Integration of Spirituality into the Strengths-Based Social Work Practice: A Transpersonal Approach to the Strengths Perspective

Jung Hee Lee[1], MSW, Ph.D.

Abstract

The strengths perspective in social work practice has called for a shift away from a focus on client problems to a focus on client capacities and possibilities for last decades. The strengths perspective has attracted the interest of social work practitioners and scholars by challenging social work's longstanding emphases on psychopathology and problem-solving methods in fundamental ways. However, some practitioners and researchers alike have continuously questioned the effectiveness, uniqueness, and relevance of the strengths perspective as a practice model. Particularly, practitioners have raised questions about the feasibility of its call to keep focus on strengths when working with clients in the midst of miserable situations. This article reviews philosophical principles of the strengths perspective as well as criticisms, and identifies the gap between its theoretical basis and practice based on Ken Wilber's transpersonal theory. This article then clarifies that the development of practitioners' personal spirituality is critical in fully vitalizing their strengths-based work with clients.

Key words: Spirituality, strengths-based practice, spiritually sensitive practice

1. Introduction

The idea of building on client's strengths was introduced to the social work profession in the name of the strengths perspective in the late1980s (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989; Rapp & Sullivan, 2014). Since then, the strengths perspective has encouraged those in the social work profession to recognize and honor the innate wisdom of the human spirit and the inherent capacity for transformation of every people. The strengths perspective has become a postmodern call for the social work profession to shift away from a focus on problems to a focus on possibilities. This call for a "dramatic shift" has gained ground among social work practitioners and educators within the entirety of the profession(Saleebey, 2006; Rapp & Sullivan, 2014), as it has been applied to mental health, child welfare, work with older adults, women's issues, substance abuse, and policy (Chapin, 1995; Macias, Kinney, Farley, Jackson, & Vos, 1994; Rapp & Chamberlain, 1985; Rapp & Goscha, 2004; Regehr, 1996; Ryan, Sherman, & Judd, 1994).As some have said, "it became an insult to be called problem-focused" in the social work arena (McMillen, Morris, & Sherraden, 2004).

However, despite the broadening understanding of and the growing influence on the movement to shift toward a deep reverence for the inherent possibilities and potentials of human beings, there have been continual questions about the strengths perspective as a practice model. Two main concerns have been raised. First, scholars questioned whether the strengths perspective is really different from conventional perspectives such as problem-focused practice (McMillen et al., 2004; Staudt, Howard, & Drake, 2001). Second, practitioners in the filed questioned whether it is realistic to keep their focus on the possibility and capacity of clients (Glicken, 2004; Schatz & Flagler, 2004; Taylor, 2006).

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[1] 600 Park Street, Hays, KS 67601, USA, Fort Hays State University, Department of Social Work, 1-785-628-4469 Email: jhlee3@fhsu.edu

Both concerns reveal the fundamental difference that the strengths perspective is based upon; the strengths perspective involves not simply the social worker's emphasis on or recognition of the visible strengths in clients, but is based on capacity and possibility of clients no matter how hopeless or unrealistic these capacities and possibilities look in appearance. Thus, social workers should be able to see and believe clients in the light of capacities, possibilities, and hopes no matter what their clients 'problems or situations. The strengths perspective asserts that it is through the worker's trust in clients' capacities that transformation and change can occur. As Weick and Saleebey (1998) emphasized, "It takes courage and a degree of trust for a social worker to look through this lens" (p.28).

Practicing from the strengths perspective requires that social workers develop different ways of seeing the whole potential of clients and their environments. However, practitioners often lack the eye to see beyond visible reality. In other words, the strengths perspective demands that practitioners develop a different level of seeing beyond the empirical and rational level. Consequently, what is it that helps practitioners see the whole potential of their clients beyond empirical and rational evidence? This article attempts to find an answer based on transpersonal theories. In particular, Ken Wilber, a prominent transpersonal theorist, provides valuable insight into that question. According to Wilber's transpersonal theory, all things are included and transcended in the spirit realm. Consequently, the whole potentials of people can be seen in the spiritual domain (Wilber, 1998). Wilber also insists on a new way to see this spiritual realm, which he called the "eye of the spirit". This way of seeing is very different from empirical and rational perspectives. Wilber's insight implies that we can recognize the whole potential of clients and genuinely believe that the clients can change toward possibilities no matter what the empirical and rational diagnoses. We do this, not through our eye of flesh (empirical eye) or the eye of mind (rational eye) but only through the eye of the spirit.

In this article, the historical traces of the strengths perspective in the social work tradition, its philosophical principles and limitations will be reviewed. Furthermore, the gaps between the strengths perspective's theoretical principles and social work practice will be identified by using Ken Wilber's transpersonal theory. In the end, the spirituality of the practitioners will be discussed as a vital element to ignite the power of the strengths perspective which is based on the genuine belief of clients' possibility and potential.

2. The Strengths Perspective: Overview and Limitations

2.1. Historical Traces of Strengths Orientation Practice

Historically, the social work profession has not been very sensitive to the importance of recognizing people's capacities (Weick, et al., 1989). Early social work operated from the concept of moral deficiency based on its Judeo-Christian heritage (Niebuhr, 1932). As social work developed into a profession it drew mainly from social science efforts to define people's problems (Bruno, 1957). Nevertheless, the reverence for the inherent capacity and latent possibility of people still can be found in the varied social work traditions and history.

The idea of building on people's strengths in social work practice dates back to the early settlement house movement. In the early twentieth century, the charitable organization society (COS) movement and the settlement house movement came together to form the profession of social work. However, the approaches of the two movements were extremely differently. Contrary to COS that aimed to reform personal problems or deficiencies, the social reform efforts of the settlement led to the development of a different view of the nature of clients and the role of social workers. They considered the worker-client relationship as a reciprocal exchange of learning and emphasized the value of client self-determination (Addams, 1893). The Hull-House, the beginning of the U.S. settlement house movement and in some ways the beginning of modern social work (Commager, 1961), was not a charity; it was like an empowering station at which a variety of programs to realize and increase immigrants' potentials were offered. The settlement house movement emphasized neighbor-to-neighbor helping and at the same time showed respect for the cultural heritage that each person brought to the United States (Addams, 1910).

However, social worker's adoption of the empirical and rational method used in social scientific theory out of the quest for professionalization turned the attention of social work back to human weakness or deficiency (Leiby, 1978). Alliance with the positivist paradigm encouraged diagnoses and analyses of the client in keeping with general theoretical principles. Social workers began to focus on "objective facts" about the client and the core process of social work involved resolving diagnosed problems (Bruno, 1957). From the 1930s to the 1950s, the purpose and nature of helping and the view of the client in the helping process was elaborated and debated between the functional and diagnostic schools of social work. Basically the differences between the two schools centered on their understanding of human nature.

The impact of Freudian psychoanalysis on social work practice in the 1920s had resulted in the development of diagnostic social work in which the worker functioned as an expert in diagnosing and treating client. However, by adapting Otto Rank's revisions of classical Freudian theory, the functional school recognized the dangers of the deficit orientation inherent in psychoanalytic theory. The functional school emphasized the role of agency-based social workers who believed in client's innate capacities for growth and change (Smalley, 1967). Otto Rank, who served on the faculty of the Pennsylvania School of Social Work, introduced a new concept of the will defined as a person's conscious and unconscious desires and strivings toward growth and change. This understanding of the will contributed to the thinking of the early functionalists such as Taft and Robinson who emphasized the nature of human growth (Timms, 1997). Ruth Smalley (1967), who wrote during a historical time period in which male pronouns were standard, stated, "The functional school sees the push toward life, health, and fulfillment as primary in human beings, and the human being as capable throughout his life of modifying both himself and his environment, in accordance with his own changing purposes within the limitations and opportunities of his own capacity and his own environment" (p.90). This different understanding of human growth and change also led to a sharp contrast about the role of the social worker in practice. The diagnostic group saw the social worker as the responsible professional who assessed and "treated" a pathological condition of clients by directing goals and treatment. In contrast, the functional approach did not view a social worker as the personal responsible for client change. The social worker functioned in an agency context as a helper who engaged in a relationship process with the client, which released the client's own power for growth and change (Smalley, 1967).

From the 1960s to the early 1980s, the social work profession demonstrated a growing desire to adopt rigorous social scientific approaches and objective research techniques. The efforts to rationalize practice moved steadily forward during this period. Some social work practice models, e.g., the life model, gave limited attention to the capacities, assets, and resources of the client (Gitterman & Germain, 1976), but attention to client capacities in these practice models represented "a cameo role in the larger drama of problems and problem-solving" (Saleebey, 2004, p.589). As Saleebey (2004) noted, "it is only recently that we have developed a more robust and articulate language about and consciousness of the great array of strengths, talents, resources that individuals, families, and communities possess" (p.589).

2.2. Philosophical Review of the Strengths Perspective

According to Saleebey (1996; 2001; 2002), the strengths perspective is based on two major philosophical principles: (1) liberation and empowerment, and (2) alienation and oppression. These two principles reveal that strengths perspective is rooted in the genuine belief of possibilities and potential in everyone. Liberation refers to the possibilities for people. As he says, "hope and belief in the possible is central to liberation" (2002, p.7). It emphasizes the reality of the possible. It also believes that everyone has innate powers and potential. Empowerment as a philosophy refers to the work of helping others see the wisdom and strength within and around them and to use these resources toward the possible. In the strict sense of the word, empowerment means to give power, to enable or permit, but the strengths perspective reenergizes the concept of empowerment by discovering the power within clients rather than returning it to them in a paternalistic manner (Perkins & Tice, 1995). Thus, empowerment begins with a belief in people's capacities for growth and change.

However, the strengths perspective is also based on the awareness that the circumstances around us can be repressive and harsh. It is our reality that there are still a lot of harsh things around us. Social institutions or oppressors limit or distort the possibility and potentials. Liberation, therefore, means restoration of this hidden and oppressed human energy and spirit. In this sense, social workers are required to believe that every client has the possibility and reason for hope, and to be dedicated to helping them find and achieve their hidden potential.

Several guiding assumptions of strengths-based practice as delineated by Saleebey (2002) include the following:

- Every individual, group, family, and community possesses strengths.
- Even trauma, abuse, illness, and struggle may be sources of challenge and opportunity.
- No one knows the upper limits of client's capacity to grow and change. One must hold high our expectations of clients and make allegiance with their hopes, visions, and values.
- Every environment is full of resources and opportunities

These philosophical assumptions indicate that the strengths perspective is deeply rooted in the genuine belief that everyone has and can realize their strengths, possibilities, and potentials. However, as noted in the next section, this belief has been criticized and challenged by researchers and social work practitioners alike.

2.3. Criticisms of the Strengths Perspective: Effectiveness & Uniqueness

Although the strength perspective is still maturing as a relatively new approach, some have challenged or questioned the uniqueness, effectiveness, and realistic use of the strengths perspective. (Gray, 2011; McMillen et al., 2004; Staudt et al., 2001; Taylor, 2006). For example, Staudt, Howard, and Drake (2001) reviewed the studies of 9 strengths-based interventions that reported positive outcomes. Their purpose was to examine how the strengths perspective is operationalized and implemented, and to examine the empirical support for its effectiveness. Their conclusions were summarized in two points. First, it is unclear how strengths-based interventions are different from traditional social work practice approaches. In other words, features of the strengths perspective are not uncommon to other practice models, even though its proponents describe the strength perspective as a kind of paradigm shift. Staudt and colleagues viewed the strengths perspective not a distinct practice model, but a value stance. Second, they also noted that there was little support for the use of the strengths perspective as an effective and unique practice model. Other case management interventions also had positive effects similar to strengths-based case management. Accordingly, they insisted that it was not possible to determine whether positive outcomes are due to the implementation of the strength perspective or to the delivery of additional services such as case management.

McMillen, Morris and Sherraden (2004) criticized the strength perspective from a different viewpoint. Their focus is not simply on the effectiveness of strengths-based interventions as a practice model but on the more fundamental issue, the identity of the strengths perspective. McMillen and colleagues defined the call for shifting to the strengths from problems of clients as "a grudge match" making social work students confused unnecessarily, and creating a bad impact (dichotomization) for those in the social work profession. They insisted that problem-focused and strengths-focused approaches are not dichotomous categories, and that historically social work has always needed and kept a dual focus. In other words, there is no distinct difference between the use of the strengths perspective and conventional social work practice approaches.

The practice community has also been somewhat critical of the relevance of the strengths perspective for social work practice. Practitioners often raise concerns that the strengths perspective simplifies the real problems and difficulties faced by clients (Glicken, 2004). In her book, Glicken (2004) quoted practitioners' criticisms insisting, "It [strengths-based therapy] isn't the answer for all too many of my troubled clients…The simplicity of the strengths model is almost childlike to me. It assumes that people can get better because… they can. If that were the case, a legion of people with serious health problems would be cured by now" (p.13), and "People are complex, and the strengths model simplifies the complexities of why people become miserable. … That's a very complex and exacting process, more than being endlessly positive with clients, I'm afraid" (p.14).These criticisms reveal that some practitioners still think that the strengths perspective is too simplistic or superficial to resolve the real problems of clients. Furthermore, Taylor (2006) insisted that the strengths-oriented theorists are placing mentally ill clients in danger by discouraging standardized diagnostic assessments, by suggesting that mental illness is not a neurobiological disease, and by relying too much on client's strengths to promote well being.

In response to these criticisms, strengths perspective proponents have insisted that focusing on the strengths of people is never a superficial approach but a very in-depth process (Glicken, 2004; Saleebey, 2002; Saleebey, 2004). Discovering positive attributes about clients is as complex and in-depth a process as finding out about negatives. As Saleebey (2004) remarked, these criticisms show that "it is painfully hard to give up the idea of problems and problem-solving as the essence of the work we do" (p.589). Regardless, researchers and practitioners continue to express an underlying disbelief in the effectiveness, uniqueness and relevance of the strengths perspective for social work practice. However, it is notable that it is often "painfully hard" for practitioners in the field to consistently use the strengths perspective in their work with clients. Examining those struggles social workers face in their practice consistently from a strengths-based approach may provide insights as to what is missing in the current strengths perspective writings.

The research studies examined by Staudt et al (2001) do demonstrate the effectiveness of strengths-based practice through positive outcomes. However, the more difficult question was whether the positive effects were due to the unique methods of the strengths perspective or due to the delivery of additional services, e.g., case management, that are common components of other conventional practices.

This leads to the next question about the uniqueness of the strengths perspective as a practice model: Is the strengths-based model really different from other practices? If it is, how can the strengths perspective best be differentiated from other conventional approaches? McMillen and colleagues (2004) insisted that they could not tell any distinct difference in strengths models from conventional problem-focused models that also have a double focus on balancing problems and strengths. Then, what truly make the strengths perspective different from other approaches?

2.4. The Spiritual Aspect of the Strengths Perspective

The strength perspective theorists make clear that it is different from traditional practices in fundamental ways (Saleebey, 2002; Weick et al., 1989). Saleebey (2002), who insisted the strengths perspective is a "dramatic departure" from conventional social work practice, says:

First and foremost, the strengths perspective is about discerning those resources, and respecting them and the potential they may have for reversing misfortune, countering illness, easing pain, and reaching goals. To detect strengths, however, the social work practitioner must be *genuinely interested in*, and respectful of, clients' stories, narratives, and accounts… In the end, clients want to know that you *actually care* about them, that how they fare makes difference to you, that you will listen to them, that you will respect them *no matter what their history*, and that *you believe* that they can build something of value with the resources within and around them. But most of all, clients want to know that *you believe they can* surmount adversity and begin the climb toward transformation and growth[emphases added] (p.14).

In other words, the strengths perspective moves beyond practitioners 'simple recognition or assessment of the strengths of clients. That is, the strengths perspective requires the social worker not only to discover clients' strengths and resources, but also to *genuinely believe* that all clients have possibilities and hopes to reverse misfortune and to grow and change no matter what the problems they have (Koenig & Spano, 2007). Chapin (1995) also repeats that the strengths perspective is "rooted in the belief that people can continue to grow and change and should have equal access to resources" (p.507). This implies that the strengths perspective is beyond the simple development of skills or techniques of therapy or treatment.

The essence of the strengths perspective that makes it distinct from the conventional social work practices does not only lie in whether or not practitioners consider client's strengths in their assessment process but also in whether social work practitioners can "genuinely" believe and honor the possible and potential of their clients no matter what their problems and situations. This belief and faith is spiritual in nature and represents a very essential aspect of the strengths perspective. Saleebey (2002) insinuates at the connections between the strengths perspective and spirituality when he states, "In the thicket of trauma, pain, and trouble you can see blooms of hope and transformation" (p.1).However, how can practitioners keep the belief that often conflicts with their rational understanding and knowledge of clients' very real problems?

2.5. Remaining question: Is it possible?

Social workers, who practice from the strengths perspective, know what they need to do for their clients, but they may not agree that "focusing on strengths" is always realistic. It seems unrealistic for social work practitioners to sustain their belief or hope in clients' growth – in the face of miserable realities filled with urgent and immediate client needs and complex problems. How can practitioners believe that clients can grow and change, when they are suffering in the midst of extreme problems? How can they apply the strengths perspective to clients with serious mental disorders that are clearly "neurobiological illnesses" (Taylor, 2006)?

They know, but they do not believe. In reality, practitioners may not genuinely believe that clients can grow or change, even though they can talk about hope and possibility. In a sense, practitioners might want to believe, but their rational understanding and empirical evidence or rational assessment of client realities leads to pessimistic views. If social workers see only through empirical and rational eyes, they are not different from the practitioners, who use a problem-focused approach but assert that they are already sensitive to clients' strengths and potentials. The strengths perspective needs the new eye, called the eye of the spirit.

3. Transpersonal Insights for Strengths Perspective

3.1. Transpersonal Perspective

Within the profession of social work, spirituality has been increasingly considered essential to an understanding of the whole person. Several authors (e.g., Besthorn, 2001; Bullis, 2013; Canda & Furman, 2010; Derezotes, 2006; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2012) have explored spirituality (e.g., transpersonal theory, deep ecology) and their relevance to social work practice. In particular, transpersonal theories provide the social work profession with an alternative framework by which social work professionals can recognize the potential for extended human developmental capacity (Robbins et al., 2012). The transpersonal perspective offers an expanded notion of human possibilities that goes beyond self–actualization and beyond ego.

The major concepts of the transpersonal psychology are summarized: (a) human experiences must be conceived of in ways that extend the view of consciousness beyond conventional ego boundaries: (b) the process of individuals and the social order toward full consciousness is evolutionary and developmental: and (c) the progress of individual and social development to higher level of consciousness has a repressive tendency (Besthorn, 2001). However, this categorization needs to be viewed cautiously because transpersonal theories have developed from varied intellectual backgrounds (Besthorn, 2001). Many thinkers have developed the empirical and theoretical bases of transpersonal theory, including Grof, Tarf, Vaughan, Walsh, Washburn and Wilber (Robbins et al. 2012). For the purpose of this article, Wilber's transpersonal theoretical insights will be presented as a new lens for vitalizing the strengths perspective. Finally, implications for social work practice using this expanded transpersonal view of the strengths perspective will be discussed.

3.2. Wilber's Spectrum Model

Ken Wilber names his complete transpersonal perspective as Integral Theory because it includes and transcends the insights and scope of analysis from previous psychological traditions and from many other disciplines and cross-cultural studies (Robbins et al., 2012). For the purpose of this paper, however, his spectrum model of human development is focused. Wilber (1996, 2000, 2001) developed his own theory entitled "the spectrum model of human development." Through an integration of a vast array of Western and Eastern traditions, his model (1996, 2000, 2001) proposed that a spectrum of levels of consciousness emerge in both individual and societal development as a process of human evolution. In his proposed holarchy, an ordering of increasingly complex, sophisticated, and comprehensive structures of consciousness and social organization, there are multiple complex stages of evolution in which human consciousness undergoes transformation by developing higher and deeper levels of sophistication in personal consciousness and societal infrastructure.

In particular, two concepts used in the early stage of his theory, the "Great Chain of Being" and the "Eye of the Spirit", provide valuable insights for enhancing the strengths perspective as a theoretical framework and as a practice model. The Great Chain of Being, which is considered an integral concept in most religious traditions, is defined as a view of reality as a rich tapestry of interwoven levels, reaching from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit (Wilber, 1990; 1997; 1998). Broad variation exists in these levels depending on each religious tradition. Some religions have only three basic levels in the Chain and others have seven, twelve, or more. However, the common, basic point is that reality is a series of nests within nests from matter to spirit. According to Wilber (1998), the Great Chain of Being is a series of concentric circles that reflect five levels of reality. The innermost circle is the physical or matter dimension; moving outward, the other successive levels are the life, mind, soul, and spirit. What is important in the concept of the Chain is that the higher levels of being transcend and include the levels below them. Thus, the highest level, the spirit domain, is the area where matter, body, mind, and soul are included and transcended. It implies that the whole potentials of reality can be seen in the spirit area. Wilber (1990) also insists that this spirit domain requires a different way of knowing just as the matter domain and the mind domain need a different way of knowing, and that the eye of the spirit is the very way of perceiving the spirit realm.

The Great Chain of Being and the eye of the spirit imply what the strengths perspective needs for its fullest function in the real practice setting. As described earlier, the strengths perspective is uniquely based on the belief that every individual has strengths and possibilities, and thus strengths-based social work practitioners are required to be able to recognize and believe the whole potential of clients. However, it can matter if the social work practitioners' ways of regarding clients stay at empirical and rational levels. This limitation is evidenced by practitioners' struggles in their practice with clients.

Therefore, the transpersonal focus on spirituality as a holistic domain where whole possibilities of human being can be seen and Wilber's insight of the eye of the spirit as a new way to see the whole potential of people provide important implications for the strengths perspective that regarding what is missing and what is to be done in social work practice. First, we need to identify the eye of the spirit more specifically to incorporate the eye of the spirit into the strengths perspective. .

3.3. New Way of Seeing

Wilber adapts familiar Christian terms to describe different ways of knowing that result in different kinds of knowledge and validity criteria. The spectrum of different modes of knowing, which roughly corresponds to the spectrum of consciousness, includes the eye of the flesh, the eye of the mind, and the eye of the spirit (Wilber, 1990). The familiar shapes of these ways of knowing are objective empiricism (the eye of the flesh), rationalism (the eye of the mind), and mysticism (the eye of the spirit). The validity of knowing through the eye of the flesh and the eye of the mind is generally accepted in modern culture. Empirical studies in the natural and social sciences (the eye of the flesh) and mathematical proof and evaluation of the logic of social theories (the eye of the mind) are familiar to most educated professionals. However, the eye of the spirit is not generally used as a way of knowing, and its claims to validity are treated with suspicion in our society. Wilber (1998), however, argues that the validity of spiritual knowledge can be assessed with similar standards as empirical and rational knowledge.

A variety of meditative and contemplative practices are associated with the eye of the spirit. The Buddhist practices of zazen and vipassana and Christian contemplative traditions represent exemplars for producing spiritual data (Wilber, 1998). The next strand, apprehension of the spiritual data, or understanding the meaning of the spiritual experience, emerges from practice usually with the help of a knowledgeable spiritual guide. Finally, the quality of the spiritual seeker's practice and his or her comprehension of the experience are evaluated by one or more representatives of the community of adepts. They confirm or disconfirm that they are seeing with the eye of the spirit. This process is analogous to a community of scholars confirming that the methods and conclusions drawn from an empirical study are correct. Wilber's idea of the different modes of knowing suggests that there are domains of consciousness beyond the rational (the eye of the mind). The higher level (the eye of the spirit) in the spectrum of consciousness transcends and includes the flesh (visible) dimension and the rational mind. Accordingly, awareness can increase as we go higher in the spectrum of consciousness, and we can see broader and deeper at these levels of consciousness. Therefore, the eye of the spirit is a holistic perspective, which can be cultivated by social workers to strengthen their views of clients' possibilities and potentials.

4. Integrating Spirituality into Strengths-based Practice

4.1. Holistic Understanding of Spirituality

To integrating a new eye, spirituality, into the strengths perspective, the close examination of spirituality discussed in the strengths perspective and social work in general is needed. First, as multiple meanings of the concept of spirituality are recurrent in the social work literature, it is necessary to review the meanings of spirituality currently mentioned in social work, and to define it clearly for the purpose of this article.

According to Carroll (1998), who discusses social work's conceptualization of spirituality, there are two different meanings of spirituality: Spirituality-as-essence and spirituality-as-one-dimension. The view of spirituality-as-essence refers to a core nature, which provides the motivational energy toward meeting the potential for self-development and self-transformation. From this perspective, spirituality is a way of life (Canda, 1999). On the other hand, the view of spirituality-as-one-dimension refers specifically to "one's search for meaning and relationship with God, the transcendent, or ultimate reality" (Carroll, 1998, p.11). This view considers spirituality to be the transpersonal dimension of a person. The dimension of relatedness to God or the transcendent may be framed within or separate from an organized belief system or religion. However, the presence of dual meanings in the concept of spirituality does not necessarily mean that these meanings are dichotomous. As Carroll (1998) points out, both meanings may be included in an overall concept of spirituality.

In this article, which focuses on spirituality of both clients and practitioners based on a transpersonal perspective, spirituality is defined in a holistic sense including both meanings; the wholeness of humanity and one component. Thus, as Wilber (1990; 1998) asserts, through the concept of the Great Chain of Being, spirituality is one level but it is also the domain where all aspects of reality are included and so the potential of human being is revealed. Through the development of a spiritual eye, practitioners can see hope and possibility in all area of clients.

4.2. Integration of Spirituality into Strengths Perspective

The strengths perspective as a theoretical framework already has a deep understanding of spirituality. In the strengths perspective, the capacity for self-transformation involves an inner sense of knowing or wisdom and is an internal response to opportunities for healthy development (Weick, 1983). Basically, this capacity led to the new social work paradigm which is based not on problem but on strengths. The main concepts of the strengths perspective such as self-healing and resilience are also very similar to other's description of spirituality-as-essence. More explicitly, Saleebey (2001) states, "Spirituality is quality of being that can bring a new level of understanding, appreciation, and energy to our work" (p.475).

From practitioners 'perspectives, however, spirituality is often considered only as one factor in the ability of people to cope with life problems but not as the wholeness of humanity (Glicken & Frazer, 2004; Gotterer, 2001; Palmer, 1999; Saleebey, 1997). Practitioners tend to focus on how to use or draw upon the spirituality of their clients as a strength in practice. As a result, while social worker's competence to tailor understandings and language about spirituality is simply based on a careful assessment of clients, the importance and examination of the spirituality of practitioners is overlooked. Little attention has been paid to the impact of the spirituality of practitioners on the intervention or on the relationship between clients and practitioners. Koenig and Spano (2007), however, emphasized that spirituality is an important component by which practitioners cultivate hope in their own lives and practices. In reality, unfortunately, most practitioners still feel unprepared by education or training for how to deal with the issues of the spirituality (Canda & Furman, 2010; Sheridan, et al., 1992; Murdock, 2005).

It is worth noting that the eye of the spirit is more than a way of seeing for practitioners as they work with clients. In other words, transpersonal awareness inspires a sense of mutuality in the practitioner beyond ego-bounded self. The eye of the spirit transcends the ego-bounded self and yields a sense of connection and communications with all other people and the environment on a global level (Wilber, 1998).This implies that the relationship between practitioner and client can be vitalized through spirituality. The quality of the relationship between practitioner and client has long been understood as a powerful tool for healing within social work practice (Strupp, 1995). Carl Rogers (1951) pointed out the important elements of the quality relationship such as respect, genuineness, concern, collaboration, and empathy. Particularly, in strengths-based practice, the role of practitioner as a collaborator, a facilitator, and a genuine partner is considered key to the success of practice. Spirituality of the practitioner is the power to ignite the underlying motive for social work, empathy or sacred compassion or unconditional love (Canda, 2001). Considering that the genuine relationship between practitioner and client is crucial in strengths-based practice, the spirituality of the practitioner can be a generator to create that genuine therapeutic relationship.

5. Implications

The preceding sections demonstrated that a transpersonal insight by Wilber could offer social work practitioners, who use the strengths perspective, a more expanded opportunity for empowering clients by recognizing and trusting client's whole potential and possibility. This implies that spirituality is critical to practitioners as well as clients in practice. The literature on spirituality and social work to date has focused upon practical applications of spirituality in mental health assessment and intervention mainly revolving around clients (Canda & Smith, 2001; Coholic, 2005; Dezerotes, 2006; Oxhandler, Parrish, Torres, & Achenbaum, 2015). The inclusion of client's spirituality in practice is a meaningful expansion for the social work profession. The need to integrate practitioner's spirituality into social work practice provides another opportunity for more holistic approach that enhances practitioner's ability to respect and empower client potential and possibility.

The next question then will be how to help social work practitioners develop the eye of the spirit or spirituality. Several authors indicate that social work professionals are inadequately prepared to undertake spiritually competent work with clients and advocate the inclusion of relevant material within the social work curriculum (Sheridan et al., 1994; Canda, 1998; Canda & Furman 2010; Canda et al., 2004; Oxhandler et al., 2015). According to Wilber (1998), to have the eye of the spirit is not a simple natural process. He states that as other levels of knowing do, different ways of knowing are required. Thus, developing a spiritual eye demands spiritual or transpersonal experiences, as the term "transpersonal" means beyond the person or beyond the ego (Cowley, 1993). Specifically, Wilber (1998) suggests meditation or contemplation as a way to "engage the injunction," i.e., to have the eye of the spirit.

In spiritually sensitive practice of social work, some methods and practices for spiritual development are recommended. For example, Canda and Furman (2010) list a variety of spiritual activities or training techniques helping practitioners and clients to grow spiritually; e.g., meditation, reflective journaling, reading religious books, prayer, forgiveness, yoga, etc. However, spiritually sensitive practice is not only about skills or techniques. Canda and Furman (2010) make it clear that spiritually sensitive practice "includes but is more than problem solving. It includes but is more than promoting coping, adapting, and recovering" and encourages clients to reach for "their immediate goals and their highest aspirations and potentials" (p.252). Canda (1999) also notes, "Spiritually-sensitive practice gives a deepened meaning to empathy. Expression of empathy does involve skills of accurate listening, critical reflection, and appropriate feedback to the clients. However, empathy cannot be reduced to skills or techniques… a person can intuitively connect with another, sensing the person's inner feelings, anticipating the implications, and gaining insight into the right response just at that particular moment" (p.104).

Professional understanding of spirituality through education must be required, but strengths-based practice must move beyond the understanding or recognition of the spiritual facts of clients. The practitioner must be also engaged in a constant process of self-reflection, search for meaning, and participate in the practice of disciplines that expand awareness to transpersonal levels (Canda, 1995). From a transpersonal perspective, "the helping situation is an opportunity for both client and worker to deepen their spiritual insight and to grow toward their highest potential, including transpersonal awareness if that is relevant to the client's needs and aspirations" (Robbins et al., 2012, p.383).

6. Conclusion

This article reviewed the philosophical principles of the strengths perspective and major limitations raised by some scholars and practitioners. The hidden gap between the theoretical framework of the strengths perspective and its practice has been examined using Ken Wilber's transpersonal theoretical concepts. Finally, while the strengths perspective as a theoretical framework is rooted deeply in spirituality and emphasizes the genuine relationship of client and practitioner based on genuine empathy, the strengths perspective as a practice model does not pay much attention to the importance of the spirituality of practitioners. Thus, the strengths perspective as a practice model has not moved beyond the empirical and rational level yet, although a new way of looking at clients, through the eye of the spirit, is necessary for practitioners. Spirituality, based on transpersonal theory, is a fundamental component of strengths based social work practice and it can help to sustain practitioners in "holding out hope" in clients' capacities for growth and change. Therefore, spirituality is critical to both clients *and* practitioners. The spirituality of clients has been primarily focused upon as an important resource of clients, but the spirituality of practitioners, who try to see and believe the possibility and potential of clients regardless of clients' visible problems, has not been explored deeply yet.

Transpersonal theories challenge social work practitioners who practice from a strengths perspective to move beyond the egocentric and rational assessment standards. It is the eye of the spirit, through which practitioners can see the spirit realm, the world of wholeness, vast potential and hope. Spirituality involves understanding the interconnectedness of all people and it moves us towards the realization of all our aspects (Canda, 1999). Spirituality is the power plant in which the genuine motive for helping people is generated. Saleebey (2002) states, "In the end, what will convince you to stay with this perspective is the spark that you see in people when they begin to discover, rediscover, and embellish their native endowments. That spark fuels the flame of hopeful and energetic, committed and competent social work" (p.284).The spirituality of practitioners is the spark to ignite the power of the strengths perspective, which is based on the genuine belief in the possibility and potential of clients.

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