Introduction

Families are perhaps society’s oldest and most resilient institutions. Around the world, the family is valued and celebrated. From the beginning of human life, people have grouped themselves into families to find emotional, physical and collective support. Family structures may vary around the world, and yet, the value of family endures. Therefore, healthy
individuals within healthy families are at the core of a healthy society. It is in everyone’s best interest to help create a positive environment for all families.

Families are our most intimate social environment. They are the places where we begin the vital processes of socializing our children: teaching them — in partnership with countless others in the community — how to survive and thrive in the world. A healthy marriage and family can be a valuable resource for helping us endure difficulties that life inevitably brings. On the other hand, unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships can create terrible problems that may persist from one generation to the next.

**The Strengths-Based Perspective**

Understanding the family and the place that it holds within society has been difficult to grasp. Family theorists have tried to create one theory or framework that explains the family since the beginning of the 20th century. According to White (2005), early family theory focused on the family and how it fit within society, creating frameworks that borrowed from other disciplines such as anthropology and economics. In the last half of the 20th century, the focus moved to the functions of the family using typologies to classify families. An interest in cross-cultural comparisons also led to a new look at previous perspectives during this time in an attempt to understand the family from a global perspective.

A focus on family strengths brings a more reasonable balance our understanding of how families succeed in the face of life’s inherent difficulties. By focusing only on a family’s problems, we ignore the fact that it takes a positive approach to be successful. The family
strengths perspective is a world-view or orientation toward life and families, grounded in research conducted around the world. It is basically a positive, optimistic orientation. It does not ignore family problems but restores them to their proper place in life: as vehicles for testing our capacities as families and reaffirming our vital human connections with each other.

Most of the research about families has focused primarily on the problems or weaknesses of families or the individuals within the family. Not until the 1970s did family strengths begin to gain momentum when Nick Stinnett began his work at Oklahoma State University in 1974 and the University of Nebraska in 1977. Stinnett, DeFrain and their colleagues then began publishing a continuous series of articles and books (Casas, et al, 1984; DeFrain, DeFrain, & Lepard, 1994; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002; Olson & DeFrain, 2006; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985; Stinnett & O’Donnell, 1996; Stinnett & Sauer, 1977; Xie, DeFrain, Meredith & Combs, 1996). Over the past three decades researchers in the United States and around the world have studied families from a strengths-based perspective. Research on strong families has not only resulted in models for better understanding the qualities of strong families; it has also suggested a number of propositions that have importance in how we look at families in general, and how we can successfully live in our own families.

**22 Propositions Derived from the Family Strengths Research**

Families around the world are wonderfully diverse. By having different interests and capabilities, we offer strength to each other as individuals, family members, and citizens of our communities. However, as human beings, we are all quite similar. Our studies of strong families
around the world have lead us to the conclusion that there are remarkable similarities among families who exhibit good ways of working together and caring for each other.

The family strengths perspective evolves over time as our understanding of strong families increases. It is not a static set of ideas or rigorously testable hypotheses, but more like a family itself: a constantly growing and changing dialogue about the nature of strong marriages and strong families. Over the past three decades, researchers looking at couples and families from a strengths perspective have developed a number of propositions derived from their work around the world that merit serious consideration:

• Families, in all their remarkable diversity, are the basic foundation of human cultures. Strong families are critical to the development of strong communities, and strong communities promote and nurture strong families.

• All families have strengths. And, all families have challenges and areas of potential growth. If one looks only for problems in a family, one will see only problems. If one also looks for strengths, one will find strengths.

• It’s not about structure, it’s about function. When talking about families, it is common to make the mistake of focusing on external family structure or type of family rather than internal family functioning.

• Strong marriages are the center of many strong families. The couple relationship is an important source of strength in many families with children who are doing well.
• Strong families tend to produce great kids; and a good place to look for great kids is in strong families (Stinnett & O’Donnell, 1996).

• If you grew up in a strong family as a child, your chances of having a strong family of your own are greater, however, you can also have a strong family if you didn’t see that model (DeFrain, Jones, Skogrand, & DeFrain, 2003).

• The relationship between money and family strengths is precarious. Once a family has adequate financial resources, the relentless quest for more and more money is not likely to increase the family’s quality of life, happiness together, or the strength of their relationships with each other. “The best things in life are not things.”

• Strengths develop over time. Families learn how to develop healthy strategies. Many couples who are unstable at first end up creating a healthy, happy family.

• Strengths are often developed in response to challenges. A couple and family’s strengths are tested by life’s everyday stressors and as well as significant crises.

• Strong families don’t tend to think much about their strengths, they just live them. However, it is useful to examine a family’s strengths and discuss precisely how family members use them to great advantage.

• Strong families, like people, are not perfect. Even in the strongest of families conflict exists. A strong family is a piece of art continually in progress, always in the process of growing and changing.
When seeking to unite groups of people, communities, and even nations, uniting around the cause of strengthening families can be a powerful strategy. Families are the foundation for all our groups, and the strengths of families that are remarkably similar from group to group, gives us powerful common ground for working together.

Human beings have the right and responsibility to feel safe, comfortable, happy, and loved.


**An International Family Strengths Model**

A positive and useful approach to conceptualizing families from a global perspective links family strengths, community strengths, and cultural strengths and demonstrates how families use these valued tools to meet the many challenges they face today in a difficult world. Conceptual models from all three levels of strength were developed from an analysis of countries in our recent textbook (DeFrain & Asay, 2007), where two visual models are presented in order to help understand and organize our thinking about the complexities of family life today.

Drawing conclusions about families on a global level was a most difficult task. As a starting point, we chose to use the discussions of 18 countries, which represent a diverse sample of all the major regions of the world. The variety of information that the authors provided was fascinating and each presentation was unique. We asked eminent professionals world-wide, representing a wide variety of countries and cultures, to write about the difficulties
families face today and how families use their strengths to meet these challenges; the 43 co-authors each approached the task at hand from their own unique individual and cultural perspectives, and the diversity of their responses was remarkable.

From the very beginning, we believed the creation of that volume would make two major contributions to the field of Family Studies: First, we thought the text would help the reader conceptualize families around the world from a strengths-based perspective. We believe this is a useful way of organizing our thinking about the multiplicity of families living in so many diverse cultures, and have found that without some way to do so it can be very easy for students of the field to become overwhelmed by the differences and not be able to see the striking similarities among families from culture to culture. It simply is too easy to get lost in the cultural trees of difference and miss the cultural forest of similarities. Family strengths – those qualities that help families succeed in the difficult tasks of life – are a positive, unifying conceptual frame for understanding families.

Second, we believed from the very beginning when we started working on this volume that the act of creating the text and analyzing the contributors’ work on families in 18 countries would also advance the level of theoretical understanding of family strengths globally. The fact was that many of the countries represented in the text had not had studies of family strengths conducted there before, and a discussion of strengths and challenges in their cultures would be a catalyst for new investigations. This proved to be the case and the volume resulted in a good deal of new thinking from a strengths-based perspective in many countries, and in a number of
countriests, new research on family strengths was conducted specifically for the articles the
writers were developing.

**Family Strengths**

When people around the world describe the qualities that make their family strong, these are
some of the traits they talk about:

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<th>Appreciation and Affection</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Caring for each other</td>
<td>Trust</td>
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<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Honesty</td>
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<td>Respect for Individuality</td>
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<th>Positive Communication</th>
<th>Enjoyable Time Together</th>
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<tr>
<td>Giving compliments</td>
<td>Quality time in great quantity</td>
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<td>Sharing feelings</td>
<td>Good things take time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoiding blame</td>
<td>Enjoying each other’s company</td>
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<td>Being able to compromise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agreeing to disagree</td>
<td>Sharing fun times</td>
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Spiritual Well-Being

Hope
Faith
Compassion
Shared ethical values
Oneness with humankind
the Ability to Manage Stress and Crisis Effectively
Adaptability
Seeing crises as challenges and opportunities
Growing through crises together
Openness to change
Resilience

Appreciation and Affection for Each Other

When focusing on strong families, you are talking about positive emotional bonds and how we create these with each other. People in strong families care deeply for each other and let each other know this on a regular basis. They feel good about each other and know how important it is to continually express these feelings. Giving sincere thanks builds a positive atmosphere where bonds of emotional connection are nurtured.

Commitment to Each Other. Research on strong families around the world reveals story after story of the incredible staying power that family members demonstrate toward each other. Strong families are committed to each other above all else. The family comes first.

Commitment describes a special kind of love we have for each other – a love that is steady and sure and is not subject to how we feel, the passage of the years, or hard times. It is commitment that endures. Besides valuing the family as a unit, strong families do not lose sight
of the value of each individual family member. Each person forms a part of the family and each part is precious.

**Positive Communication.** Communication is on the list of the qualities of strong families — open, honest, straightforward and clear communication. But positive communication—above all else — is the key to success. Communication in strong families does not always produce agreement on important issues. Family members are all individuals and have unique ways of looking at the world. It works best if they all can speak directly with each other without blaming or condemning. And even in strong families, some disagreements simply don’t get resolved. People can still love each other and remain friends and loyal family members while agreeing to disagree on various issues. Troubled families tend to be overly critical and hostile in their communication with each other, or deny problems and avoid verbal conflict.

**Successful Management of Stress and Crisis.** Strong families know how to manage difficult times in life creatively. If the family can see the situation as not only a serious difficulty, but also as an opportunity to strengthen their bonds with each other, the challenge can be met. Families sometimes fall into disarray during times of crisis; but those families that can recover from the initial shock and sense of despair and band together to find solutions to their difficulties commonly say they feel stronger and more appreciative of each other as family members.

When studying stress and crisis around the world, it is hard for a researcher not to conclude that human beings and human families can be remarkably resilient. The crises
following numerous terrorist acts, natural disasters, and other world tragedies caused untold damage to family and community well-being. During those times, families come together to share their grief. The need to lean on each other is strong. Strong families rise above crisis by working together toward a common goal.

**Spiritual Well-being.** The term spiritual well-being is also often associated with religion and includes institutions and doctrine. Some families talk about faith in God, faith in life, faith in loved ones. They talk about being generally hopeful about life and believe that, in a broad sense, life works out pretty well for them. Some describe a feeling of oneness with the world, a connection to nature, to the land. Some people talk about how important it is to them that family members share important ethical values and beliefs, and express themselves in these terms by commitment to important social causes.

**Enjoyable Time Together.** Time spent together is critical and instead of arguing whether it should be quality time or quantify time the answer is that we need quality time in great quantity. Happy childhood memories most commonly center on activities that are shared as a family. Simply enjoying time together is the key. Eating meals together, spending time outdoors in nature together, attending sporting events, playing games, and just having time to talk are all good examples. The particular activity isn’t as important as the fact that the activity is a vehicle for human contact.
Community Strengths

Strong families contribute to the well-being of communities, and strong communities enhance the development of strong families. A number of important community strengths emerge as we examine communities around the world:

- a supportive environment that genuinely values families, and a general willingness and natural generosity infused in the culture to help when families are in need
- a good educational delivery system
- religious communities for families seeking this kind of support
- family-service programs developed by government and non-governmental organizations for families who cannot find the help they need from their own extended family, friends and neighbors
- a safe, secure and healthful environment

A Supportive Environment

Throughout our book it is evident that the contributions of the community to the family are undeniable. It is this connection to other individuals and families that serves as a safety net for many families. The author from the article on Canada reports that their government has suggested that families increase involvement with their community (including extended family, neighbors, and churches) to strengthen the family. Specific wording in the document suggests that “these groups must reclaim their natural functions as agents of family support.”
Many societies are relatively collectivist in nature and rely on the group for support. As the Korean co-authors point out, “The concept of We-ness for the Korean includes homogeneity, unity, interdependence, mutual protection and acceptance as its intrinsic properties.” Even those countries with a more individualistic orientation find that a supportive environment within the community is essential. As we see from the article about Botswana, it may be the community that is able to help families transition to a modern society.

**A Good Educational Delivery System**

Another important community function for families is a good educational delivery system. Several authors mentioned the importance of education for their countries. This is an important function usually delivered by the community. Informal education is also a function of the community. The South African co-authors write about *indigenous knowledge systems* that have educated young people for centuries. These localized educational systems are based within the community and information is passed on by word of mouth. It is a precious picture of elderly community members sitting down with young boys and girls and visiting about life.

**Religious Communities for Families Seeking this Kind of Support**

The religious community may play an important role in enhancing spiritual well-being for many families and may also play an important role in supporting families in a variety of other ways. Several articles speak about the social support that the faith community provides for families. The article on Israel describes the role of religion as that of a social regulator in terms of issues such as marriage and passing on values. The article on Botswana talks about the community
prayers for marriages. In Somalia, the influence of religion is used to justify behavior and becomes the vehicle for social change within the community.

**Family-Service Programs**

Social services provided by communities also play an important role in family life. In some countries such as China, family policy is well-defined and provides needed services to families within communities. The authors report that, “Parents, schools, and communities work closely together to set up programs that ensure the proper development of children today.” Other authors reveal a different story and finding access to services are mentioned as challenges.

For many, the dichotomy between urban and rural, wealthy and poor becomes the dividing line between adequate and inadequate services. The chapter on Brazil points out that there are many regional disparities between what the communities are able to offer families. Government-sponsored welfare programs that are needed by families in the poorest areas are lacking. The chapter on Mexico reveals that 57% of families do not have access to social services.

**Safe, Secure and Healthful Environment**

Around the world, the community usually takes on the responsibility for protecting individuals and families. A safe environment is necessary for families to carry out their functions. The chapter on Greece notes that the protection of the family is a component of public law. This is not the case in many countries that have been ravaged by terrorism, war and natural disaster. The civil war in Somalia has forced many to flee their country. Even though Somalis are
nomadic and are accustomed to the difficulties inherent in that way of life, civil war has taken a far greater toll on the population due to starvation, maiming and killing. The authors of the article on Israel share their perspectives on the effect that relentless terrorism has on a community.

Traditional societies have elaborate and effective social security systems built into the community. The difficulty arises when the community is not able to provide that safety net, as is the case with so many societies in which families have been displaced or in the case of urbanization. Rural-to-urban migration, multicultural strife, urban isolation, health crises such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic and a lack of trust have brought about tremendous changes that have occurred and weaken the community.

**Cultural Strengths**

So far in this discussion we have seen how family and community strengths reinforce each other. There is a third level or dimension which could be called cultural strengths. These include:

- a rich cultural history
- shared cultural meanings
- a stable political process
- a viable economy
- an understanding of the global society
Rich Cultural History

The history of cultural groups needs to be considered in our efforts to understand families in their social context. The heritage and historical legacy of each country contributes to the strengths of the families, giving them meaning, direction and inspiration for dealing with life’s challenges. As you read through the history of each country you realize the bequest given by the people who have come before them to create a culture unlike any other, each unique in its own way. Greece is a country whose cultural heritage seems to call out to future generations, giving them a foundation and a purpose. The author talks about the instability of the area for more than three thousand years and how these constant changes and struggles have prepared the people with a fighting spirit and a sense of determination. The author of the Russian chapter spends a significant amount of time explaining the importance of understanding the heritage of a great people who have suffered throughout time. Individuals and families draw strength from knowing who they are and find comfort from a deep sense of belonging.

Shared Cultural Meanings

Strong families also share meanings with their culture. Many of the authors include words or maxims that are indigenous to that country. The authors sometimes struggle with translation because there is no way to explain the rich meaning or consequence of the statement in just a few words. It is so embedded in the fabric of their lives that its meaning is only something that those within the culture can really understand and appreciate. Examples of this can be found in
the idea of botho in Botswana, the mauri in New Zealand, ubuntu in South Africa, and the oikos in Greece. Although these concepts may be understood at the information or knowledge level, the genuine emotional meaning will be quite different for those who have grown up in the culture and have shared personal experience.

A Stable Political Process

A stable political process and a viable economy are beneficial for families. A stable government provides an atmosphere in which families do not have to concern themselves with the daily responsibilities of the country, although some individuals may choose to involve themselves in the political process. When the political process is functioning well, people may come to expect that the government will continue to provide and protect with a consistency that can be trusted. In that way, they are able to build on that stable base and have expectations that allow them to construct a bright future for themselves.

Families that live in times of political upheaval cannot rely on the political process for support, which makes family life more difficult and in some cases dangerous. In Somalia, for example, mass killings, starvation, destruction of resources, and separation of families have resulted from the political civil war that has divided the country.

A Viable Economy

A stable economy contributes to the ability of families to provide for themselves and gather resources to sustain life. Almost every author addressed issues related to economics. Just as political instability can destabilize families, economic pressures and problems often cause
societies to make adjustments ultimately forcing families to change the way they carry out their functions. In some cases, families are forced to concentrate their efforts solely on survival. Although this tends to leave little time for building family strengths there are several strategies that strong families implement while working together for solutions. An example of one strategy has been migration which has also forced many families to change while they are separated from each other.

Stable politics and a vibrant economy do not guarantee that each individual family will be strong, loving and happy. While there are many families who may be caught up in a desperate political and economic environment, they may still manage somehow to create positive emotional connections with each other even as the instability of the social environment swirls around them.

**An Understanding of the Global Society**

Learning from other cultures is an important tool for building strong families. Each culture develops creative ways for dealing with the many challenges that life brings. Knowledge of other cultures adds innumerable options for families as they create a meaningful, stable, and joyful life together.

Over a decade ago, Marshall McLuhan (1994) argued that a global village would eventually take the place of different cultures. When one examines the impact of the globalization of the business world, the Internet, movies, and other technologies, it would be easy to come to the conclusion that it may be possible to meld all world cultures into one.
However, this idea has met with considerable criticism in terms of the importance of the vibrant differences around the world that make each culture unique.

Although the world is not likely to ever become uniformly and universally the same, global influences are inevitable. Globalization also has some advantages for families. Increasing information and being aware of the world outside provides a new perception of how one fits into the world and gives a sense of the human interconnectedness with all people around the globe. Increased cultural understanding stops misunderstanding and reduces fear.

In an important sense, the purpose of studying strong families around the world is to help inform the global community. Knowing about strong families in other cultures helps families everywhere understand the components of what constitutes a healthy family. Any one culture that assumes they have all the answers has not really examined the strengths of other cultures. Although each culture may display family strengths in their own way, knowing there is a connection to strong families all around the world serves to reinforce the role and importance of the family in every society.

The Integration of Family, Community and Cultural Strengths: Two Visual Models

From a visual perspective, how do family strengths, community strengths and cultural strengths fit together and mutually influence each other? Borrowing from the Ecological Model established by Bronfenbrenner (1977), the idea of concentric or nested circles is one way to view the three areas of strengths with family strengths in the center and moving out and away from the single family unit to the broader culture context (see Figure 1).
Ecological theory represents the interrelationship between systems. The inner circle characterizes the near environment that involves face-to-face interactions with others. The immediate family is found in this system. In some societies, this basic system would also include extended family or those that form close associations such as within a small village or a group that represents family although not blood related. For example, in the article on South Africa, the social-cultural and social-political climate has forced families to create household structures formed by the availability of resources and the ability to sustain its members rather than a group whose relationship is strictly formed through kinship.

The center circle involves interaction between contexts. For families around the world, this can represent many different types places in which people are connected and belong. In a relatively individualistic society such as the United States, this may represent few connections – the school system for children, the workplace, and a few others. Some cultures include the extended family as part of their connections. In Mexico, the extended family is the source of economic support, emotional support and personal satisfaction. In China, filial piety, which focuses on respect and obligation to the family rather than individual identity, creates a family network where the extended family plays a critical role socially, emotionally, and economically. In other societies, there may be more connections. For example, in Kenya the *harambee* philosophy has formed communities where families work together to provide the social needs of everyone by forming connections to educational, medical and social institutions.
The outer circle represents the outside influences. This system represents influences that are culturally imbedded. For example, the idea of filial piety is a macrosystem within Chinese culture. Children may not be taught to honor their elders specifically by their parents or within the school system by their teachers but it is found to permeate society as a whole. History is also included within this outer circle. The historical background influences the all aspects of people within those countries. This can be seen in the chapters about Russian and Greek families.

As with the Ecological model, the influence between the circles is reciprocal in that the influence of the family on the community and culture can be as significant as the influence that the community and culture have on the individual local family unit. From an examination of families around the world, families seem to take on different structures in different circumstances. An example of this is the South African households where the authors describe a family that is more “fluid” and results in more “complex family structures.” Here the household is one of social organization and includes those who live together and contribute income and practical help. The common trend of all families though, is to accomplish tasks such as childbearing, providing for the basic needs of family members, establishing social support networks, and essentially establishing family traditions. The way in which these tasks are realized ultimately influences the way society functions.

Another way to visualize how family, community, and culture strengths relate to each other is to construct a Venn diagram (see Figure 2). In this model, we might visualize the strong
family as that family where the three areas of strengths intersect. A family which possesses not
only internal family strengths but enjoys support from the community and a positive and
empowering heritage is, indeed, in an excellent position in the world.

Unlike what may be imagined in the Venn diagram, however, those who are living in
parts of the world torn apart by war, famine, or harsh political conditions can still create and
maintain strong families, though the task becomes much more difficult because of external
stressors impinging upon the family. In difficult circumstances such as these, families search for
a new state of equilibrium within the community and/or within their culture. It could be that a
family unit is preserved and thrives but the country is politically unstable. In this type of
situation, the stability of the families is dependent almost solely on the strengths of the
individual family and their immediate community. Even though there may be chaos in the larger
environment, the family is still able to continue to nurture each other and to function as a
family even though their cultural heritage is threatened. In this model, this equilibrium would
be represented by the intersection of only family strengths and community strengths. When
political order is re-established, cultural strengths will again have a positive influence within the
family.

Another example can be found among those countries that have examined the changes
that urbanization has forced among families. In South Africa, the author talks about the
situation where individual families have been separated due to the need for one or more of the
members to find jobs in the cities leaving families vulnerable and isolated. The authors note
that, "The culture of sharing provides a buffer system for the many indigent rural families who are often without any form of social support or safety.” In this case, the community and culture have intersected to meet the needs of the family in the absence of the family unit.

Other authors talk about the absence of community support. The article about Russia talks about the lack of family services. The author states that the family “may be the only island of stability in a boundless ocean of uncertainty generated by the dysfunctionality of social institutions.” In addition, families are more divided and spend much more time in individual actions leaving little time for community activities. Here the family strengths and the cultural strengths are the two categories that carry the family through during this time in history.

In some cases where the entire culture is in a state of transition, the absence of community and cultural strengths leaves the family unit alone to survive only on their own internal strengths. One example of this is Somalia. The authors have shown that significant changes in circumstances have taken place for the predominantly nomadic population. This group of people, who for centuries have known the ways of independence and pride in caring for their own, are suddenly faced with the necessity of living in urban areas to survive. They become overwhelmed by the transition and are forced to give up their traditions and communal ways of living while at the same time often do not have the community support and the basics they need.

Both of these visual models illustrate the truly amazing ways that families all over the world are able to use their strengths to triumph over even the most horrendous conditions and
insecure situations. It is also strengths that help families who live in relative prosperity and freedom to rise above complacency and the subtle erosion of the family. Certainly communities and cultural heritage contribute to the stability and support of families in all types of circumstances but ultimately it seems that the individual internal strengths of families provide the basic foundation for what keeps the family from gradually disappearing.

In Conclusion, it is our belief that this study of the strengths of families, communities, and cultures around the world is still in its infancy. We know that we have only scratched the surface in our examination of global families. What we understand today may change tomorrow as we learn more about the diverse ways that families express themselves within the contexts of their local communities and cultural heritage. Over time, we hope to uncover new truths about how families live, and change, and grow in the environments where they live. We look forward to the journey.
Figure 1. Concentric Circles Representing Relationships Among Strengths.
Figure 2. A Venn Diagram Representing the Intersection of Strengths.
References


