

Academic Paper

Coachees experiences of strengths-based coaching when identifying their strengths with the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand how coachees experienced strengths-based coaching following the identification of their strengths with the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). The data was elicited from five semi-structured interviews and analysed with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study revealed three themes: strengths becoming conscious, development of subjective self and consciously applying strengths. The study has illuminated how strengths-based coaching helped to uncover strengths blind spots and raise coachees' awareness. Strengths became more tangible for the coachees providing a framework in coaching and facilitating discussions. Coachees were then able to consciously apply their strengths outside of coaching, making them feel more equipped for future challenges.

Keywords

strengths, VIA, self-awareness, psychometrics, coaching

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Introduction

The growing research in strengths across disciplines indicates strengths interventions are more beneficial than deficiency interventions (Meyers, van Woerkom, de Reuver, Bakk, & Oberski, 2015; Ruch, Niemiec, Mcgrath, Gander, & Proyer, 2020). Moreover, an increasing number of coaches are using strengths-based interventions with their clients (Elston & Boniwell, 2011; Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). This may be because they can help to counterbalance an individual's natural negativity bias making them useful for solution focused coaching conversations (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; A. M. Grant & O'Connor, 2018). Additionally, they are an integral component of positive psychology coaching, a popular emerging coaching approach (van Zyl, Roll, Stander, & Richter, 2020).

The 24-character strengths in the VIA taxonomy of character strengths and virtues arose within the paradigm of positive psychology. They feature prominently in the literature with over 800 articles published to date (Francis & Zarecky, 2017; Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). This research has helped to confirm both the reliability and validity of strengths and the accompanying psychometric test - the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) (Niemiec, 2018; Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). It is claimed the VIA-IS is the most popular strengths identification psychometric tool having been translated into 42 different languages and taken in almost every country of the world (Littman-Ovadia, Dubreuil, Meyers, & Freidlin, 2021; Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). Importantly for this study, it has been found that strengths-based practitioners are making use of the VIA-IS with over 70% surveyed likely to review the results of the survey within their practice (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021).

Definitions

Strengths have been defined as "...positive personality traits that reflect our basic identity, produce positive outcomes for ourselves and others and contribute to the collective good" (Niemiec, 2018, p. 2). Or, more simply as "a common language to understand what is best in human beings" (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021, p. 2).

Current research

As strengths have arisen within the paradigm of positive psychology, which is conceptualised as a scientifically backed discipline, there has been a focus on tight experimental, statistical methods (Lomas, Waters, Williams, Oades, & Kern, 2020; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The growing body of literature has linked strengths to many positive outcomes for individuals. The positive effect of strengths on wellbeing is the most robust finding, shown in many different studies, a range of settings and different populations (Ghielen, van Woerkom, & Meyers, 2018; Seligman, 2011; Wagner, Gander, Proyer, & Ruch, 2020). Strengths have also been linked to increased life satisfaction (Harzer & Ruch, 2016; McQuaid, Niemiec, & Doman, 2018) and relationship satisfaction with strengths use across life domains being positively associated with flourishing (Lavy, Littman-Ovadia, & Bareli, 2016; Wagner, Pindeus, & Ruch, 2021). They have also been found to help buffer the effects of work related stress (Harzer & Ruch, 2015), increase engagement (Peláez Zuberbühler, Coo Calcagni, & Salanova, 2020), contribute to a sense of meaning or seeing work as a 'calling' (Harzer & Ruch, 2012, 2016) and increase job satisfaction (Gander, Hofmann, & Ruch, 2020; Harzer & Ruch, 2013). These are exciting findings for coaches with the purpose of coaching spanning many different life domains (Grant & Cavanagh, 2018).

However, while quantitative research has enabled the construct of strengths to be isolated, empirically validated and linked to outcomes, it is important to note that constructs are neither isolated or simple within the social environment of coaching (Biswas-Diener, 2020; Francis & Zarecky, 2017). The VIA-IS comes highly recommended in the positive psychology literature yet it is still under researched within a coaching context (Richter, van Zyl, Roll, & Stander, 2021). There is a need for more contextual research showing how they 'work on the ground' by providing the human perspective, which qualitative research can help provide (Hefferon, Ashfield, Waters, & Synard, 2017).

There are some promising findings arising from qualitative studies looking at strengths within coaching. Strengths have been found to be a positive experience for coachees gaining more clarity, self-acceptance, increased self-reflection and insight leading to developing a positive secure sense of subjective self (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). Similarly, Zarecky (2014) found coachees gained more clarity with strengths-based coaching helping coachees to find their career passion. Strengths helped to elicit meaningful conversations and raise self-awareness to connect with their authentic selves. However, both studies looked at self-identifying strengths, not the VIA-IS.

Studies that have made use of the VIA-IS in coaching have found coachees experienced more self-efficacy and agency (Clifford, 2011) and increased confidence, self-belief and renewed engagement at work (Elston & Boniwell, 2011). Another interesting finding was how participants described their signature strengths as 'natural', enacting them without effort or conscious awareness (Elston & Boniwell, 2011). This implies they would not be consciously aware of their strengths without the survey bringing them into awareness. However, these studies were predominantly work focused and as coaching spans many life domains (Grant & Cavanagh, 2018) it is important to build on these findings with a broader coaching focus as the present study aims to accomplish.

Psychometrics in coaching

The VIA-IS is a psychometric tool so it is important to consider the literature on using psychometrics within coaching. Psychometrics are believed to make a valuable contribution to coaching and coaches have an increasing range of tools available to use to support coachees (Allworth & Passmore, 2012; Kurz & McDowall, 2007). The benefits touted for psychometrics include increasing self-awareness, opening new avenues for exploration and providing feedback and evaluation (Allworth & Passmore, 2012). Psychometrics have been termed a 'shortcut' in coaching (McDowall, 2017; McDowall & Smewing, 2009) with findings demonstrating they can lead to deeper discussion and quicker access to issues (Tina, 2018).

Psychometrics have been criticised by proponents of a facilitative coaching approach (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). It is argued that objective identification of strengths can disempower individuals creating an 'iron cage', with test users accepting the results as a label without challenge (Ford & Harding, 2007; Zarecky, 2014). Self-identifying strengths can be seen as a more suitable option within coaching giving coachees freedom to construct their own meaning (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020; Zarecky, 2014). However, individuals have a natural preoccupation with weaknesses and problems, termed the negativity bias, so may need help in identifying their positive characteristics and reframing their problems with the language of strengths (Baumeister et al., 2001; Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). As the VIA-IS facilitates an examination of a coachees strengths from an objective viewpoint it can uncover unconscious strengths and combat strengths blindness (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Niemiec & Pearce, 2021; Richter et al., 2021). Self-awareness has been linked to better coaching outcomes (Gatling, Castelli, & Cole, 2013), therefore the VIA-IS may make a useful addition to coaching.

Furthermore, psychometrics are not purely objective but rely upon interpretation that can lead to meaningful discussions within coaching (Kurz & McDowall, 2007). The 'iron cage' argument originated from management testing (Ford & Harding, 2007) but coaching differs by providing a safe space to explore their results and share experiences (Kurz & McDowall, 2007). Indeed, the value of psychometrics is purported to be in the mutual discussion following the test, allowing coachees to query and contextualise results (McDowall, 2017). This provides space for the subjective perspective and most psychometric tests purport that an individual is the best judge of their own characteristics or strengths (Carr, Cooke, Harris, & Kendall, 2012; Niemiec, 2018). Furthermore, strengths have been shown to be malleable and changeable with conscious effort (Kauffman, Silberman, & Sharpley, 2012; Niemiec, 2018). This flexibility can make a practical addition to coaching and contradicts the idea of them creating an iron cage (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). The VIA-IS therefore, should be able to fit within facilitative coaching provided that the coach creates a safe space to discuss and dispute the results (Kurz & McDowall, 2007).

Strengths as 'being' and 'doing'

It can be argued that strengths can make a valuable addition to coaching over other psychometrics as they are seen as both 'being' and 'doing' (Niemiec, 2018). The 'being' refers to identity, helping coachees build self-awareness of their characteristics, as already discussed (Niemiec & Pearce,

2021). The 'doing' aspect refers to the practical application of strengths. They can be used to foster client goals (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021), offer insight (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020) and reframe problems steering the conversation into solution-focused questioning, found to be more beneficial than problem focused coaching (Grant & O'Connor, 2018; Linley & Harrington, 2006). This practical application of strengths makes them unique to other personality psychometrics.

Aim and rationale

The study had a specific purpose of improving understanding of strengths-based coaching for practitioners by providing the viewpoint of the coachee. The study sought to answer the research question: What is the experience of coachees of strengths-based coaching using the VIA-IS to identify their strengths?

Methodology

This study was conducted using an interpretivist epistemology aiming to explore and understand the subjective internal meaning making of the participants instead of uncovering an objective reality (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). It takes a constructivist ontological position and the outcome is a subjective representation of the way the participants have made sense of their experience (Bryman, 2016).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) aims to provide rich, detailed examinations of individuals' lived experience of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). It is idiographic in that it recognises the particular individual experience before moving to more general claims (Smith & Osborn, 2015) therefore recognising the importance of each individual experience. This makes it well suited to coaching research because coaching is idiographic by nature.

Participants

Participants were purposively sampled. They had to be UK based and have experienced strengths-based coaching identifying their strengths with the VIA-IS within the last 24 months with a qualified coach. To find potential participants I utilised my network, referrals, gatekeepers, and the snowballing effect. I provided an information sheet for the coaches to provide to their coachees to contact me for more information. A total of five participants were recruited, all female, and they were given pseudonyms for anonymity.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender
Isabel (pilot)	35-45	Female
Jenny	35-45	Female
Sian	20-25	Female
Rita	55-65	Female
Tasha	45-55	Female

Table 2: Step-by-step analysis process

Step 1: Starting with the first case: reading and rereading.	As the purpose of IPA is to make sense of the participant’s world and their unique experience it was vital to immerse myself in the data before making any kind of analysis. This immersion in the data is the first step. It started with me manually transcribing the interviews. Then reading through the transcript while listening to the recording enabling me to check the transcript for inaccuracies. Once all interviews were transcribed, I double spaced them and created wide margins for comments before printing them to read and analyse. Printing a paper copy is thought to help create a sense of close connection with the material (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Each transcript was read through twice more before undertaking any analysis.
Step 2: Exploratory Noting	On the third reading I made exploratory notes in the wide margin on the right, noting anything of interest but staying close to the participants explicit meaning (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Key words, phrases, and the use of language were explored.
Step 3: Constructing experiential statements.	The third step involved creating concise experiential statements based on the exploratory notes. The experiential statements were written to the left of the transcript completing the annotated transcript.
Step 4: Searching for connections across experiential statements.	Next the experiential statements were sorted manually. A second copy of the transcript was cut into separate statements which were scattered randomly on a large surface to break up the initial ordering. This process provided a birds eye view enabling connections to be made (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). The experiential statements were then clustered for close meaning.
Step 5: Naming the personal experiential themes (PETS) and consolidating and organizing them in a table.	Each cluster of experiential statements was named and became the PETS. These were then organised into a table on a spreadsheet with sub themes listed.
Step 6: Continuing the individual analysis of other cases	The same process detailed above was then followed for each transcript in turn.
Step 7: Working with personal experiential themes (PETSs) to develop group experiential themes (GETs) across cases	Once PETS were identified for each participant, I printed the spreadsheets and used coloured highlighters to group the PETS into GETs. They were created by identifying similarity and differences between participants. They were then grouped into a table including the PETS and annotations for each one. At this stage some PETS were discarded for lack of commonality or due to not answering the research question.

The data collection method was semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was prepared with seven open questions that aimed to elicit a rich understanding of the entire experience. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and given the opportunity to gather more information prior to commencing the interview. During the interview participants were encouraged to provide as much information as possible and recommended prompts were used to help them to expand on their thoughts (Smith et al., 2022). The interviews were transcribed manually, a time-consuming option but useful for full immersion in

the data. It was possible to listen to the way things were said including intonation, pauses and emphasis to further understand the meaning behind the words.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed prior to the next interview being conducted but analysis did not commence until every interview had taken place and been transcribed. Once all five interviews had been transcribed, the data analysis commenced. The process of analysis followed the step-by-step guide outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022), the process was as follows:

The process was broadly chronological but also involved an iterative process, returning to previous steps to further refine the analysis.

Validity

All five interviews provided high quality data, lasting between 36 – 79 minutes with a mean of 60.6 minutes. The study was assessed against the journal article reporting standards for qualitative research and was found to reach the criteria (JARS-qual) (Levitt et al., 2018). Furthermore, consideration was given to quality measures outlined to enhance the quality of IPA outputs in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022). It was ensured the study maintained the depth required of an IPA study by eliminating GET's that were not salient or relevant to the research question, thus allowing a more focused in-depth look at fewer themes.

Reflexivity

As a strengths-based coaching practitioner it was essential to put my preconceived ideas aside and approach the interviews with a focus on purely the individual experience. To avoid a positive bias in the questions I gained feedback from my supervisor and fellow research students which helped me reword questions for neutrality. In the actual interviews, I used clean language and followed the participants lead in understanding their experience. Feedback was sought out to challenge my initial data analysis and enhance my neutrality, allowing a dialogue around the themes to enable reflection on my own analysis and interpretation.

Ethics and Confidentiality

The study was ethically approved by Oxford Brookes University. Participants were kept fully informed about the study, what would happen to their data and the risks and benefits of partaking in the research. Each participant was required to read through and sign the information sheet prior to the interview. Consent was gained again verbally prior to the interview commencing. Participants were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity in the study. Both the recordings and transcripts have been kept in a password protected folder and no identifying details have been shared.

To avoid coachees feeling coerced into the study or having coaches release confidential information, an information sheet was provided for coaches to share with coachees. They could then make the decision to make contact if they wished.

Limitations

The way participants were recruited led to a possible limitation of the study. Coaches may be more likely to ask their coachees to participate if they had a favourable experience, leading to a positive bias. To negate this limitation, coaches were requested to forward the information sheet to a range of coachees even if they felt they did not have a favourable experience with strengths. However, there is no way of assuring this happened and all coachees interviewed had a positive experience.

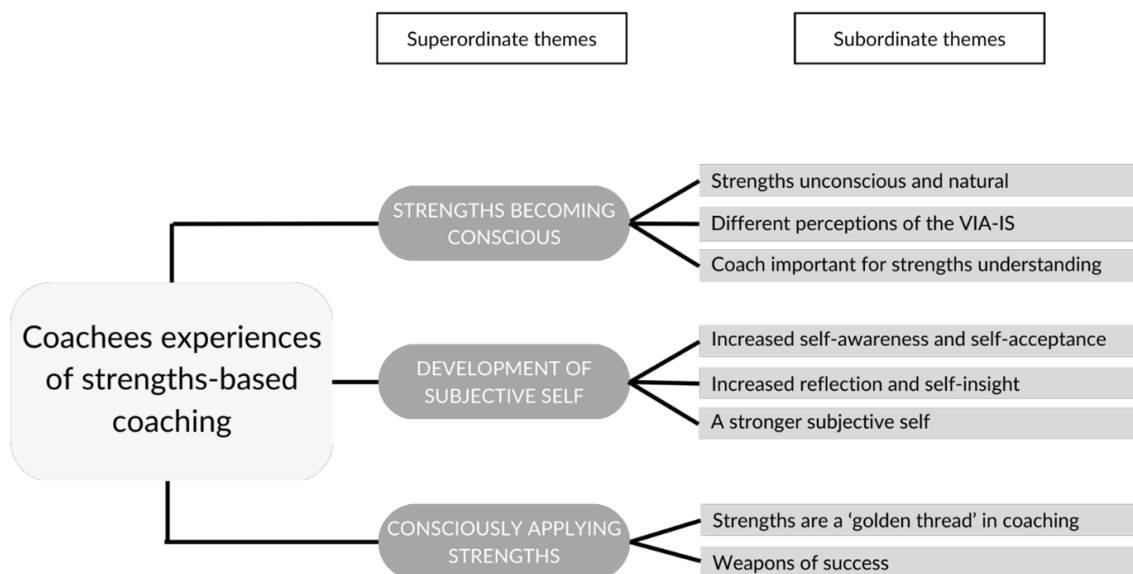
Findings

The five participants shared the experience of a strengths-based coaching 'journey'.

I'm in a very different place now to where I was 12 months ago - yeah a hugely different place to where I started on this with (Rita)

This journey was divided into three superordinate themes (Figure 1) starting as an internal experience where their strengths became conscious. The exploration of their strengths led to their strengths becoming more tangible and being able to draw on them both within and outside coaching.

Figure 1: Identified Themes



Theme One: Strengths becoming conscious

The first theme emerged in relation to the participants experience of identifying their strengths with the VIA strengths survey and the discussion that followed.

Strengths unconscious and natural

Strengths felt natural to the participants because they did not have conscious awareness of them: “[...] well big deal, always came natural to me of course you don’t recognise it as a strength” (Jenny).

They described them as a ‘blind spot’ but interestingly, they were unsurprised when finding out their strengths “...just making you aware of something you already knew if that makes sense” (Tasha).

They described the way the survey helped bring them into conscious awareness using language such as “it just brought it all together” and “able to articulate who I was”. This suggests having the language to describe their strengths helped bring the once unconscious natural feeling strengths into their conscious awareness.

Different perceptions of the VIA-IS

The actual task of completing the survey was simple and easy with participants describing it as “*well designed*” and “*an easy process*”. However, the level of significance of the survey itself and the results converged among the participants. Two of the participants felt it was not a significant aspect of their experience describing it as “*just a little tool*” and “*not the be all end all*” depicting a lack of significance. While one coachee described how they did not resonate with the online tool but enjoyed discussing their strengths with their coach.

In contrast, Jenny stated “[...] *it’s proof it’s there in black and white there’s a report so it’s gonna be very difficult to argue in a way*”. The validation the strengths survey gave her was a significant part of her experience and helped her to ‘accept’ her positive qualities which she found difficult prior to the survey. This theme shows converging experiences of using the strengths survey amongst the participants.

Coach important for strengths understanding

A salient experience among participants was not fully understanding their strengths from the survey and needing to discuss and explore them with a coach to understand them. “*I didn’t know what to do with it and what that meant*” (Jenny)

The coach was an important aspect of their experience.

“I don’t really know what to do with these strengths - like how are they strengths? and I didn’t quite feel that I had these strengths yet.” (Isabel).

They described how working through their strengths with the coach “*asking the right questions*” and reflecting on their experiences of using strengths helped them to “*feel real*” (Rita). It was a process of reflection that helped their strengths feel real for the coachees.

Theme two: Development of subjective self

The strengths helped coachees raise their self-awareness and accept themselves along with helping them reflect and gain valuable insights which led to the experience of a stronger subjective self.

Increased self-awareness and self-acceptance

Strengths helped the coachees to ‘see’ themselves: “*I can now see that is uniquely me*” (Jenny) They acted as a useful reflection tool to increase coachees self-awareness. Coachee self-awareness supported self-acceptance particularly when considering their lesser strengths “*also looking at not even at your strengths but the different character flaws you have as well and accepting them I think that’s important as well*” (Sian).

Increased self-reflection and insight

Strengths were described as a “*framework for understanding who I was*” (Rita).

What is wrong with you Jenny? What is wrong with you? [...] but once I’d done the VIA test, I was like well that’s why I’m getting so upset because it’s my strength and my value and it is everything I stand for (Jenny)

Jenny experienced a powerful insight from understanding her strengths which had a big impact on her career. Other participants also found strengths useful for “*retrospective understanding of yourself*” (Tasha). They acted as a reflection tool to look back on situations and their own behaviour providing a greater understanding and further insight.

A stronger subjective self

Strengths were not simply personality traits to the participants they appeared to be more entwined with their values and beliefs:

[...] important and good to understand you know this is what I stand for and that is who I am and what I believe in and that's really me at my core and how I conduct myself and my relationships with others and if other people don't want to do that that's their problem so suddenly it felt like I could distance myself from it and say ok well this is me and I am true to myself (Jenny)

The use of language *'what I believe in'* showed how strengths are interwoven with her values and her sense of self. Stating *'me at my core'* depicts a deep identification with her strengths, a sense of authenticity. It also depicts a strong independent subjective self where she is confident in who she is and what she stands for. She expresses an authentic self where she is not influenced by others, being instead, true to herself. This rhetoric was echoed by other participants,

"It is something that is really unique about me, not everybody is like this and that's when I was like that's pretty cool, and I should be really proud of that, and it can be used in a lot of situations to you know to benefit me but also to benefit another person" (Isabel)

There was a sense of differentiation and becoming a unique and authentic self. The development of a stronger subjective self was encapsulated by Rita who described a dramatic shift in her sense of self:

the whole process has been transformational the circumstances for me were quite marked - you know it was a very real break point [...] I just kind of felt a completely different person as a result of that process (Rita)

Another participant referred to the shift as a *"day and night kind of change"*. The language depicts a dramatic shift in the participants sense of self.

Theme 3: Consciously applying strengths

After discussing and exploring their strengths the strengths became tangible to the coachees allowing them to use them both within and outside coaching.

Strengths are a 'golden thread' in coaching.

Strengths were used as a framework or structure in coaching:

"it's almost like a golden thread that goes through the coaching sessions, and I quite like it" (Jenny).

"It gave them very much a structure which was good" (Sian).

They were also used to help coachees when facing challenges *"you can figure out why you are stuck or where your strengths can get you unstuck"* (Tasha). Tasha is describing how strengths can be used to reflect on an issue but also be applied to help move forward. Strengths, therefore, were experienced as an integral part of the coaching experience, referred to as the 'cornerstones' of the coaching experience depicting them as an essential foundation.

Weapons of success

Strengths became almost physical for the coachees who described them as 'concrete', 'tangible', 'tools', 'shields' or 'weapons of success'.

"That shield that's my strengths and I know their gonna be there and they're gonna help me to manage these challenges better." (Isabel)

Coachees felt "equipped" and "empowered" particularly in challenging situations because they could draw on their physical strengths. They conveyed a deep trust in their strengths being there when they needed them.

... it was absolutely fundamental because every time I got stuck with something and in fact I have I think probably more than once in the last 12 months been stuck with something and have gone back to this and thought yeah hang on, I can do this I have done this I do it in this way (Rita)

Other participants explained they are "learnings that can be applied again and again" and "they'll always come in useful". Strengths appeared to provide a protective effect with one coachee explaining how they will help prevent a future burnout. The coachees expected strengths to play an important role in their life after coaching.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand how coachees experience strengths-based coaching following identifying their strengths with the VIA-IS. The 'strengths journey' the participants embarked on started as an internal process of becoming conscious of their strengths, increasing their self-awareness and giving the coachees a tool to reflect and gain insights into themselves and their behaviour. This led to a development of their subjective self and feeling more empowered and equipped by being able to draw upon their strengths.

This notion of strengths feeling natural or dormant until they were identified was observed in previous studies (Elston & Boniwell, 2011; Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). It links with the concept of strengths blindness where an individual does not recognise a strength because it feels natural to them (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Niemiec, 2020). Strengths blindness may be because people underestimate their strengths or they believe their actions and thoughts are more similar to others' and do not recognise their own uniqueness (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). This idea seems plausible because as the participants became more aware of their strengths, they also experienced feeling more unique and authentic as if they were differentiating themselves from others.

The psychometric test, therefore, did help coachees become aware of their blind spots which aligns with the literature that states psychometrics make a valuable addition to coaching or act as a 'shortcut' to self-awareness (Allworth & Passmore, 2012; McDowall, 2017). Increasing self-awareness is an expected finding as it is a common theme in the literature (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Peláez Zuberbühler et al., 2020; Zarecky, 2014). The increased self-awareness seemed to enhance feelings of self-acceptance which was identified by Lucey and van Nieuwerburgh (2021). Participants used strengths to reflect about themselves and their retrospective behaviour. This reflection helped the coachees to gain valuable insights. This was also highlighted in previous studies (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020; Govindji & Linley, 2007). Insight refers to understanding one's own thoughts, feelings and behaviour while reflection is the inspection of thoughts, feelings and behaviour (Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002). Self-awareness has been shown to enhance coaching (Gatling et al., 2013) and self-reflection is an important component for transformative learning to take place (Mezirow, 2006), indicating strengths can make a valuable addition to coaching.

The findings suggest a developmental process took place in coaching with strengths acting as a catalyst through increasing self-awareness. It is not possible to know if the developmental process the participants experienced was due to the strengths of the coaching as this may have happened within coaching regardless. However, the way the participants described their experience made it clear that strengths were an integral part of the process for them. Strengths were seen as a 'framework', 'cornerstone' or 'golden thread' of the coaching. This golden thread acted as an anchor point and appeared to help steer into solution focused discussions found to be more effective than problem focused coaching (Grant & O'Connor, 2018; Linley & Harrington, 2006).

It has been found strengths can be used in the conscious pursuit of goals (Elston & Boniwell, 2011; Haslip & Donaldson, 2021), applying them is also recommended for development of strengths and increased wellbeing (Niemiec, 2018). This application to problems, solutions and goals aligns with the 'doing' aspect of strengths (Niemiec, 2018). This study provides further nuance and depth to this concept. It was evident that strengths became something physical described as '*weapons of success.*' Coachees conveyed a deep trust in their strengths being available when they needed them, feeling '*empowered*' and '*equipped*' depicting enhanced feelings of self-efficacy, observed in previous studies (Clifford, 2011; Zwart, Korthagen, & Attema-Noordewier, 2014). This could be interpreted as fulfilling the competency need from self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Further research here may elicit a deeper understanding of the link between positive outcomes and the role of strengths.

The research unearthed how strengths can provide a protective effect, a 'shield', which has been termed the 'buffering effect' (Niemiec, 2020). Strengths have previously been found to buffer the effect of workplace stress (Harzer & Ruch, 2015) and this study adds further understanding to how this may take place. Coachees felt more '*equipped*' to deal with adversity because they had their strengths to draw on. Again, the physicality of strengths helped participants feel more competent. Further research could explore how strengths impacts resilience.

The study raised important questions about the use of the VIA-IS in coaching and hopefully will encourage further research and discussion. The VIA-IS was found to be simple to complete making a useful 'homework' task. However, some coachees did not resonate with the survey, although, it did not appear to dampen their experience either. It has been argued that the results of a psychometric test can be adopted without question, forming an 'iron cage' (Ford & Harding, 2007; Zarecky, 2014). Jenny stated "*[...] it's proof it's there in black and white there's a report so it's gonna be very difficult to argue in a way*" which supports this argument. However, upon examination of her full experience, this validation was significant for her because she required the objective validation to recognise and accept her positive qualities. Sometimes, the natural negativity bias and the unconscious natural usage of strengths may make it difficult for an individual to recognise and identify their own strengths (Baumeister et al., 2001; McQuaid et al., 2018). Therefore, it could be argued that objective strengths identification may provide a useful starting point in coaching particularly when coachees have low self-awareness or confidence in themselves (Kurz & McDowall, 2007).

Strengths were used to 'articulate' who the participants were, aligning with the idea of the common vocabulary of strengths that was found to elicit valuable discussions (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021; Zarecky, 2014). This ties in with Burr's (2015) notion that language can shape reality and meaning is created through social interactions. Indeed, appreciative enquiry research shows positive language cultivates change within organisations (Cojocar, Bragaru, & Ciuchi, 2012). Therefore, the language of strengths may help the coachees to create a new reality through the interaction of coaching. Participants explained how the discussion made the strengths 'feel real', supporting this constructionist argument. If the language is what creates the reality, this pulls into question the value of using an objective measurement of strengths. If part of that reality is already shaped by test results, the individual does not have full freedom to shape their own reality (Zarecky, 2014) thus making a case against the use of the VIA-IS within coaching.

Yet, coachees were unsurprised by their strengths suggesting they felt they were accurate. They also emphasised the importance of the discussion with the coachees indicating they were comfortable discussing and disputing results. This contests the 'iron cage' argument, instead showing the VIA-IS fits within facilitative coaching because the coach creates the safe space necessary to use psychometrics effectively (Ford & Harding, 2007; McDowall, 2017). Nevertheless, it is important to tailor interventions to the client (Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2014) so more research would be useful to ascertain which identification tools suit which coachees.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to the literature on strengths-based coaching by providing the lived experience of five coachees. It has illuminated how strengths may work in practice by uncovering blind spots and raising self-awareness, acting as a catalyst for developing a stronger subjective self. Moreover, strengths can act as a framework for coaching, being drawn on to facilitate solution focused questioning. The study has raised questions about strengths identification tools and aims to open a dialogue and encourage further research. It was evident the VIA-IS was not suited to all clients, so more exploration is needed to uncover which strengths identification methods are suited to different coachees. Additionally, it has provided further nuance and depth to the understanding of the 'doing' aspect of strengths. The physicality of strengths was a surprising discovery that could be linked with feelings of self-efficacy or increasing resilience. This would make a fascinating area for further study.

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