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JOURNAL ARTICLE

One step at a time: *Talking about strength-based approaches*

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In this article, I will describe climbing metaphors I have been using to talk about strength-based approaches in my work with social-care teams and families known to them. I am part of a team of embedded CAMHS clinicians in the London Borough of Newham. Our roles were created in the context of the borough's attempt to introduce systemic approaches to the children's social-care department (Goodman & Trowler, 2011). We previously wrote, in an earlier issue of *Context*, about our experience and learning (Totsuka *et al.*, 2014).

Mountain metaphor

"We social workers are so risk-averse, we tend to go for the kill" (Sylvia, social worker).

The first time I mentioned this metaphor was during a consultation with a social worker, Sylvia, who was assessing the children's needs for contact in the context of the parents' acrimonious separation. We talked about the need to engage both parents in the process, in particular the father, whom Sylvia felt less able to relate to, partly due to the background and partly perhaps gender. She liked my suggestions of questions focusing on the father's strength as a parent.

She made the comment above in this context, and reflected how risks and difficulties can easily become the focus of her work rather than building a relationship with the families. For example, a social worker who has concerns about the state of the family's home may 'go for the kill' by pointing this out to them. She wondered what it was like for them to feel criticised by a social worker on the first visit. Of course, this would depend on the level of risk. In some situations, the risk may be so great that immediate action may have to be taken. In this situation, the highest context marker is safety, and considering the family's response may have to take second place, at least temporarily. Sylvia was raising a question as to what options a social worker has when a situation is not this critical. Would they 'go for the kill', or would they attempt to build the relationship with the family? This seemed to describe the fine balance social workers have to strike in both assessing and managing risks, and helping a family change by engaging them and building on their strengths.
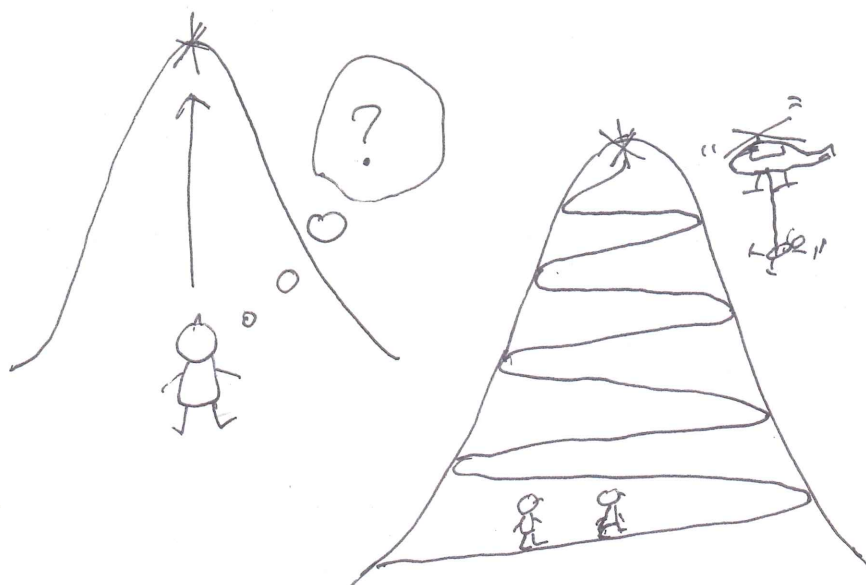

Figure 1.

At the end of this consultation, I drew a mountain with a parent at the bottom (Figure 1) and explained the illustration as follows.

I wonder if it feels impossible when a parent is told to get to the top, looking up to where they are supposed to get to, but with no idea how to. It must feel like being asked to climb Everest. The worker's skill is in helping the family find a way to take one step at a time. If the slope is too steep, you can't walk up. You could try to climb straight up, but that's harder and more dangerous. So, you climb by reducing the angle of the slope (indicating the zigzags). *If the foothold is poor, the guide (social worker or therapist) makes the steps. This enables the family to walk one step at a time (in other words, creating as it were, a scaffolding). Walking uphill is not too different from walking on the flat, which the family is used to. You are using your feet, your natural and existing strengths. Steps have to be small. Small steps taken at a steady pace are better than rushing and taking big steps, which are more tiring and risky. When you come to steeper rocky sections and you need to use your hands, the skill is in still keeping your weight mainly on your feet, rather than pulling up with your arms, which are weaker and tire more easily. Of course, there are times the situation is so risky and critical – there may be someone with a serious illness or injury, the terrain proves to be impossible to get through – that urgent action has to be taken to rescue people by helicopter (in social-care terms, removal of children or initiating care proceedings). You are right, we need to build the relationship with the family: they are likely to follow you (for example, take advice) if they trust you and have a good relationship with you.*

Alfred Vogel used a similar metaphor. *"I am like a mountain guide. I can't carry*

you. I can go in front of you, but you have to walk" (Keough, 2006, p. 33). One problem with this metaphor is the assumption I am making here that the person can walk, which I am aware is not always the case. The point I wish to make is that, whatever capacities a person has, his or her existing strengths can be utilised.

Sylvia's comment echoes the article by Featherstone *et al*. (2014), which describes the social and political discourse that influenced 'early intervention' and 'child protection' and provides a context that shaped risk-averse and procedure-driven social work practices. They advocate 'family support' and approaches that *"...emphasise families' capabilities rather than their deficits and workers' abilities to cheer on change and encourage hope. Checking under beds and telling people what to do should not be our raison d'être. If it is, then we are definitely part of the problem!"* (p. 1748). They urge us to consider inequalities in a society as a major organising factor for our clients (see Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and for our relationship with our clients: *"Distances between groups are intensified, including between social workers and their service users. This is a really important insight for us to take on"* (p. 1738).

Risk – strengths: dichotomy or 'both/and'?

In consultation with another social worker, we discussed areas she could explore further with the family. For example, it was hard to hypothesise why the standard parenting program was not working for this parent without knowing her history and experience of, and beliefs about, parenting. The social worker realised talking to a school-refusing young person about school is unlikely to engage her. We discussed joining (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981) and a problem-free talk such as asking about her interests (e.g. Freeman *et al*., 1997, Ch. 2). This thoughtful social worker reflected on the competing agendas of engaging the family and assessing and addressing risks and problems.

From systemic family-therapy perspectives, these are not mutually exclusive. The recent issue of *Context* (137) illustrated a breadth of systemic practice in social care across the country and demonstrates how systemic practice is used effectively to reduce risks to children

Figure 2. A zigzag ski-touring route

and young people. In the process of building the relationship with the family, the task of addressing risks is facilitated. I believe these two processes are mutually enhancing.

For example, I believe the families are more likely to tell us about their struggles if they have a positive relationship with us; learning about the risks and strengths would allow us to hypothesise the problem and what approaches are more likely to be helpful, and decide if there is time for therapeutic work or a 'helicopter' has to be called in. A social worker colleague offered the following comment:

It is so easy to get almost obsessed with the 'problem' and trying to bring about change, as that is why we are working with the family. However, getting to know the person without the problem is essential, not only does it help you build a good relationship and shows you care but you also learn what their motivations are in life and only by knowing this can you promote a positive change in their life. (Merle Nazareth, social worker)

Similarly to the chapter "Getting to know the child apart from the problem" in Freeman *et al.* (1997), I believe it is equally important to 'get to know' and engage the parents. During Matthew Selekman's live consultation (2011), he was observed to spend a lot of time to get to know each member of the family, including the parent. He asked the children, *"When you are at your best friend's house, and if they ask you 'What are the two qualities*

you respect most about your mum', what would you say?" I have used this question on many occasions since and am often amazed how young people come up with the answers, even in the context of severe conflict with their parents. One father, who came to a CAMHS with his son due to behavioural problems at school and in the community, was barely making any verbal or eye contact with him. When I asked the above question, the son said, *"He (father) has always been there for me"* and the father became tearful. This seemed to help him shift from anger and frustration to being able to think about his son's strengths and how he could be supported at home and school.

I wonder if strength-based approaches are sometimes seen as a rather 'soft' approach, perhaps not focusing enough on the risk. My take on the strength-based approach is to help the family find the next-best foothold by hypothesising about their strengths, motivation, circumstances and constraints; thus maximising the chance of them taking a step forward.

Ski touring provides another metaphor for the obstacles and challenges along the way. This is a way of travelling around the mountains in winter away from the noise and bustle of ski resorts. As there are no ski lifts it involves putting skins on the back of the skis to walk up the hill (Figures 2 and 3). Typically, skiers create a track that zigzags up the mountain, which makes the gradient more manageable

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Figure 3. Ski touring. Hannah Burrows-Smith, a mountain guide, leads the way.

path, to share the load and ensure no one gets too exhausted. When the surface is too icy, the guide cuts the steps with an ice axe. It is important to have the right tools: backcountry skiers always carry a transceiver (to search for an avalanche victim, or to be searched for), shovel and probe.

There are numerous other mountaineering metaphors for the process of therapy; for example, balancing risks and safety. There is no such thing as risk-free climbing and the only way to avoid risks completely is not to climb at all. Without safety measures, there could be a fatal consequence. You need tools, support, intuition, as well as rational thinking and confidence, but also the humility to know one's limits and when to retreat – I could go on.

Acknowledgement

(families may have different level of skills, strengths and resources and the guide needs to find the right angle for them). At the end of each section, skiers have to turn and change the direction. If the slope is not too steep, there is an option to gradually change the direction, but most of the time, skiers are required to perform an uphill kick turn (Figure 4). This is a challenging technique that requires knowledge, skills, agility, flexibility and much practice – for those who are interested, there are numerous youtube videos, e.g. *How To Perform An Uphill Kick Turn*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjkCTQLicHo (accessed 20/2/15). This is where families face another challenge after some work; perhaps the progress stalled, they experience another crisis or further changes are expected by the network. Before the turn is attempted, skiers first have to find or make a good base by stomping on the snow, which symbolises the importance of preparation. Groundwork is crucial before a challenging move.

It is always much easier to follow an existing path. If there is none, the guide usually makes a path, but group members often take it in turns to lead and make a
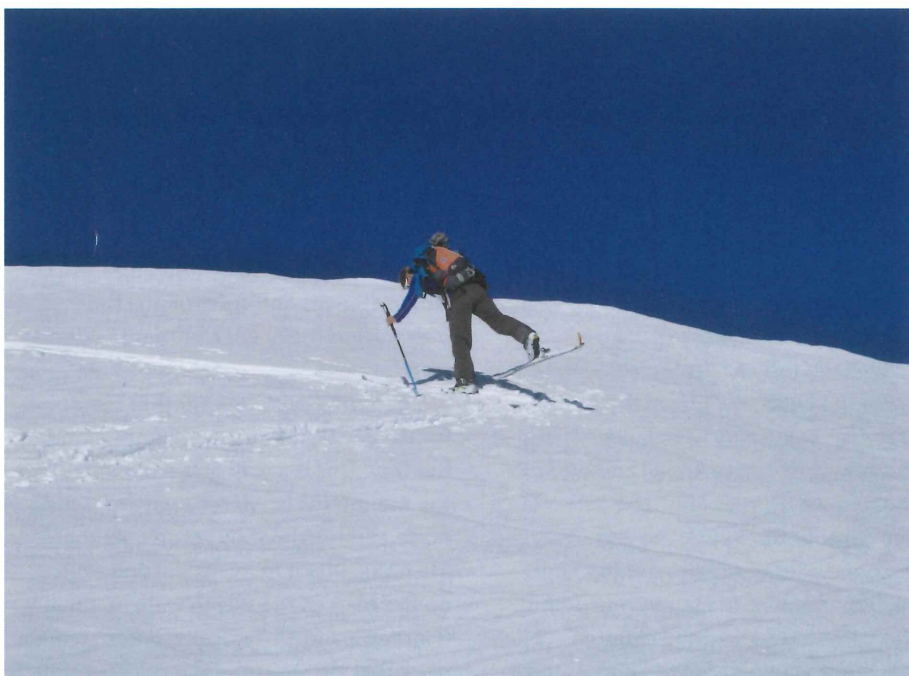
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Figure 4. Uphill kick-turn by Hannah Burrows-Smith.

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