral level. In a two-week period, for instance, he organized his house-mates to help him eject a disruptive fellow renter, provided tangible and emotional support to a relative in distress, reaffirmed several lapsed friendships, and successfully founded a campus organization. Yet a review of these accomplishments did nothing to alter Todd's self-constructing; he considered them all as isolated fragments of behavior, each of which he dismissed as trivial or lucky occurrences. However, Todd's therapist gently persisted in encouraging him to integrate the meaning of these events, with responses like, "These are just steps, but what do they symbolize?" and "What do these things say about who Todd is?" After one such question, Todd's self-deprecating laughter fell away, and he quietly replied that his actions showed that he could be "a motivator, someone who could inspire people and get things done." Movingly, he went on to say very tentatively, "It seems like bragging . . . it's so new . . . but I seem to be coming out of my shell. . . . It feels so right." He fell silent for a moment and then concluded by noting tearfully that he suddenly felt "flooded with all the proud things I've done in my life." In personal construct terms, the recovery of these proud memories could be attributed to his having glimpsed, for the first time, the outlines of a new identity structure that gave his previously fragmented behaviors a fresh, comprehensive meaning. (Nemeyer, 1987, p. 13)

There is no way of knowing if a similar reconstruction process would have occurred had Todd participated in the DSAP instead of the particular therapy he experienced. It is suggested, however, that the focus of the DSAP on the articulation of strengths would have elicited positive self-constructions, such as "I am a motivator, a person who gets things done." If the purpose of personal construct therapy is to discern new themes that can portend a satisfying and hopeful future, it may be possible to move toward that goal more quickly with an intervention designed to do just that. Further studies will be necessary before we can evaluate the relative benefits of different approaches to these goals.

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Jerald R. Forster, Department of Education, DQ-12, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195.