

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK for Constructing a More Positive Self-Identity

(How DSAP Might Work)

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Introduction

In a related paper, I have summarized selected positive psychology literature supporting *strengths-articulation* (Forster, 2005). In that paper I built a solid case for the idea that most people would benefit by focusing more on their own strengths and the strengths of people they encounter. *Strengths-articulation* is a good way to focus more of your attention on strengths. The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) is an excellent example of *strengths-articulation*. In this paper, however, I want to show how strengths-articulation helps a person construct or create a more positive self-identity.

What is Self-Identity?

One way to think about yourself is to assume that you are a separate being with a personal identity. (Actually, nearly everyone in today's society just takes this for granted). In other words, you have an awareness of yourself and you think of yourself as a certain type of person, which means you have a *self-identity*. Of course you also attribute identities to other people with whom you interact, but your self-identity is the identity that mostly influences how you experience what you experience.

It might be more accurate to hypothesize that your self-identity is actually made up of many different identities, even though it is easier or less complicated to summarize all of those changing identities into one self-identity. Those who study the ways individuals think about themselves, tell us that it is impossible to reduce an individual's dynamic and complex self-reflections to a single self-identity. Since it is not possible to present a comprehensive theoretical framework for explaining a person's self-identity in this short paper, I will try to present an abbreviated model. I will simply suggest that you and I, and nearly everyone else we know, have *Self-Identities* and that it is usually better if these self-identities are positive. It is also useful to consider a theoretical framework that allows for making changes in self-identities. There is such a theoretical framework that I have found useful for explaining how self-identities are developed and how they change. The theoretical framework is called *Constructivism*.

The Essential Idea of Constructivism

The theoretical framework of *constructivism* posits that a person constructs his/her own reality. This means that a person makes sense of phenomena by interpreting what is happening and acting on that interpretation. A person does not observe things in a strictly objective manner, the way those things really happen. Instead, individuals develop unique *personal constructs* or personalized perspectives, which they use to interpret what comes to their attention. An important aspect of anyone's reality is his/her self-identity. A person's self-identities play a big role in how situations get interpreted. At any instant during a person's waking hours, that person might be aware of his or her *self*, often at the same time that person is aware of other matters that come to his or her attention. Although a person may not be consciously focusing on his or her self-identity, that person does have a *working-model* of who s/he is, and that working model serves as that person's current *primary self-identity*. A person is always constructing or creating that primary self-identity and it is always changing somewhat as that person has new experiences. This self-identity, which might be somewhat below one's immediate consciousness or active awareness, does influence ways the person selectively perceives and interprets events that are happening

in that person's life. In a way, that person is constructing his or her realities using unique perspectives, filtered observations, and personal constructs that enable him/her to anticipate what might happen.

The good news is that since you are constructing or creating your primary self-identity, you can also change the way you construct or create your primary self-identity in the future. Your primary self-identity can be changed or re-constructed. One way to change your primary self-identity is to focus on positive aspects of your experiences and this helps you reconstruct a more positive self-identity. That is what you are doing when you engage in the *Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP)*.

The Building Blocks for your Reconstructed Self-Identity

There are two major types of materials or building-blocks you use for constructing your current primary self-identity, *personal qualities* and *assumed roles*. Personal qualities are the more simple type of building block. If you were asked to describe yourself, you might offer some descriptive qualities, such as how tall you are, how old you are, and maybe something about your sunny disposition. Some of these qualities are physical and some of them might be behavioral or even character patterns. Your primary self-identity might be made up of a mixture of physical, psychological, and metaphysical qualities. Often you will weave these personal descriptors into a pattern of how you fulfill one of the common roles in our society, such as being a mother, a primary partner (wife, husband, lover), a daughter, a teacher, a social worker, etc.

In a way, your primary self-identity is a *constructed virtual self*, with attributes that are physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. These qualities, and probably certain assumed roles, have very personalized meanings for you, mostly because the qualities that you have come to use are all tied to personal experiences you have had. Your primary self-identity originally evolved from your most important personal experiences. The building blocks of your self-identities are often words that represent ideas and feelings gleaned during important past experiences.

Which Personal Experiences do you draw from when reconstructing?

There are two primary ways of reconstructing your primary self-identity. In traditional therapy or counseling, problematic personal experiences are explored, in an attempt to identify causes for dysfunctional personal self-identities. The other primary approach has been characterized as a Wellness Model. This model is similar to one that is emphasized by the *positive psychology movement* described in Forster (2005). This approach focuses on positive experiences, which are used to articulate strengths. These strengths are used for reconstructing a more positive primary self-identity.

The DSAP starts in by remembering important Good Experiences. During the process, the participant identifies Dependable Strengths. These positive qualities are summarized in a *self-description* that is put at the beginning of a Report of My Dependable Strengths. This rather simple series of activities demonstrates how a more positive self-identity can be constructed.

Reference

Forster, J.R. (2005). *A Summary of Selected Positive Psychology Literature Supporting Strengths-Articulation*. 16th PCP Congress. Columbus, Ohio.