

***The home-visit as an empowering experience
for 'at-risk' families***

Pascale Carleen Paul

Family Service and Child Protection

Beyond Social Services ©

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1. Introduction

The profession of social work originated from the **hospital almoners** since the 1300s. An almoner is actually a chaplain or a church officer who was in charge of distributing charity. They were Christian religious functionaries who had for mission to distribute alms to the poor. The name almoner was also used for a hospital official who interviews prospective patients to qualify them as indigent, and was later applied to the officials who were responsible for patient welfare and after-care. This position is now usually filled by social workers.

Social Work also came about in the 1800s because of **settlement houses** which were created for education, savings, sports and arts. The settlement movement started in England due to its increasing urban poverty, giving rise to a movement whereby those connected to universities settled students in slum areas to live and work alongside local people. Friendly visitors paid by the church and charitable bodies also did social work to support the poor and disadvantaged.

Social work started with the historic mission to assist disadvantaged populations. It began with people's genuineness to help others to get out of their difficult situations. The social workers went door to door, met people where they lived and assisted them in any way possible. They assisted the disadvantaged by giving alms, as well as by educating them, thus creating opportunities for them so that they could get out of their cycle of poverty.

However it has always looked at at-risk families with a pair of black glasses through which they see that at-risk families are full of problems. Metaphorically, social workers viewed at-risk families like a half empty glass of water. Seeing the glass as half empty means that we see all that is lacking in a person and their family system. When we view at-risk families in this way, we feel that we have something to give to these people. What is wrong with thinking that we have a lot to give to at-risk families?

Well the answer to this is that many social workers (and psychologists, counselors and most other helping professions) do not see the strengths that at-risk families possess. By

giving alms or acting like we have something to offer them, we are actually taking the one-up position which gives us tremendous power over families who already feel powerless. Unconsciously or consciously, we make these families even more dependent on us, and then we find fault that they do not want to 'get out of' their problems. The truth is that many helping professions, including social work, are not really helping at-risk families to get out of their problem situations.

The clinical approach uses the deficit perspective to treat at-risk families or individuals. The client/patient walks in, the professional analyzes and labels the problem and client/patient receives appropriate help. Such terms as dysfunctional family patterns and social dysfunctions makes the social workers look at those families, like a glass half empty, with problems. The sad thing about this is that using the term dysfunctional for example already classifies the family as such and it is next to impossible for them to believe that things could change.

Whether we go out in the community or stay in the office to welcome a family, the approach we take and the beliefs we have are what are important. If we look at a family as a half empty glass, we will disempower them even more, whereas if we look at them with the half full glass of water, we choose to look at what these families can do. We are then looking at their strengths and their skills instead of their weaknesses. By doing this, we are also empowering them to see their own strengths.

Beyond Social Services has chosen to go out in the community, into their homes to meet families, using the Strengths Perspective. A home visit, if not conducted correctly and with good intentions, can actually cause more harm than good. Beyond is very conscious to go for home visits not looking like 'Professionals' in suits and ties. When professionals visit at-risk families in formal clothing, they are again disempowering them. Thus when caseworkers at Beyond meets their families at risk, they try as much as possible to fit in with them, which means that very often, they take a one-down position in terms of what they wear, what they say and how they carry themselves.

2. Social Work at Beyond Social Services

Beyond Social Services is a non-profit welfare organization that has always existed and continues to exist to help the lowest strata of the Singapore society. The families, children and youth that Beyond work with have poor living conditions, blue collar jobs if any, low level of education and low self-confidence and self-esteem. Beyond has for mission “to curb delinquency among disadvantaged young people and their families and to move them beyond their problems. We want to develop young people who respect the law, value education and seek to become responsible persons.” Beyond works at building an inclusive community, by using the community development work approach of the ART: Advocacy, Resource Mobilizing and Training. Beyond also believes strongly that every child, youth and family they work with has inner strengths and also strengths in their family and community (social capital) contrary to most other organizations in Singapore.

The referral of a child, youth or a family to Beyond is very often using the deficit model where their problems and negative behaviours/attitudes are listed out. Families are very often referred for ‘counseling’ to teach them parenting skills and so on at our Family Service Centre. Similarly, children and youth who answer back in class, behave rudely with their teachers or do not attend school are referred for counseling as well. The referrer (e.g. the school) identifies a problem with the child or youth and refers the ‘problem’ to another organization (generally Beyond) who they think is more qualified to resolve the problem. So let us say for example that a child does not attend school regularly. The teacher will get concerned and try to call the parents to find out what the situation is. Often they might not be able to reach the parents, so when the child next comes to school, they will ask the child to get their parents to come to school to meet them. The clever child knows that he/she might be in trouble and often they will not transmit the message to their parents. So parent and teacher do not get to meet and that situation goes on for a while.

Nearing exams, some teachers and their school principal or vice principal will decide to refer the child and the family to Beyond. Generally the picture that is painted to Beyond is “a troublesome child who is often missing from school and irresponsible parents. When the child happens to turn up in school, he will either be sleeping in class, or bullying his friends. His/her parents are irresponsible as they never once turned up in school to meet the teacher. The parents did not even come to school during the parent/teacher meeting to get their child’s school results at the end of last term. This family is irresponsible and not concerned with the child’s education. Is there something you can do at Beyond to get the child in school?”

The picture is so black that if we, at Beyond, had not chosen to wear our Strengths glasses to view the family, we would see this as a family full of problems, similar to the other families we have worked with. Luckily, the Strengths glasses help us to ask other questions about the family system and dynamics. We may find out that this family is a single parent family, where the mother is struggling, doing a 12-hour job so that she can feed her four children, for example. “No wonder she does not have the time to come to school at the time appointed by the school!” We could also find out that this child is the eldest of the 4 and as such he has so much pressure on his head to take care of his siblings while his mum is working hard. He sleeps late, waiting for his mother to return home from work every night. After just 5 hours’ sleep, this boy needs to wake up and prepare his siblings for school, then leave for school himself. Sometimes he reaches school late, and is asked to see the Discipline Master and is made to stay back after school or is punished or scolded. Sometimes he falls asleep in class then gets scolding and is asked to stand outside the classroom. His friends then make fun of him for always getting into trouble. Of course he has to defend himself. They call his mother names. Of course he has to defend her. And he fights back, punches the guys who made fun of him and his mother. But he ends up in trouble again and the teachers call him a bully and want to call his mother in to complain about him. Well Beyond can paint a totally different picture to the school (the real picture but not exaggerated) about the child and his family. This boy is responsible, helping his mother at home even if he does not like it. He knows he is the only man in the house now and his mother depends on him a lot. He is clever and wants

to study but the teachers always scold him. He is loyal to his family by defending them and not saying why he is so tired in school. He loves his family and does not want to be taken away if he says that his mother leaves the children with him while she goes to work. He is intelligent, as he knows that, in Singapore, sometimes, MCYS (the ministry) can say that the mother is neglecting her children, when in fact, she is working so hard for them. This is a family full of strengths, loyal and hard working people.

Sadly enough, in Singapore as well as other countries, when social workers were to receive this referral the way it was made and were to make an assessment of the situation, the dark side of it is what they would see. Beyond chooses to work differently. Beyond chooses to wear different colour glasses and makes assessments looking primarily at the child and his family's qualities and strengths and uses this energy to work with them.

At Beyond we also try to find out what the child and his family's will is. That means that we try to find out what the young person or their family really wants, not what we think they need and we use that energy to move the case. Beyond also identifies each stake holder in a case and finds out all the factual information about the case and how each of them will contribute. This way, the caseworker knows at first glance who is motivated to contribute and uses those energies to support the young person and/or his family.

Beyond Social Services promotes the Community Approach rather than the Clinical Approach. That is why Beyond has chosen to conduct regular home visits to meet their families instead of working from the office. We believe that these families are stronger where they live. It is their comfort zone. We have got to admire the fact that they really are experts in living in one room flats, and managing space, managing the small amount of money they have, and surviving with the little food they have. For that reason, Beyond's caseworkers try to blend in with them where they feel more powerful. We blend in intentionally through the clothes we wear to work, the way we speak and the way we treat them. Our Community Workers wear casual outfits to come to work (unless they need to attend official meetings), visit families at their homes where they are king

and queen of their kingdom and adopt, more often than not, a One-Down position when addressing them.

We make the families, children and youth feel powerful, make them believe in their own strengths, and validate that they have a right to be proud of their lifestyles, family, friends and neighbourhoods because we truly believe the fact that they are Experts of their Own World. The solutions often lie in their own hands. As such, a home visit, if it is carried out well, is a powerful tool to help at-risk families experience the strengths we see in them. It is a door to empathy and an opportunity to strengthen partnerships with these families.

Beyond's caseworkers are very mindful to conduct home visits at regular intervals and not only when there are some problems with their children at school or somewhere else. One of the main reasons why parents have such negative feelings towards social workers visiting their homes is because social workers always turn up when something is wrong. Social Workers and teachers are often no different in this way. It is rare that a teacher will visit a family if the child has been behaving well and has good school attendance. Similarly, it is rare that social workers visit a family if there is no problem at hand to work on. Beyond's Healthy Start Programme is a very good example where their caseworkers often conduct home visits only to distribute milk powder for the babies or to find out how the new family is coping. Bringing a small gift for the family during a home visit goes a long way in building rapport. It also shows that we are a guest in their home and further empowers them to act as hosts.

The timing of a home visit is very important with families from low-income financial status especially because we could be trying to meet them after they have done a 12-hour shift at work and came home to a messy house and hungry children. It is not very empowering for such families to turn up unannounced as well. However if the family has no telephone or means of communication, this can't be helped much except that we need to choose a day and time that they would feel comfortable with. Nevertheless, it is always good to check with the family before hand whether it is appropriate to come at such and

such a time and day. Remember that you are a guest in their home, and the last thing we want to do is to make them feel like we are invading their privacy and come in uninvited.

Below are some guiding principles that Beyond has just put in practice in order to empower the families during our home visits.

3. Home Visit - Creating an Empowering Environment

Guiding Principle	Techniques
Inter-generational status must be respected	Hierarchy reinforcement
Families are Home-proud	Appreciate their Hospitality Acknowledge their Home Improvements E.g. Décor & organization
Family problems have their roots & supports in our culture	Externalizing the Problem

Singapore is a multi-cultural country where people of different races, namely Chinese, Malays, Indians and others live in harmony. The first few things that struck me more than seven years ago when I first came to Singapore is how the different cultures and races are respected and nurtured by everyone. For example, younger siblings will call their older siblings respectfully elder brother or elder sister in their respective languages and dialect. Similarly, ‘aunty’ and ‘uncle’ terms are very commonly used to address any adult who is much older than you.

Cultural competence is the ability to provide services effectively to people of all cultures, races, ethnic backgrounds, and religions in a way that recognizes, values, affirms, and respects the worth of individuals and protects and preserves their dignity. But to respond respectfully and effectively to people of different cultural backgrounds, caseworkers must first understand the widely differing cultures of the people they serve. Their values stem

from principles in three main Eastern philosophies: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

In this particular case, hierarchy reinforcement stems from Confucianism's major principle, namely filial piety. Several key concepts follow from the principle of filial piety:

- Family roles are highly structured, hierarchical, male-dominated and paternally oriented.
- The welfare and integrity of the family are of great importance. The individuals in the family are obligated to save face so as to not bring shame onto the family, thus keeping problems within the family.
- Interdependency is valued and stems from the strong sense of obligation to the family. This concept influences relationships among family members. The family provides support and assistance for each individual member who in turn provide support and assistance to the entire family. These relationships, interactions and obligations are life-long, and the goal of the individual members is not necessarily autonomy and independence.

Likewise, loyalty to family is a deeply held ideal for most Indian families. Elders and the respect for elders is a major component in the Indian culture. Elders are and remain the driving force for any family. An individual takes blessings from his elders by touching their feet. Most Indian families follow the patriarchal lineage where the son and his wife live with the son's father and so on, while the daughter gets married and leaves the house to live with her in-laws. Generally the head of the household is the eldest man in the family.

Islam is central to and dominant in the Malay culture. Similarly with the Chinese and the Indian families, loyalty to the family is what drives Malay families. The elders in a Malay family are to be respected just like the Chinese and the Indians. This is shown through their language when they address their elders.

Therefore, the first guiding principle of a home visit in Singapore in an attempt to create an empowering environment is that *the inter-generational status of the family must be respected*. The technique that a caseworker or any stranger for that matter needs to apply is known as **hierarchy reinforcement**. It is human behaviour to first address the friendliest person or the one who is easier to talk to. However in the case of a home visit to a family where filial piety and loyalty to the family is of utmost importance, responding with cultural competence will allow the caseworker to, not only be in the good books of that family, but also to be able to understand and work with each family more effectively.

It is thus the caseworker's role to find out what the structure of the family is and what the hierarchy is. The caseworker needs to be intentional in first addressing the eldest in the family. Subsequently, he/she can address the others down the hierarchy before talking to the child or the youth who they may be closer with. Throughout the conversations, the caseworker needs to always ensure that the eldest in the family can express his/her views. For example, if Mr Tan is the grand-father and the eldest of the Tan family, the caseworker could say from time to time, "Mr. Tan, how do you feel about this?" or "Mr. Tan, what do you think about what Zhi Wei just said?"

We need to be really careful to sound genuine, honest and respectful while doing this. If we just go through the motion and just say the words without really believing that the inter-generational status in the family needs to be respected, it will cause a lot of distrust between the family and the caseworker and the family will shut the caseworker out of their life.

The second guiding principle in the attempt to create an empowering environment in at-risk families is that we must believe that *all families are home-proud*. All the three cultures in Singapore have very good hospitality. The Indian family in particular treats guests as god. They serve their guests and take care of them as if they were part and parcel of their family. Even a family which was not very happy with me as the caseworker offered me coffee or tea every single time I went over to her place. Keeping

this principle in mind, one of the techniques we should apply as visitors to their homes is to genuinely **appreciate their hospitality**. Refusing their food or drinks can offend certain families even when they do not have much food and drinks to offer in the first place. So even if you need to take just a glass of water, you would have given them the opportunity to act as hosts, giving them the power over you. In any case, everyone likes to be hosts. It gives us the power to control the situation, the responsibility to make our guests happy and the opportunity to serve others. What it gives most of all to a family who believes they do not have much to offer is exactly the reverse. It makes them believe in themselves and it makes them believe that they do have much more to offer.

Another example of showing your appreciation for their hospitality could be that you bring them a small gift from time to time, especially at the first visit. The gift needs not be expensive or needs not cost anything at all. It could be just about anything that you have at hand in good condition, such as donated food voucher, rice packets, milk packets biscuits, cakes or donated clothes or shoes and so on. The items that you take to them as presents could be donated by the public, sponsors, people in the community. This gives you an opportunity to establish a network of support for them in the community. You are thus building resources in the community, you are advocating for them, and you are working towards making the community more inclusive.

Yet another example of a thoughtful gift could be that one day you go in and ask for permission to take some photographs of them. You could then make them a family album which very few of them have. You could even prepare them a chart of the structure of the family, with pictures of them. The family could then proudly put the chart on a wall. The chart can also be a way that everyone in the family knows the structure of the household, i.e. father as the head and so on.

With the guiding principle that families are proud of their homes, we need to also **acknowledge their home improvements** such as in the décor or the organization of the household. Once during the Hari Raya period (which is a Malay feast), I was invited to one of my families' homes for lunch. I went in and observed that the house was tidy and

so well decorated. I praised the mother about the cleanliness, especially after they had partied the night before until very late. I also praised her on her curtains and some of the decorations. The mother was so happy and proud that I had noticed, and informed me that she sewed the curtains herself, every night after work. As for the decorations, she recycled some stuff and turned them into something nice. That day I learnt that this mother has more strengths than I had given her credit for. That same day, this mother and I created a bond of trust that goes beyond worker and client. She offered me food, delicious Malay food. I discovered yet another strength that day which I had never known throughout the four years that I had worked with her. Indeed I then realized that for the four years that I have known her, I have never commented on her house being clean and beautiful every time I went in.

Many of the families we work with at Beyond do not have sofas and chairs. It is important to be mindful of that fact and to be as genuinely comfortable in their home as possible. If the whole family is sitting on the floor when you walk in but you choose to remain standing, you are telling them unconsciously that their home is not welcoming enough for you. If you turn up at their homes in formal outfits and everyone is sitting on the floor, they will feel powerless and weak in their own home. Many government social workers face problems with these families, primarily because when they visit the homes, they have that official stance with them that makes a family powerless and scared and then they are surprised when the family clams up. Many a times Beyond's caseworkers can get more information out of our families than government officials because we do not appear to be superior to them.

The third guiding principle that helps us create an empowering environment for the families that we work with is that *family problems have their roots and supports in our culture*. By **externalizing the problem**, we are acknowledging that these families are not solely responsible for their problems. As social workers, we need to be non-judgmental and we need to be rational. We need to fully believe that some of the problems these families face exist because of our culture. Using the counseling clinical model, the caseworker would have asked the client to own up to all the responsibilities of their

situation and would have referred them for counseling, parenting courses and so on. However if we define a problem more clearly with the W-Facts (what, who, where, when, why), all stakeholders' perspectives and the stakeholders' contribution to help resolve the problem, the responsibility is lighter on the family. The table below can be used in such a case:

Problem Definition in W-Facts, Stake Holders' Perspectives, Stake Holders' Contributions

Name and Role of SH (Mother, Father, Teacher, Principal, Social Worker MUST be included)	What is exactly the problem? Use W-Facts: Who, When, What, Why, Where? Avoid Jargon!	What does he/she want to happen? Differentiate wish, will and delegation. The will can be seen in actions.	What does he/she want to do, to give or to contribute?
Young Person			
Mother			
Father			
Teacher 1			
Teacher 2			
Principal			
Social Worker			
...			

Using the above table enables the caseworker to:

1. Get a clearer picture of the problem
2. Identify which stake holder will contribute to working towards resolving the problem (find out who is motivated)
3. Allow everyone to see which stake holder is motivated to help the child so that it may encourage more stake holders to cooperate
4. This makes it clear that the power is with all the stake holders and that the caseworker has no miracle solution. In this way, the caseworker brings everyone's skills together for them to work at their problem. Expectations are evidently moderated by this exercise.

Often it is said that the family is the root of all problems in a young person's life and that the family will determine how the young person will turn out to be. As much as this is

true in the first few years of a child’s life, it does not apply so much when the child is in school or around in the neighbourhood. It is where the child grows up that has a greater influence on the young person’s future and not so much the family itself. This guiding principle empowers family to take more responsibility because it says that they are not solely to be blamed for their children’s behaviour.

Thus in order to create an empowering environment for the family during a homevisit, the caseworkers has to be genuinely guided by the principles that inter-generational status in a family needs to be respected and valued, that families are proud of their own homes and that family problems have their roots and supports in our culture. Once we are guided by these principles, the caseworkers can then apply techniques such as hierarchy reinforcement, appreciating the hospitality of the family, their home improvements and externalize a problem and identify stake holders and their contributions in order to really make their home visit a positive event for the family.

4. Home Visit - Adopting a Strengths Perspective

Guiding Principle	Techniques
Families are organized to care for its members	Role Clarification 1. Executive Functions Parenting, Home Management 2. Relationship Functions Marriage, Emotional Ties
Families are resilient & have a wealth of experience to draw strength from	Family Stories Seek success & resilience Connote traits as strengths in character See patterns as cohesion Exception Questions Circular Questions

For a home visit to be successful, we must be optimistic and adopt a Strengths Perspective. We need to be guided by the principle that *families are organized to care for*

its members. Beyond believes that every system is organized. It does not matter if it is organized 'well' or not. Guided by this principle we need to be aware of the two main functions of roles in a family, the executive function and the relationship function. These are two different roles at two different levels. **Role Clarification** is important because people often discuss at different levels and that is why conflicts arise. Often the husband and wife, father and mother discuss at different levels. One is talking about the heart while the other is talking about the running of the home. When this happens, conflicts occur and things get worse. The caseworker needs to determine with function they are trying to discuss with the family and clarify that with them. If the caseworker is talking about how the child is feeling in the home, while the father is talking about him needing to work to bring in money to sustain his family, we are actually talking at different levels. What may happen is that the caseworker feels that the father is being irrational and does not care about his child, when this is not true.

At the **Executive Function** level, the two main roles are parenting and home management while at the **Relationship Function** level, the two main roles are marriage and emotional ties. Any family or any individual feels more empowered when they feel they are being understood. When the caseworker comes to address issues regarding the mother's parenting styles and the mother goes on and on about her relationship with her husband, it is clear that the caseworker and the mother are talking at two different levels. If this is not rectified, nothing will be accomplished during this home visit and the mother will feel even less helped, and even more powerless at the end of it. So the caseworker could do two things. Either the caseworker brings the mother back to the topic of parenting and asks her to focus because it is important and that is the reason why he/she is there. Or the caseworker could first discuss what was on the mother's mind, that is, her issues with her husband, then move on to the purpose of the home visit. In this second option, the caseworker would have applied the skill of understanding by realizing that the mother will not be able to focus on the issue of parenting when her relationship issue is first and foremost her priority. By wearing the Strengths glasses, the caseworker would see that maybe the father might function better at executive roles than the mother, and work with the father instead on the issue of parenting.

The second principle that guides us during a home visit when we adopt the Strengths Perspective is that *families are resilient and have a wealth of experience to draw strength from*. We could apply techniques to draw out their **family stories** such as *seeking success and resilience*. By finding out whether the same thing had happened to them before or someone they know, and how they have dealt with it in the past that has worked, we could actually be reminding them that they are stronger than they think they are and they themselves have the solution to their current issue. Basically we should seek out their past successes and draw out their resiliency from them so that we can remind them of their strengths. For example, if a mother informs us that her husband has lost his job because he turned up drunk at work again and the mum is worried that she will now not have any food to put on the table for her children, we could guide her through memory lanes to think back to similar situation in the past. If she agrees that this had happened before, we can ask her nicely what she had done to cope back then. She might say things like she decided to borrow some money from her sister to make some 'kuey' (pastries/cakes) and sold them to her neighbours to get money. She returned her sister's money and had enough money to buy groceries to sustain her family. Is this not a beautiful strength of this mother that we would like to build on? We could praise her for her ingenuity of thinking out this plan, her courage to do something about it, and her hard work to sustain her family and herself. We can then ask her what she could do this time to get through this rough patch until her husband can find himself another job or was she willing to do this even if her husband found another job so that she need not worry if he gets fired again.

Another useful technique to apply is to *connote traits as strengths in character*, which also means reframing. Reframing is about changing perception by understanding something in another way. I will illustrate this point with an example. There was this 60-year old father of three children who refused to send his children to Beyond for tuition. He was a rag and bone man (collecting old clothes, newspapers, and so on) and goes around everyday on his bicycle for his rounds to try and make his living. Very often his wife and his children will be following him. That implies that sometimes, his children do

not attend school in order to walk the streets and the housing blocks with him to help him. Still, Mr Sim often did not have enough money to put food on the table and he would request and sometimes demand financial help from Beyond and anywhere else he knew. Over the years, his caseworkers had tried to find him a better-paid job, but he always managed to make his bosses angry and he kept losing his job. His caseworker used to feel that this man is crazy, lazy, not interested in putting in effort to support his family, dragging his children along with him to collect old things from the neighbourhoods and stupid for refusing Beyond's help to assist his children with educational support and basic needs.

When we slipped on our Strengths glasses one day, we saw a very different man. We saw a father who loves his children so much that he brings them around with him. We saw a man who is a great advocator for his and his family's needs. We saw a hard working man who will come at a moment's notice if we have things for him to pick up and sell and who, without fault, will cycle or walk around the community everyday to find things to make his living. We saw a man who is so used to being his own boss that he angered everyone else who tried to boss him around. We saw a man who taught his children his skills of rag and bone. And more importantly, we saw this man who knew how to keep his family united and close to him. Once we were able to reframe what we could not understand from something negative into something positive, we were able to work with him in a more productive way.

Seeing patterns in their behaviours as cohesion is the third technique that can be used to show the families that they are resilient. When an intelligent child repeatedly does not want to succeed in school, for example, we could see it in various ways. We could say that this child is stupid and is too slow for that class. He should be taken down one level in school. OR we could see that this child is refusing to pass because that is the culture in the family. The child could be thinking, "My brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts have always failed in class. If I pass, I will be the odd one out and I will look stupid! They will all say that I act 'extra extra only'. I don't want them to stop talking to me." True enough, very often this is the culture in a family and the child feels that by succeeding, they are

not being loyal to the culture of their family, which is to fail. By being loyal, that means that they still fit into their family. Failing means passing for them. Their strength is loyalty to their family.

So the way to work with this is to first acknowledge that it is indeed a strength, and give permission to their loyalty. Once they feel that you understand why they feel this way, you could then bring them back to say that as much as their loyalty to their family is good and necessary, it is quite hard to live with it in reality. They do need an education if they want to have a better life and now is the time to study.

There are two types of questioning that can be used to prove to families that they are resilient and have a wealth of experience to draw strength from. They are the *Exception Questions* and the *Circular Questions*.

Exception questions are the type of questions that a caseworker may ask to find out whether there was a time that this specific problem did not happen, why and what they had done to prevent it and so on... The caseworker can then feed the loop and build another reality for the individual. Some of the exception questions are:

- Think back one year, 2 years or 5 years back and tell me whether there was a time when you did not have this problem?
- What was different at those times? How did you feel? What did you do then?
- What will make it possible for more of that to happen?
- What small changes will you notice?
- How will the small changes make a difference for you? For others?
- What will you notice about yourself? Others? What will they notice about you?

Circular questions are the type of questions that guides the family or the young person to look at themselves from another person's perspective with or without the other person/s being around. The purpose of this type of questioning is to enable a more holistic assessment of the situation. The trick with this type of questioning is that if you get stuck, you can bring more people into the loop. Some examples of circular questioning are:

- What do you think your mother would say to what you did?

- How do you think your husband sees his son?
- What do you think is important for your mother in her relationship to her sister?
- How do you think your partner perceives your answer to this?
- Do you have any advice for your parents how they can get you to (clean up your room)?
- What ideas do you have for your parents to help you to do better in school?

These two types of questioning help the family or the young person to 'see' other things about themselves that they would not have considered. In this way, they will be able to discover that they have even more strengths than they thought they had.

There are thus so many techniques that a caseworker can use during a home visit that will help the families and their young people to discover their strengths in terms of the way they organize their life and family, and also in terms of their resiliency and their experience. Some of the techniques which have been highlighted above, such as role clarification (executive and relationship functions), bringing out their family or personal success stories, connotating traits as strengths, us seeing patterns in behaviour as cohesion and a way of questioning that makes them see themselves in different perspectives, are tools that makes a home visit become an empowering experience for at-risk families.

5. Home Visit - Negotiating a Contract

The third component of an empowering home visit is the negotiation of a contract. This is the time when the caseworker and the family set a goal together in order to find a direction for the case. If the first two parts of the home visit, creating an empowering environment and adopting a strengths perspective, are well carried out, the contracting part becomes much easier for both the family and the caseworker. Nevertheless, there are still a few guiding principles that the caseworker needs to work from and a few suggested techniques that could be used to make the whole experience of a home visit well worthwhile to an at-risk family.

Guiding Principle	Techniques
Families want to help themselves & want the best for their families	Tracking Scaling, Miracle, Circular Questions
A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step - even baby steps add up	Analogy Crystal Ball Methods SMART
Families want to give back & are not looking for a hand-out	Win-Win definition Benefit Transparency (quid pro quo)

Our first guiding principle in negotiating a contract is that *families want to help themselves and want the best for their families*. One of the techniques that a caseworker should apply is known as **tracking**. Tracking simply means that the caseworker needs to make the family focus on the issue at hand and to follow that specific issue until it is fully addressed and looked into. Very often our families tend to digress to other issues during a session. It is our duty to ask them to focus more to the issue at hand so that they can indeed work towards a solution for them and their family.

Scaling, miracle and circular questioning are all techniques that can bring the families to think at their situation and at their issue from outside a box. **Scaling questions** forces people to look ahead at how they want things to be and to look behind at how things were or have been in the past so that they can make a change to improve their present and future. It is important to work with them step by step on this because planning too much in advance or having realistically unachievable goals could make them fail and give up easily. Some examples of this type of questioning are as follows:

- On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being totally unacceptable and 10 being as good as you can imagine, where would you put your relationship at this point? Or,
- On a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 being never and 100 being always, what percentage of the time would you say you feel like giving up your job to stay home and sleep?

In response to their answers, the caseworker can probe further to get them to think another step higher with these questions:

- What percentage would it have to be for you to feel better about working?
- What would a small improvement (from 3 to 3.5) look like? What will you be doing differently? What will others do differently?

Miracle questioning can help a caseworker to find out a lot about the dreams, aspirations and visions of a family or individual. In addition to that, the caseworker can find out what problems the family or the individual wants to get rid of. It goes like this:

- If a miracle happened tonight and you woke up tomorrow morning and your problem was solved, how would things be different? Describe the differences from your point of view and what others would be doing and experiencing?

In response to their answers, the caseworker can probe further to get them to think deeper:

- Does some of that happen already at times? ... even a little bit?
- What will allow more of that to happen?
- What will you have to do? ... others?

Circular questioning has already been described above.

A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step - Lao Tzu

A journey of a thousand mile starts with a single step - even baby steps add up. This is the second guiding principle we should have when we are negotiating a contract with a family or an individual. By using the **analogy technique**, the caseworker can impress on them the importance of making the first step, followed by the next and the next and that no matter how big or small the size of the step is, it does not matter as long as you are making the step forward.

The **Crystal Ball method** is yet another way to make dream about their future so that we can encourage them to take the first few steps. The question to get the dream started goes something like this:

- If you could now look into the future by means of a crystal ball, how would you look like and how would your life look life?

Subsequently, the caseworker could ask more questions about

- What is the first thing that you need to do to make your life look like that?
- How are you going to go about doing that first step? ...and so on

A goal must be **SMART**. There are a few variations to S.M.A.R.T. which are:

- Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant & Time-Bound
- Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant & Time-Bound

Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant & Time-Bound A new variation to S.M.A.R.T. which follows the Strengths Perspective and the will of the individual could be

- Specific, Measurable, *Attractive*, Relevant & Time-Bound

While a caseworker wants the family's goal to be achievable and acceptable, the best is to work on a goal that is attractive to the family. This way it is a positive goal, not just any goal. The family or the young person will find it more interesting to work on a goal that they really want and that is going to motivate them to put in effort to make the first step, then the next few steps.

The third guiding principle that a caseworker needs to have is that *families want to give back and are not looking for a hand-out*. It is very easy to think that an at-risk family or individual wants to make use of people or situations in which they can get the maximum from. There is so much talk in social work these days about not making a family dependent on the welfare system. This is a deficit way of looking at at-risk families. The one main reason why some of these families get dependent on the welfare system and never give back is because we have never asked them to. The community model encourages community workers to identify strengths in the people we work with and create opportunities whereby they can do something useful with their skills and strengths.

Thus when we are guided by the principle that families do want to give back something and are not asking to be given things for free, the way we work with them is totally different.

One of the techniques to apply is the **Win-Win definition** where the caseworker explains about the need to work in partnership and ask the family about some ideas about what they could do to contribute. For a win-win situation, both parties involved in the partnership need to feel positive about what is decided, especially the family.

A **Benefit transparency** or a **quid pro quo** is an equal exchange of goods and services, that is, it is a favour/service that is given back for a favour/service rendered.

Some of the ways families at Beyond have given back something in the past are:

- A father who received help financial and others to put his son into a childcare had the skill of plumbing. The caseworker called upon him to render his services one day as some pipes were blocked or something. This father was very eager to come down and conduct the reparations. He later refused to take payment for his services, and asked that he will gladly come down in the future if his help is needed again. The caseworker, understanding that the father was trying to give back something in his own way for the help he received, agreed not to pay him that first time, but that if his services were called upon in the future, he will accept payment.
- Another family who has received a lot of help from Beyond Social Services always, without fault, makes a special dish when there is a party or an outing to which they are invited. At the party, she always ensures that her caseworker and other staff she knows have eaten enough.
- One of the youth who has practically grown up with Beyond renders his services as and when he is needed. For example, on Saturdays when the other children at the Centre are taken for swimming, he will prepare hotdogs and drinks as refreshments for the children and the staff after the swim. This is his way of giving back to Beyond.

These are just three examples of families or young people who have given back something, however minute it is, in their own way, using their own skills, and with their own motivation. Families are always looking for ways to give back something. They just need to be given a chance to do so. The first criteria needed for this to happen is the way they feel the service providers feel about them. If they feel that service providers feel that they are good for nothing people who just want to abuse the welfare system and make use of people, they will feel useless. They will forget that they have so much potential in them. They will even forget that they are thankful for the assistance they received and that they would like to return the favour in other ways. However if they are made to feel that they have the potential and the genuineness to want to give back, they will feel empowered to do so.

Families want to help themselves. They want the best for their families. They want to give back something for assistance received and they are not looking for a hand-out. A baby step is better than no step at all. If we are guided by those principles, we will bring them out from our families and the young people we work with. The techniques we use to bring that out need to remain positive, need to allow them to see a future they usually will not think about and allow them to give back in their own small way.

We should also remember that we are in their homes. We need to make them feel comfortable in their own homes, with us present. It is a challenge to do that, and it is a bigger challenge to negotiate a contract with them that remains attractive to them. The last thing we want to do is to make them feel powerless in their own homes.

6. Home Visit - Building Social Capital

A home visit from a caseworker can be made useful to a family because it can help the caseworker to build on a pool of social capital for them from their own resources.

Robert Putnam says that social capital “refers to the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other” (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital).

The effects of social capital on an at-risk family as follows:

- Social Capital is necessary to achieve individual goals
- Social Capital helps to overcome difficult situations
- Social Capital makes people empathetic to the misfortunes of others
- Social Capital helps to resolve collective problems
- Social Capital is transferable in economic capital

How can a caseworker build on social capital during a home visit? To begin with, a home visit allows the caseworker to learn about the neighbourhood of the family at-risk just by making his/her way to the house. In Singapore, when a social worker needs to visit a flat, he/she needs to walk across other flats, pass in front of play grounds, basketball courts, child care centres, student care centres, shop keepers, coffee shop workers, and other flats. The social worker is actually doing some community mapping, or more specifically, neighbourhood mapping and building a pool of resources and networks to introduce to the family he/she is going to visit.

The social worker can also meet new people at the family’s houses, such as visiting siblings, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, grand parents, neighbours, friends, friends of friends and so on. The social worker then becomes aware of the social capital that this family has and uses the strengths in it. One of the tricks that always, always works for me to find out more about the family’s social networks is to attend weddings, funerals, parties, birthdays and religious celebrations when I am invited, or sometimes even if uninvited. Naturally, being aware of the culture, as well as good manners, is important as previously mentioned so it is vital to bring a small gift or token during those visits, to wear appropriate clothes and genuinely want to be there. These families always have large social networks, especially the Malays, and a party or celebration is the best place to meet most of them.

With this knowledge and awareness, we can then help the family to create a genogram and/or an eco-map and/or a Strengths Check to build their resources and identify untapped strength within their own networks.

7. Conclusion

A home visit is a very important part of social work if and only if it is conducted properly. We have visited many guiding principles and techniques to have and to use during a home visit to make the whole experience empowering and beneficial for at-risk families. Sadly, many families are terrified of home visits because of the negative connotation that comes with it. Many families have the feeling that social workers are ‘checking up on them’, or ‘coming to take my children away’ and so on. These families are not to blame for thinking this way.

I have to admit that when I conducted my first few home visits, I felt that it was my duty to ‘check up on them’, especially if the families were requesting for financial aid. During training we are told that not to be judgmental. Well that is not really possible if we are not going in wearing the Strengths glasses. Indeed, during those first few home visits, my inner eyes would open big when I saw big screen televisions, huge hi-fi stereo systems and such things in my families’ homes. I do feel ashamed now for having such feelings and thoughts at that time. I am sure that my reaction, no matter how much I wanted to hide it to them, had shown in my tone of voice or my eyes or my behaviour towards them. Now that I think back, I feel, “No wonder those families were reserved and cool with me.” I also feel that they were right to hide some of the truths from me. It took me longer to build a rapport with these families than with families where I walked in wearing those powerful glasses that helped me to see their world in a more colourful and positive light. It is amazing that how you view people is how you treat them, and how you treat them is how they treat you back. When you view them negatively, you treat them with distrust and little respect, and they treat you with distrust and even less respect too. Luckily the reverse is true and even better. When you view them having this wonderful

wealth of strengths and experiences, you treat them with respect, and they treat you back with respect and welcome you into their homes and lives.

Once you are in their homes and lives, it is critical to help them to see that wealth of strengths and make use of that to put their life back on track. In their homes (or elsewhere), you need to take a one-down position with regards to them and allow them to have the power over you. Allow them to act as hosts and treat you like guests. You need to create an empowering environment for them in their kingdom, always adopt the strengths perspective and negotiate a contract where the will of the family is transparent and a concrete action step decided upon. You need to also remind them about their social capital. And you need to always respect and value them for who they are. Only then will they feel helped and empowered.

When we are welcomed in their home by the head of the household, when we can engage in small talk without too much effort and when the family opens up and shares their views and their opinions, we know that we have been able to achieve the goal of creating an empowering environment for that family. When we are able to identify resources within the family and are able to highlight the positive side of each member of the family, we know that we have adopted the strengths perspective successfully. And when the goals that we come up with together with the family are clear, the will of the family is transparent no matter what they are, and when there is a concrete action plan at the end of the home visit, we know that we have been able to negotiate a contract successfully. When we have been able to locate resources in their community and neighbourhood on the way to the home or at their homes, we know that we have used a home visit to its utmost potential for the benefit of the family.