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## Towards a Critical Solution-Focused Practice?

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*RE-PRINT IN ENGLISH***Towards a critical solution-focused practice?<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This article explores possible connections between solution-focused practice, collective action, and social change. It considers how solution-focused practice might enter and be used in such contexts. A case is made for collective action as one type of response to the sort of difficulties that lead people to seek therapy. This is addressed first in a solution-focused way, by considering characteristics of the approach that might help its adaptation for social and collective action. Finally, ideas are offered to make solution-focused practice more suited to such endeavors.

**Introduction**

Some recent developments in solution-focused practice have excited me more than any since my introduction to the model in the mid 1990s. At the 2017 solution-focused world conference in Frankfurt, I attended an 'open space' discussion facilitated by Wolfgang Gaiswinkler on 'SF and Politics'. During this gathering we groped our way uncertainly towards what a relationship between politics and the solution focused approach might entail. At the same conference, I was invited to deliver the opening plenary at the SFBTA North American conference in November of 2018. My address was on broadening the solution-focused approach from the individual to the community level. Earlier in 2018, a section of the annual UK Association of Solution Focused Practice (UKASFP) conference focused on a similar theme, framed this time as 'SF and Social Change'.

A draft 'solution-focused manifesto for social change' was distributed at the UKASFP conference, signed a little mysteriously by the 'Solution-Focused Collective'. In the late summer of that year, a group of solution-focused practitioners, all interested in using solution-focused ideas and practices for the purposes of social change, formed under this name. Having consulted the wider solution-focused community on its contents, we further developed and then published the manifesto (Solution-Focused Collective, 2019).

In this article, I want to explore connections between solution-focused practice and politics, and what it might mean to think in this way. I am not approaching this enterprise neutrally, as I am committed to the importance of collective action and the need for social change. One of the reasons I was interested in the SF and politics discussion in Frankfurt was that political campaigning had become connected to my professional life while I served as the Chair of the British Association of Social Workers from 2014 to 2018. In particular, in April 2017, I took part in an event called 'Boot Out Austerity', a 100-mile walk to protest about the UK government's policies of 'austerity', which included savage cuts to services and benefit payments to disabled and unemployed people. This was a collective action, by a group of social workers who wanted to make politicians and the public aware of the impact of this austerity and to call for its end (the phrase 'Boot Out Austerity' is a pun in English: 'to boot out' is a colloquialism meaning 'to get rid of', while boots are, of course, worn by walkers). The discussions in Frankfurt and at the 2018 UK and US conferences alerted me to possibilities of bringing solution-focused practice into such contexts, and of how it could be used in them. Investigating these possibilities might lead to more questions than answers, unsurprisingly given that we are at an early stage in this process. If these questions are difficult to answer, then, as Jonathan Franzen (2013) suggests, this would make them very much worth asking.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article, in Polish, was published in the first edition of *Polski Biuletyn BSFT* in early 2018.

First, I will suggest the case for collective action in response to difficulties that lead to people seeking therapy. I will follow this with a critical look at aspects of solution-focused practice that might impede its movement into the political domain. The existence of such issues would suggest that work is required on the solution-focused approach to enable this movement to happen. I will address this in two ways, first, in true solution-focused fashion, by considering characteristics of the approach that fit with or will help in adapting it for more political and collective action. Second, I will offer some ideas for making solution-focused practice more suited to these endeavors.

Let me add a brief note about terminology, as words can take on different meanings in different parts of the world. I am referring in particular to the word 'critical' in the title of this article. This is of course a word in everyday use, where it is often associated with being negative and even destructive. Put in front of 'practice' though, it can refer to "open-minded, reflective approaches that take account of different perspectives, experiences and assumptions" (Glaister, 2008, p8). We are going somewhat further, and using the term 'critical solution-focused practice' to evoke, for example, 'critical psychology' and 'critical psychiatry', which are perspectives in their respective fields that draw on critical theory (Fox et al., 2009; Thomas, 2017). This originated in the sociology of the Frankfurt School, though the term now refers more widely to critiques of society that draw attention to and challenge power structures (Bohman, 2019). Critical theory sees social problems as determined more by societal structures than by individual factors, and associated practice perspectives therefore see social change and collective action as at least as important as individual change.

### **A case for collective action**

In the earlier days of the helping professions, collective action was a common feature. For example, social work in the UK was initially as much a collective approach involving campaigning and reform as it was an approach used with individuals and families (Dickens, 2018). The importance of the former relative to the latter was advocated by Clement Attlee (1920) (later the British Prime Minister responsible for developing the post-war welfare state) amongst other social workers, which in turn influenced the work of Jane Addams in the US (Knight, 2010). Addams, known as the 'mother' of social work, ensured that initially it had a strong emphasis on reform. This was challenged by the gradual growth of the more individualized psychotherapy and psychology, which saw a rapid acceleration in the second half of the twentieth century (Rose, 1990).

The sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1959, p.9), drew an important distinction between personal troubles and public issues. He illustrated this in the case of unemployment:

*When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.*

The relevance of this distinction has been reinforced in recent years by the effects of the austerity programs implemented by many governments following the financial crash of 2008. The psychological impact of austerity has been extensively documented (McGrath et al., 2015), though this does not mean that this impact requires individualized responses. The need for a collective response has been highlighted by service user groups, for example, the UK-based radical psychiatric survivor group, Recovery in the Bin (2015). As one mental health service user said, "The best antidepressant is collective action" (Curtis, 2018).

### **Solution-focused practice - an individualist critique**

A belief in the need for collective responses is one of the hallmarks of radical and critical approaches in the helping professions, with another being a focus on collaborative working and the empowerment of service users. Although the central focus of solution-focused practice on what the client wants might be seen to make this a radical approach, it has remained a largely individualized endeavor. In an influential article, Miller and de Shazer (1998) clearly intend to keep solution-focused therapy away from politics, as it is usually understood, and not treat clients' problems as social problems.

They claim that, in a different language game, solution-focused therapists *do* engage in a political process, by replacing their clients' problem-focused stories with solution-focused ones. This is a language game that sees therapy as a job, working with clients in constructing change, and "this is what clients pay their therapists to do" (Miller and de Shazer, 1998, p.367).

How solution-focused practice is being conceptualized here is caught up in the context in which it originally developed, where a person pays a fee to receive therapy. It has since moved into many other contexts, and yet it has carried with it individualized, transactional features of the privatized market setting. The development of solution-focused therapy has been virtually coterminous with the current era of neoliberalism, and part of our argument is that prevailing models of practice cannot escape the influence of the wider social and political landscape. In the neoliberal age, "all forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favor of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values" (Harvey, 2005, p.23). So while it is tempting to see the act of asking what the client wants as a radical one, while this remains at the individual level it can also be seen as contributing to "ways in which individuals are encouraged, or even coerced, into seeing themselves as wholly responsible for every aspect of their lives" (Ferguson, 2017, p.76).

The word 'coerced' might seem strong, but we need to be careful about how solution-focused therapy could be used in government programs, alongside other psychological interventions, as a means of 'psycho-compulsion', for example to return people into employment (Friedli & Stearn, 2015). There is a price to pay for trying to make people wholly and individually responsible for their lives. As *Recovery In The Bin* (2015) put it, "autonomy and self-determination can only be attained through collective struggle rather than through individualistic striving and aspiration".

Added to these thoughts about context and the limits of asking individuals what they want, a further politically-driven critique of the solution-focused approach would focus on its lack of attention to the question 'why?'. This is seen as the central question in self-directed groupwork, an approach to collective action that developed within social work (Fleming & Ward, 2017), which has connections with the critical pedagogy of Freire (1970). The developers of the self-directed groupwork model critique approaches which jump straight from the question 'what?' to the question 'how?', without addressing 'why?' in between. They claim that this limits the scope of solutions to "the private world around people and within their existing knowledge and experience" (Fleming and Ward, 2017)." The suggestion being made is that asking 'why?', especially in a group context, develops a critical consciousness and leads to a wider range of options for actions and change.

This focus on problems, and on process rather than outcome, marks self-directed groupwork out as very different to solution-focused practice, and it is not clear at this stage what this particular critique will offer a solution-focused practitioner. But who knows what synthesis might result from a consideration of such an antithetical approach! The important thing is to adopt a critical and reflexive stance towards one's methods, which is part of a political approach in itself (Warren, 1984). At the very least, this will keep our approach alive and will help to steer us from conformity towards development and change.

### **Solution-focused as a radical practice**

So, there appears to be work to do for solution-focused practice to be adapted for use in a political context, as part of collective action towards social change. If we want solution-focused practice to move in this direction, let us first look at what is already occurring, for 'instances' of such adaptation.

We stated a caveat above, with regard to the solution-focused starting point of asking what the client wants, that this can lead to required social change being reduced to the pursuit of individual goals with an undue responsibility placed on the individual. At the same time, if we guard against this, it is still a potentially radical and empowering act, to ask a person, or a group of people, what they want. Let me give two examples. Ferguson (2017) describes the 1838 memoir of John Perceval as "perhaps the most perceptive and poignant account ever written by an ex-patient about asylum life" and shares this extract (p.37):

*Men acted as though my body, soul and spirit were fairly given up to their control, to work their mischief and folly upon. My silence, I suppose, gave consent. I mean, that I was never told, such and such things we are going to do; we*

*think it advisable to administer such and such medicine, in this or that manner; I was never asked, Do you want anything? Do you wish for, prefer, anything? Have you any objection to this or that?*

My second example is a collective one. A few years ago, I was at a social work conference in South Korea, at which a group of disability rights activists staged a protest as the minister gave a welcome speech. The audience were shocked by the treatment of the disabled people as they were removed from the stage and the hall, but at the end of the conference three days later they were back on the same stage, this time at the invite of the conference organizers, and able to convey their message. This followed negotiations with the conference hosts, though I also witnessed a truly collaborative relationship developed between the disabled activists and a group of social work activists at the conference, through which the disabled group gained support in making their case. This began when one of the social workers located the disabled activists website after the protest and sent them an email that ended with the simple question: "What do you need from us, what do you want?" (Shennan, 2016).

For many years now, the starting question of the BRIEF team in London has used the word 'hope' rather than 'want': "What are your best hopes from our work together?" (Ratner et al., 2012). A recent book by the English Marxist scholar, Terry Eagleton (2015), might explain the popularity of this particular question, as he considers differences between hope and desire. Eagleton's is a rich account, drawing widely on political, religious and literary sources, which I cannot do justice to here. I shall pick out a few of these differences, which alert us to the political aspects of hope. First, hope, unlike desire, can express possibility as well as a wish. "I hope to see you in Copenhagen in September" suggests I expect this could happen, whereas "I wish I were Lionel Messi" does not (for the non-sporting reader, I am referring here to the world's greatest footballer).

A consequence of this aspect of hope, that it is a desire for something believed to be possible, is that it invites action to be taken towards its realization. For Thomas Aquinas, this action is part of hope itself, which he defines as "a movement... towards some difficult good" (Eagleton, 2015, p.50). That hope is an activity rather than a state of mind makes it performative, that is, it is "not simply an anticipation of the future, but an active force in its constitution" (p.84). As the English Romantic poet, Shelley, wrote in *Prometheus Unbound*: "to hope till Hope creates/From its own wreck the thing it contemplates". Eagleton finds here an explanation for the connection between the Romantic imagination and radical politics, and this might suggest to us too that the invitations we make to our clients to imagine preferred futures could lead to political action (p.85):

*The mere act of being able to imagine an alternative future may distance and relativize the present, loosening its grip upon us to the point where the future in question becomes more feasible. This is one reason why the Romantic imagination has a link to radical politics. True hopelessness would be when such imaginings were inconceivable.*

This idea of hope as movement and the implications of this for political action mean that it is not only the future focus of solution-focused practice that is relevant here, but its focus on progress too. Eagleton also cites theological thinkers, such as Jurgen Moltmann, who describes Christianity as "hope, forward-looking and forward-moving, and therefore also revolutionary and transforming the present" (p.54). This fits with the focus on progressive narratives in solution-focused practice (de Shazer, 1991) and hints at an as yet untapped potential for the approach to be utilized in radical movements, whether political or spiritual.

We can also mention the resource focus of solution-focused practice. Raymond Williams (1983, p.241) described social movements, such as the peace movement and the feminist movement, as "resources for a journey of hope", which he believed were needed to move beyond globalization. Working with service user movements and groups, the solution-focused practitioner would typically be alert to their resources, which according to Jones and Novak (2014, p.17) include "unparalleled insights and understandings of their challenges and difficulties and the ways to meet them". In the case of service users affected by poverty this would be a much needed corrective, as they go on to claim that "the resourcefulness of the poor is a much neglected contribution to the struggle".

So there do appear to be a number of ways in which solution-focused practice might already be useful with regard to collective action and social and political change. We can also note that the approach is already used with groups of people and not just individuals, though in different contexts than those being considered here. There are numerous examples of

solution-focused groupwork, in educational or treatment settings (Metcalf, 1998; Sharry, 2007) though the treatment is usually of individuals who have come together just for this purpose, rather than work with a collective as such. There are likely still lessons to be learned here, and perhaps even more so from solution-focused practice in and with organizations (McKergow & Clarke, 2007). Outside of solution-focused practice but connected in its focus on resources, asset-based community development might also be a source to tap into (McKnight & Block, 2010).

### **A cautionary note**

Before looking at how solution-focused practice can become more relevant for social change, I shall address a potential fear about the nature of the social change for which the approach might be used. In the manifesto referred to above (Solution-Focused Collective, 2019) it is clear that this is about a movement towards more social justice. It might seem hard to argue against such an aim, though two issues arise. One is that a term such as social justice is vague and justice is in the eye of the beholder, so to speak. An end that seems just to one group in society might seem less so to others. Second, this is in any case not the only type of social change wished for. There are nativist and other racist groups who also see certain social structures as unfair, and there is no reason to suppose that a solution-focused approach could not be used in pursuit of societal objectives that they would favor. In response, we can see that the same issue arises for solution-focused practitioners in working with individuals, where ethical issues need to be managed in the same way. This is dealt with explicitly in the criteria for a solution-focused “common project”

*We have sometimes said that when we can summarize what the client wants in one or two sentences and this is something that is important to the client, realistic in the client's present life-situation and ethical – which means something we want to participate in helping the client create and something that lies within the legitimate remit of our work – then we have a project. (Korman, 2017)*

Similarly, in any given society, there will be mechanisms for sanctioning social change projects, and the availability of a new approach to be used in such projects is neutral in respect of their ethical basis.

### **Further towards a critical solution-focused practice?**

Let us turn finally to what else might help to move solution-focused practice further towards the political arena. Most importantly, we need to approach this task collectively. Just as neoliberalism has isolated the people with whom helping professionals work, so it has fragmented professionals and the services we work in. Forming alliances with likeminded professionals is key, and fortunately there are a number of groups who have made moves towards collective models of working from whom we can learn. These include critical psychiatrists (Thomas, 2017), critical, community and liberation psychologists (Fox et al., 2009; Afuape & Hughes, 2016) and radical social workers (Turbett, 2014).

Each of these groups has developed alliances with service user groups. While this is also an important aspect of collective action, it does pose an issue for solution-focused practitioners that will require some thinking through. In the therapy context at least, contacts between solution-focused practitioners and their clients are relatively fleeting, with the practitioner aiming not to leave footprints in the client's life (Insoo Kim Berg, quoted in George et al., 1999, p.36). Forming alliances for social change, which would bring practitioners further into their clients' lives, does not sit easily with this. However, in other contexts, solution-focused practitioners do work on a longer-term basis with their clients, and in addition to this, collective action is likely to involve campaigning activities and not solely solution-focused practice as it is traditionally conceived.

Perhaps the most radical shift of all, that would enable an alliance of practitioners and service users, would follow if we adopted the position of Raymond Williams, reported by Eagleton (2015, p.68), who “takes it for granted that hope is in the first place not hope for oneself but *hope for us*” (emphasis added). In Ken Loach's 2016 film, *I, Daniel Blake*, the title character, who is subject to the indignity of the British social security system and has his welfare payments stopped, prepares a speech that rings with defiance. It begins “I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user...” and ends “I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more, nothing less”. We are all citizens, and we are all affected by globalization and regressive policies, such as austerity and reduced public services. So perhaps those of us who join together in these common causes

can utilize solution-focused practice if we just change one word in that opening question, from 'What are your best hopes?' to 'What are our best hopes?'.

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