

Academic Paper

# The lived experience of self-identifying character strengths through coaching: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## Abstract

The study aimed to expand the understanding of the experience of people who self-identify their character strengths. The data came from semi-structured interviews held after a coaching intervention using strengths cards. Analysis using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed four themes: Identifying strengths is instinctive, yet complex; experiencing the subjective self; identifying strengths is multi-faceted; and strengths are brought into awareness. The findings suggest that the lived experience of self-identifying strengths is complex and positive. This study may provide coaches and positive psychology practitioners insights about how strengths identification tools and interventions are experienced subjectively.

## Keywords

strengths cards, strengths, coaching, qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis,

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## Introduction

The original premise of positive psychology was that of a discipline that retained psychology's adherence to scientific standards in research, but with a distinct shift in purpose. Positive psychology moved the focus from pathology and reversing deficits, to investigating what promotes flourishing and conditions for living the best life (Allen, 2016). Coaching became a way of applying evidence-based theory and findings from positive psychology (Madden, Green & Grant, 2011; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). This has led to the term positive psychology coaching, which signifies the symbiosis between the two disciplines, with their common goal of actively enhancing "resilience, achievement and well-being" in individuals (Green & Palmer, 2019, p.10). The term positive psychology practitioners is used in this article to encompass anyone who applies positive psychology coaching or positive psychology theories, research and findings.

Strengths are seen as the “active ingredients for positive living” (Snyder & Lopez, 2009, p. 73). Strengths research has been applied to businesses, workplaces and schools (Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2011). Strengths identification psychometrics such as Gallup, Clifton, Realise2, Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) and strengths-spotting/open-ended coaching techniques (Linley, 2008; Snyder & Lopez, 2009) are some of the tools available to positive psychology practitioners to aid with objectively identifying strengths in individuals. Each of these has been statistically validated as robust, reliable and accurate in uncovering a person’s strengths (Linley, 2008; Snyder & Lopez, 2009).

This validation comes from predominantly quantitative research, which has also correlated use of the strengths to improved wellbeing, performance, resilience and other factors at the core of the goals of positive psychology coaching (Niemiec, 2013; Snyder & Lopez, 2009). The focus on a statistical, quantitative evidence base is arguably a response to positive psychology’s focus on empirical, quantitative research, perceived as needed to ensure it is taken seriously as a scientifically-backed discipline (Smith, 2011; Hefferon, Ashfield, Waters & Synard 2017).

## Literature Review

The literature provides an overview of statistically validated, objective data and tools on the topic of positive psychology coaching. Positive psychology coaching is characterised as a largely solutions-focussed, person driven approach where clients are supported to achieve their own goals with their own resources, through use of coaching models underpinned with psychological theory (Allen, 2016; Grant, 2006). A study carried out by the Special Group in Coaching Psychology (SGCP) of the British Psychological Society (BPS) confirmed that 67.9% of coaches work in a facilitative (as opposed to directive) way (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). With positive psychology coaches not presupposing any of their own or others’ expectations, they remain focussed instead on the internal process and goals of the client (Allen, 2016). However, the evidence base for positive psychology practitioners on the topic of strengths identification focuses primarily on objective identification tools, uncovering strengths from an “outside-in” perspective.

Psychometric strengths tests are situated in the specific culture, time, context and participatory audience they were created for (Snyder & Lopez, 2009). Computers and questionnaires cannot currently add in unique, human factors; additionally, the first-person view of what a client believes they have as strengths is also missing (Burke & Normand, 1987). The counter-argument is that a good coach will create a safe space for a client to dispute, validate and add to their test results (McDowall & Kurz, 2007). This may however not always result in the client actually doing that. The nature of humans is to constantly evolve, so it may be difficult for a person to unlearn or erase knowledge after they have seen or absorbed it (DeRobertis, 2016). Additionally, as coaches often become a person of trust to their clients, a test taker could feel compelled to accept the results of a well-known, validated test (McDowall & Kurz, 2007) that their coach has asked them to complete.

An important finding in the literature is that coaching theory itself does not imply that practitioners require objective measures that will elicit a client’s “accurate” strengths to ensure successful coaching outcomes. Whilst it is suggested that strengths can be used to improve well-being or enhance performance by optimising goal striving (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), well-established positive psychology researchers and coaches have argued that clients successfully reach their personal goals by believing in their own abilities and determining for themselves the path they take and how they take it (e.g. Grant, 2006).

Facilitating clients to identify their own strengths could therefore be just as powerful and impactful as being given them as an output from an objective test. This would enable a combination of strengths awareness whilst still allowing a client to freely choose their path around their idea of who they are and should be (Hudson, 1999). This may activate factors such as self-belief, self-

determination and self-efficacy, which have been shown as effective in coaching (Grant, 2006; Hudson, 1999).

It is documented that coaching “works”, but the why or how it does, is not yet as clear (Allen, 2016). By adding an understanding of strengths identification from an experiential, subjective research view, this study could provide valuable knowledge for positive psychology practitioners and coaches. It is through qualitative research that the rich, deeper experience of a phenomenon can be uncovered (Hefferon et al., 2017; Kaptein, 2011). By 2013 a body of quantitative research confirming the validity of the VIA-IS had been established (Niemi, 2013). Across positive psychology as a discipline, two years later in 2015, only 11% of positive psychology studies were assessed as qualitative (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015). The few qualitative studies involving strengths identification often involved a design where participants underwent a computerised, quantitatively validated psychometric test, followed by qualitative evaluation of the resulting impact and use of the test’s output (e.g. Elston & Boniwell, 2011). These studies provide valuable information on the effectiveness of the selected psychometric tests. The current study will add to the existing literature by drawing attention to the lived experience of participants who experience a PPC intervention.

## **Aim and Rationale**

Use of coaching models and practices based on positive psychology research has allowed PPC to emerge as a credible discipline (Madden et al., 2011). This study aims to contribute subjective, qualitative data through an IPA study of the experience of self-identifying strengths through coaching with strengths cards. VIA strengths cards were used as a tool for participants to identify their own strengths subjectively, aligning with the aforementioned elements of successful coaching: personal goals, purpose and a feeling of self-efficacy (Grant, 2006). Strengths cards are not a new concept but compared to the wide body of evidence on strengths psychometrics, the authors found only one peer-reviewed coaching study featuring this arguably first-person approach of identifying VIA strengths (see Zarecky, 2014). The output of this study may contribute more knowledge to a positive psychology practitioner’s toolkit, aiding them to make informed, ethical, appropriate person-fit choices (Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2014) on the strengths identification tools they use with their clients.

## **Methodology**

The study aims to respond to a gap in the literature by providing information relating to the experience of individuals who identify their own strengths through coaching. IPA was selected for its qualitative, idiographic methodology. IPA ensures meaning is not pre-determined prior to the study but constructed within it (van Manen, 2017). This allows for an insight into the experiences appearing to the participating individuals (Smith, 2011). IPA ensures an unfolding of the participants making sense of a phenomena in a rich, descriptive way, with their experience as the centre point (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

IPA is just one of many different phenomenological psychology approaches. All phenomenological psychology studies people’s experience and “how the world appears to them” (Langdrige, 2007, p. 5). Whilst described by Langdrige, as a “family” (p. 4), the approaches diverge, due in part to the diverse phenomenological philosophical movements behind phenomenological psychology (Davidsen, 2013; Gadamer 1989; Langdrige, 2007). The diversity has led to active scholarly debate, including what qualifies as true phenomenological research within psychology and health (Smith 2018; Davidsen, 2013).

The debate provides fuel to researchers to ensure good standards of practice and to carefully consider their choice of phenomenological approach. The sense-making of IPA can be linked to

Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology (Willig, 2013; Smith 2018). IPA's eidetic methodology and the study's epistemological position of experience fit similarly to PPC's facilitative coaching values – where participants are able to construct their own realities from the time and place they are in. Answering some of the critique of IPA (van Manen, 2017) it was essential to the researchers that this study was based on phenomenological objectives and questions. As for choice of approach, it is acknowledged that descriptive phenomenology arguably creates a purer data set of the experience of the participants' (van Manen, 2017). The double hermeneutic process of IPA however enables participants' experiences to be documented in their own words and further interpreted by the researcher through adding creative narratives to the descriptions (Langdridge, 2007). IPA then may provide more readily informative output (Langdridge, 2007) for practitioners of coaching, positive psychology or positive psychology coaching.

## Participants

Smith (2011) recommends that IPA studies focus on a smaller sample to enable richer, deeper, more sensitive analysis, so five participants over the age of 18 were sought. All participants self-selected through responding to an offer to take part in a study on self-identifying strengths. The offer was placed at a large, multi-departmental workplace and online, stating the opportunity to take part in a study involving coaching to self-identify strengths. Demographically there were no restrictions, enabling a diverse data set to condense the phenomena and “common features of the lived experience” from (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1375). There was however homogeneity across the participants that came forward such as job, age group, nationality (table 1).

**Table 1: Demographics of Participants**

	Name of Client	Age	Gender	Nationality	Ethnicity	Occupation
1	Lucy	44	Female	Danish	White European	Office Worker
2	Rachel	40	Female	Danish	White European	Office Worker
3	Rob	31	Male	Danish	White European	Office Worker
4	Janet	45	Female	Danish	White European	Office Worker
5	Matt	43	Male	Danish	White European	Office Worker

An initial conversation took place with each of five respondents who came forward. Each was offered a chance to take part which was accepted. All participants completed all aspects of the study. A critique of IPA is that researchers may not always prevent pre-constructed ideas of outcomes coming into the study (van Manen, 2017), so care was taken to ensure participants had not previously undergone any similar coaching.

Ethical approval was secured from the University of East London prior to recruitment and any data collection. There was no deception in the study so from the moment of recruitment through debriefing, participants were kept fully informed. Participants were provided with a participant information letter and a verbal explanation of the study during a one-to-one conversation with the researcher. After deciding to take part, they each signed a consent form. After the sessions, participants were debriefed fully and given a debrief letter.

## Measures and Procedure

The study had two stages.

**Stage One** was a coaching session of roughly 60 minutes. Participants were given a pack of VIA Strengths Cards and asked to pick out their strengths and put them down on a table. No other guidance was given. The goal of the session was for the participant to self-identify their strengths. Coaching was non-directive and followed the participants' own lines of discourse around the strengths they picked. A photograph was taken at the end of the session of the cards chosen by the participant, in the position they had laid them out. A copy of the photograph was sent to the

participants (or they took their own). Participants were not given any tasks or preparation for Stage Two.

**Stage Two** consisted of a phenomenological, semi-structured interview which provided the data of the study. Each semi-structured interview was video recorded. Semi-structured interviews draw out the lived experience of the phenomenon (Starks & Trinidad, 2007) and to ensure the best possible outcome of each of them, they were planned and undertaken as follows. Qualitative data collection is participant driven (Willig, 2013) and phenomenology does not attempt to pre-construct or assume what it will find (van Manen, 2017). Five questions were prepared, each having a purpose of keeping the interviews on track and guiding discussion, from broader to more specific (Smith, 1995).

The interviews themselves pursued the advice of Smith et al., (2009) of oscillating between empathetic and questioning stances. Empathetic, mirroring responses (similarly to those used in coaching) allowed the participants to talk freely and open up, and then the five pre-prepared questions ensured participants were asked the same things to draw out insights into the experience of self-identification of strengths.

Whilst designed to elicit the first-person experience, it is acknowledged that qualitative studies such as this can never be value free. Strengths psychometrics are critiqued for having embedded in them the values of those that construct them (Linley, 2008; Snyder & Lopez, 2009) but decisions made in this qualitative study, on the design, coding and analysis also have embedded the researcher in the output (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The researcher is an integral part of an IPA study, particularly in the interpretative analysis phase (Langdrige, 2007). Within qualitative research, reflexivity is used to increase reliability and validity through transparency (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005). This ensures attending to, rather than ignoring, how knowledge is being constructed - including by the researcher (Malterud, 2001). Reflective logs were maintained throughout this study. These documented where preconceptions came up and how they were consciously reflected upon and bracketed (epoché). This was done prior to all sessions, throughout analysis, compiling the themes for the findings and during final write up. This enabled the researchers to focus on attending to making sense of how the participants were themselves making sense of their worlds (Langdrige, 2007).

## **Coding and Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Basic reproduction of pauses, overlaps, and interpolations were included. Recording with video enabled adding relevant non-verbal signals to the transcripts (e.g. pointing at cards) which provided additional clarity. Body language was not added, as phenomenological studies focus on language use and content of speech; meaning the intersubjectivity between interviewee and interviewer is what is revealing in the output (Langdrige, 2007). Transcripts were coded and analysed following the guidelines of Smith et al., (2009). However, these guidelines provide little detail on bracketing/epoché at various stages, so guidance from von Manen (2017) was followed in ensuring epoché was carefully performed at all stages, including between each and every round of analysis.

The analysis involved phenomenological reduction as follows. A first full immersion into the participants' worlds, evaluating each transcript individually (Smith et al., 2009). During this, initial descriptive, linguistic and conceptual notes were built upon, and added to through iteratively re-considering sentences, paragraphs, sections and each transcript. As Smith et al., (2009) do not provide a detailed explanation of the concept of horizontalization, for this the guidelines of Langdrige (2007) were followed. Horizontalization is arguably an important part of epoché. It ensures researchers do not pre-suppose any part of a participant's experience as more important than another. Abstraction, subsumption and particularly decontextualization techniques were also helpful tools throughout the stage of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

The constituents of the phenomena were then pulled together into themes. This went through analysis at an individual level, prior to all of the documents being combined into an overall picture of superordinate themes and sub-themes across all participants. IPA studies are at times critiqued for lack of depth in their interpretation (Smith et al., 2009) so the researchers ensured several cycles of analysis were completed to ensure a deep interpretative review.

## Findings

**Table 2: Super-ordinate and ordinate themes**

	Super-ordinate themes	Ordinate themes
1	Identifying strengths is instinctive, yet complex	a. Instinctive selection b. Complex relationship with past, present and future
2	Experiencing the subjective self	a. "Ooh, that's just me!" b. Good to put words to what goes on inside
3	Identifying strengths is multi-faceted	a. Grouped, they feel like an identity and authentic self b. Individually they are tools that are separate but connected to the self
4	Strengths are brought into awareness	a. Identifying them starts ongoing reflection b. Irreversible c. Positive experience

### 1. Identifying strengths is instinctive, yet complex

#### a. Instinctive selection

Unprompted, four of the participants described the experience of the actual moment of identifying their strengths as a deep, automatic response of recognizing oneself and reacting: "that's me" (P3). P3 described it as "primal" and from deep inside, elaborating, "It's not a psychologic [sic] feeling". It's more a natural feeling."

This reaction appears intuitive and instinctive, without a lot of deliberate effort: "My brain told me [...] you should pick this one" (P3). P2 confirmed identifying with those she: "felt the most curiosity and the most, like, this is the tummy feeling" (P2). P1 also picked those that "spoke" to her. The overall sense across the participants was of not giving it "much thought" (P3). As P5 confirmed, "it was automatic [...] not anything I had to consider at all." This instinctive, automatic reaction came over as not taking any time: "It went very fast with a lot of them" (P2).

#### b. Complex relationship with past, present and future

Alongside the fast, instinctive side to strengths identification, participants revealed there was also a complex, effortful, conscious evaluation process at play. This evaluation appeared connected to reflecting on use of strengths across past, present, future:

*I just put words on [...] the feelings and emotions and thoughts that that goes, goes around in my head from day out and day in. And previous experiences and also a bit about the future and stuff like that. (P3)*

None of the participants depicted an experience of simply identifying them from where they were in the present. However, the present appeared to help with identifying authentic strengths:

*Is this me, or is it something that I would prefer to have? Cause that's not always the same. (P1)*

Evaluating to the past appeared a catalyst to new thoughts. For example, P4 used past experiences with her strengths to work out those she really wanted to focus upon in the future. P2

decided she still had time to use strengths she had suppressed previously, due to “sickness and divorce and being alone with kids...”

Additionally, compared to the instinctive side to identifying strengths, there was a sense of conscious evaluation and a perception of needing time and being more effortful:

*You don't have to pick like, okay, you have 30 seconds [...]s a process that gives you [...] more time for reflection... (P1)*

## **2. Experiencing the subjective self**

### **a. Ooh, that's just me!**

The data illustrates that the first-person freedom of self-identifying strengths encouraged, or unfolded, a positive, secure sense of the subjective self. P2 boldly declared, “they should just be there, all of them,” later proudly adding how they were “unique for me” (P2). P1 was sure she would not have “chosen any differently today or tomorrow...” adding that they felt “like being me”. P4 experienced “release” and “clearness” identifying her own strengths, enabling her to now feel more “relaxed” and “more complete.”

There was a sense of feeling “satisfied to know that I picked them” (P2). P3 explained this feeling a little deeper, using a metaphor of going to the cinema and being able to “pick out your own candy.” He explained how finding a card you relate to led to a “reward feeling...” and a sense of “endorphins being released.” Here the instinctive reaction was visible again:

*Ooh, I like that...That's me. That's just me. (P3)*

The sense of pride and satisfaction seeing yourself is rounded off by seeing yourself reflected back in an established pack of strengths cards. P3 explained this gave a sense of validation of not being “off the grid” (P3). Being able to identify strengths “that someone out there, knows already,” was positively surprising for P2 whilst for P5 it led to a simpler joy of realizing: “I'm not that bad!”

### **b. Good to puts words to what goes on inside**

The participants reported that it was “nice to say things...aloud for yourself” (P2) and one confessed: “it's always nice to talk about myself,” (P3) but self-identifying strengths seemed to go deeper than just positive emotions. There was a sense of the strengths being dormant or taken for granted, until the moment they were identified and pulled out of a pack of cards:

We tend to go day in, day out, uh, knowing about our, our abilities but, um, complications at work or private life, could put a layer on, [...] our abilities. (P3)

P5 expressed similarly that he knew he had strengths, but seeing them “laid out” was different:

*When you just walk around as a human being...you're not aware of all this. You're just with yourself. (P5)*

“Putting words on” (P2, P3) strengths, laying them out and talking about them appeared start a more conscious, visible and embodied connection. As noted by P4 “if I think about my strengths now, I think about the map, the cards.” Until they are identified, there is a distinct sense of them being in the physical person but not consciously connected to the mind. They are “just lying up your head” (P1) or have “...just been floating around your body” (P2).

### 3. Identifying strengths is multi-faceted

#### a. Grouped, they feel like an identity and authentic self

Together the strengths participants identified with came across as an active construction of the self as a whole. “The whole thing is a mapping” (P4) and how they mix together “feels very alive somehow” (P2). The construction illustrates feeling pride and satisfaction from reflexively experiencing the strengths being “my most me” (P2) and that they “feel like being me” (P1). This is accompanied by positive acceptance of the self: “I believe a little more myself [sic]” P2 revealed.

“I contain them” P5 described, adding “this is my house, built out of these bricks.” Plus, even if P5’s house might need “an extra room or some paint work,” overall, he still felt it was “in balance.” P3’s similar use of a house metaphor pulled together how strengths together may reflect a construction of an authentic, imperfect but accepted and proud self:

*...maybe one brick is quite off, but it gives that house its charm [...] in total it gives a positive outcome. (P3)*

#### b. Individually they are tools that are separate but connected to the self

Participants oscillated between describing the process of identifying strengths as a grouped view and considering them individually. Individually, they appear not to be internalized as deeply as when they are considered as a group. Rather they appear as elements or tools one has, carries, or uses, outside of and not integrated to the self:

*In your next stressful situation – how could you react here. Oh wait [...] I have humour. (P3)*

*...if you’re weak you can use this... (P4)*

P5 also highlighted examples of using the “characteristics in my backpack” to “power out” weaknesses but using them was not purely about countering difficult situations though:

*It’s nice to pick them from the shelf sometimes and like, okay, yes you did this, and you can be proud of this. (P2).*

### 4. Strengths are brought into awareness

#### a. Identifying them starts ongoing reflection

All the participants indicated the moment of identifying the strengths made them instantly more visible. Following this new awareness, the participants started evaluating future usage of their strengths. P2 considered being able to “power in some of them because [...] that is me and, and, I’m aware I can.” P4 talked of placing “more focus” on her strengths going forward to become a “better person”. P5 similarly reflected on whether he could use them to “become maybe even more balanced or happier...” These reflections did not come after identifying them, but at the same time:

*Instead of just thinking of what are my strengths, I started maybe not judging, but evaluating and thinking, okay, how can I use this? Will I use it? Do I want to use it? (P1)*

The use of future/conditional tenses suggest the participants were still processing the new awareness. P1 however also revealed it could equally indicate feelings of responsibility to use the information now it has become visible. When this conflicts with past experience, that change is not always easy:

*Awareness is good and scary at the same time because [...] do I just say, okay and now I'm being aware. I know I have these skills. Or do I [...] also have an obligation to maybe to be better at not just reflecting but also acting on it. (P1)*

*Patterns are really difficult to change... [and it's really easy to stick to what you know. (P1)*

*...most people cannot change their abilities through life. (P3).*

## **b. Irreversible**

The experience of identifying one's own strengths appeared to remain in the consciousness of the participants:

*They are still in here, the show in my head. (P2)*

Paradoxically, despite the use of conditional and future tenses when reflecting on potential changed use of the strengths they had identified, four of the participants also illustrated already having used them since the coaching session. The examples given indicated new or deliberate use of the strengths and had an inter-personal context. P1 and P2 for example, described new, positive experiences using strengths they had identified to actively bring humour and encouragement to work colleagues. The use of them also came with a reward feeling, best summarized by P4, who had tried using her strength of self-regulation more actively than before:

*I think I feel more like mature, grow [...] and I should see the situation not for myself only. (P4)*

## **c. A positive experience**

The following positive comments were expressed by more than one of the participants whilst describing their experience of identifying their own strengths. This list retains the grammar and wording used by the participants:

*Stronger, relaxing, happier, fun, gaining energy, confidence, interest, feeling good, self-worth, power, validation, feeling brave, clarity and acceptance about the self, more focused, satisfaction, good experience, feeling complete.*

That the participants still spoke of these vividly a week later suggested the emotional response had lasted. No negative discourse across the experience was found in the transcripts. Even where P2 experienced deep emotions when reflecting on not having used her strengths in the past, she felt happier from the experience overall:

*...now I can finally put my identity on myself. (P3)*

All participants commented on the coaching session encouraging open dialogue and of being able to express themselves. The colourful cards appeared to be an important element in this. P1 elaborated feeling: "you don't feel there is a right or wrong answer...." The cards appeared to add a sense of ease to self-identifying strengths:

*this is not so serious [...] it makes you relax a little bit more because you can choose, you can pick... (P1).*

P2 confirmed the cards, plus her sense of "being in a bubble" with the coach, allowed engagement with self-identifying strengths without feeling pressured:

*It felt also like a little kid's game and I like that because everything in this world is so serious often. (P2)*

## Summary

The four themes illustrate a journey where self-identification of strengths appears to move participants from a deep, taken-for-granted, sub-conscious place, into visibility where they are concurrently reflected upon and activated into conscious use. The first-person experience released positive emotions and working with a coach and with the colourful strengths cards put participants at ease. Participants expressed having time, space and options, to identify their strengths which they perceived individually as tools/elements they could put to positive use and grouped together as reflections of their true subjective selves.

## Discussion

This study explored the experience of self-identifying character strengths. IPA was used to analyse five participants' accounts documented through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted seven to nine days after a coaching intervention where participants identified their own strengths using VIA strengths cards. This section discusses the findings, highlighting the contributions of this study with reference to extant literature. Potential implications of the study's insights for positive psychology practitioners and for future research are also considered.

The findings may provide new insights into the processes at play when self-identifying strengths. The themes suggest participants experienced two concurrent cognitive elements. A fast, instinctive, "primal" (P3) response of recognition of having a particular strength, combined in parallel with a, slower, more complex thought process. This is broadly consistent with cognitive psychology research on judgement and decision-making where both automatic and controlled cognitive processes are activated, each providing independent input (Ferreira, Garcia-Marques, Sherman & Sherman, 2006). This may be of interest to those exploring how coaching works (Allen, 2016) and might indicate potential links between cognitive psychology and coaching that could be researched further.

Participants described being in a default mode of not being aware of their strengths, taking them for granted until they were "laid out" (P5) and turned into a "mapping" (P4) of the self. This may provide further nuance to the findings from Govindji and Linley (2007) that people are not always consciously aware of their strengths. Once identified, the themes indicate the visibility and tangibility of a person's strengths changed immediately, with participants becoming more conscious of their strengths which became available for reflection and use. These findings appear to emphasise the value of identifying your strengths established by quantitative research (Linley, 2008; Niemiec, 2013; Snyder & Lopez, 2009).

Participants appeared to engage in both self-insight and self-reflection. Self-insight is defined as a person becoming clearer about how they understand their "thoughts, feelings and behaviour" (Grant, Franklin & Langford, 2002, p. 821). Self-reflection is defined as a more active "inspection and evaluation of one's thoughts, feelings and behaviour" (Grant, et al., 2002, p. 821). Self-reflection appeared to be experienced as part of participants validating if they genuinely had the strengths that they had identified (Stein & Grant, 2014).

Participants further noted the positive experience of 'putting words' to something they felt inside, using examples from real life in their self-reflection on which strengths they had. Matching life experiences with tacit, implicit knowledge may be part of clients' meaning making (Stelter 2007). Stelter (2007) notes "putting words on one's felt sense" (p. 194) is where coaching reveals what is implicit within an individual. The current findings may provide further context to extant literature that suggests that authenticity comes from aligning our internal experience with what we express externally (Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, & Settles, 2009). This is also described in participants' description of the grouped view of their strengths as a reflection of their own view of their whole, complete, authentic person.

The use of future and conditional grammar tenses in participants' discourse may add a layer of understanding of the negotiation processes at play when reflecting and validating strengths. Temporal theories of the self suggest meaning is created through a person's movement through time engaging with different reflective processes (Lopez & Rice, 2006). Conditional tense use may be consistent with transitory coaching models of change where clients negotiate their position. For example, negotiation may indicate pre-decisional realism (Puca, 2004), or it could indicate activation of the critical thinking involved in validating or transformational paradigms (Cox, 2013). In this current study, the experience of negotiation comes over as deeply self-reflective.

Paradoxically, despite a use of conditional and future tenses, four of the participants noted having actively used the strengths they had identified with, in new ways, after the strengths cards intervention. Findings from this current study may then support extant literature that coaching can activate self-belief and self-determinism and that coaching is successful because it gives clients freedom and a sense of self-efficacy while the practitioner shows belief and trust in the client (Grant, 2006; Hudson, 1999). This may also suggest that self-identification may provide an alternative to objective psychometrics in allowing an individual to identify their own strengths and determine their use of them.

The themes show participants believed in the strengths they had picked and how they aligned to how they saw themselves. None of them indicated wanting to change the strengths they chose for themselves. This may add context to the importance of alignment to self-aspects that a person considers they have and will use as they have meaning for them (Ryan, 1993). The experience of self-identifying strengths comes with a sense of pride and positive emotions are experienced as participants became aware of their strengths. This adds support to research that has shown using strengths enhances a sense of well-being and are energizing (Niemic, 2013).

The literature has shown the value of psychometrics and outside-in approaches to strengths identification. The value of qualitative research in adding the richness and depth (Hefferon et al., 2017; Kaptein, 2011) of the underlying experience for participants identifying strengths is noted throughout the themes of this study. This study may bring practitioners a tentative new layer of understanding of the sense-making process behind self-identifying and recognizing strengths. The findings may also indicate the value of this first-person intervention for positive psychology practitioners who seek to facilitate clients to believe they can achieve their goals through their own path to doing so (Allen, 2016; Grant, 2006; Hudson, 1999; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007),

This study explored the experiences of participants who selected, discussed, evaluated and reflected on their character strengths by using cards. All participants were able to complete the task without detailed guidance. From one hour of coaching, this intervention enabled the participants in this study to move their perceived strengths from a dormant, taken for granted, inactive status to a more active, considered, status. This may mean that first-person strengths interventions using cards could enable clients to verbalize and connect deeply-held values by evoking deep cognitive processes, leading to actionable self-reflection and self-insight.

## **Future research**

Revealing the complex experience behind identifying strengths illuminates the benefits similar studies could bring. Future research might be able to take a deeper look at why participants demonstrated rapid progress when identifying, evaluating and determining new use of strengths. The temporal shifts between past, present, future in participants' meaning making and reflection also indicate a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis could make a viable alternative to IPA in a future study. It would allow for a deeper analysis of elements such as temporality, embodiment and inter-subjectivity (Langdrige, 2007). Embodiment comes up in participants' descriptions of not being consciously aware of their strengths and a sense of just "floating around the body" (P1). This

disconnect to their strengths changed as they identified them and put words on them. Analysis or future research on the role of embodiment and strengths identification could be illuminating.

Notes from the reflexive log and the data itself showed that whilst all participants had a pleasant experience and expressed positive emotions, the complexity of the thoughts during the experience of identifying strengths led to participants engaging in deep self-reflection of both positive and negative personal experiences. More research on the impact of first-person strengths identification interventions could be valuable to enable more information on when it is most appropriate to use them.

## Limitations

The study was conducted in Denmark. Participants were all born and grew up in Denmark, were native Danish speakers and completed the study in English. Culture, nationality and language are therefore part of the data output. Denmark has scored not lower than third place since 2016 in the annual World Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2019). As a result, further research into how positive psychology interventions are experienced in different national and cultural contexts is recommended.

Use of non-native language throughout the study was balanced by allowing each participant good time to respond and to say certain words in Danish as needed. Language could still impact interpretation of the transcripts or present cultural nuances in the data. The reflexive logs do however document the researcher feeling gratitude for working with non-native English speakers. It appeared to add deeper, more effortful, richer, qualitative depth to the explanations given by the participants in the words they selected to clarify their experiences.

## Conclusion

This study explored the lived experience of self-identifying strengths using strengths cards in coaching. The data contributes new insight around strengths identification and tentative conclusions can be drawn. Participants in this study reported that strengths identification involved the dual processes of an instinctive, automatic response (with little or no conscious thought) alongside a more complex, conscious evaluation based on iterative, internal evaluation of the self in the past, present and future. According to the participants in this study, both processes are rapid and start a journey of moving self-identified strengths from being taken-for-granted to where they were more visible, consciously evaluated and put into use. Overall, the data may give preliminary indications that subjective approaches to strengths identification may be beneficial and valuable to clients.

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