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Book Review - Radical Help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state

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BOOK REVIEW**Radical Help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state**

Hilary Cottam

Virago Press, 2018, 320 pages, ISBN 978-0-349-00909-4 £9.99 (paperback edition 2019) (Kindle and audiobook available)

Review by the Solution-Focused Collective (submitted by Guy Shennan)
Solution-Focused Collective

Of the many stories in this fascinating book, the one about Stan has taken on a particular relevance in this age of Covid-19. We are in lockdown at the time of writing this review, as was Stan on his 90th birthday, though he was imprisoned in his flat by loneliness and physical frailty rather than a virus. Hilary Cottam, who has set out here her 'radical help' framework and how it has been put into practice, had an idea about what could help Stan, which began from listening to his wishes. Stan wanted to hear the music he loved again, in the company of others. The next step came from observing something Stan could do, which was to use the phone. These observations of Stan's hopes and capabilities were followed by the design of a small-scale phone music group. With the help of the manager of the sheltered flats where Stan lived, and on his birthday, Stan was on a phone line with six other people, enjoying music together.

This story, and the account of how these phone groups then multiplied and developed, is a microcosm of the whole book. It is a book that has received a lot of attention and many powerful endorsements on its cover and opening pages. Having come to the notice of more than one member of the Solution-Focused Collective, when we established a reading group we decided to make it the first book we would discuss. We agreed at the meeting that *Radical Help* had been a more than suitable first subject, and were keen to take the radical step of writing a collective review.

Conscious that it came from outside the solution-focused world, the questions we considered included the extent to which there was a fit between *Radical Help* and the solution-focused approach, and whether they had the potential to enhance each other. While there was a general consensus that there was such a fit, we also debated whether an expert position was adopted in the services the book described. Its fundamental premise is that the welfare state developed in the United Kingdom from 1945 onwards is no longer fit for purpose, and that a principal cause for this is that relationships were not designed into the system. Having established this, it made sense for the social designers in *Radical Help* to put forward an alternative that has relationships at its heart. While we were all agreed that relationships and connection are important, the extent of the insistence that workers in one of the experimental schemes addressed relationships with particular 'clients' indicated an expert stance to some of us.

This was not necessarily a criticism, more of a comment on the fit with a solution-focused approach, and it may be that this is where solution-focused practitioners have something to learn here. The fit was clear in the posing of the question of what would adult social care look like, "if we started from what people have and what they want to do", with the possible extension of this beyond the solution-focused approach coming with the next question: "How could we think about designing a system that made the most of horizontal bonds, enabling older people to support and connect with each other?".

As can be surmised from the latter question, the book is in large part an account of a design process, which makes for fascinating reading, and raises the question of what solution-focused design might look like. It might include some of what is described here, as the principles underpinning the radical help design framework include the need for a guiding vision of the good life; a focus on capabilities rather than needs; connecting with multiple forms of resource; and starting from possibility. It also raises the question of who the book is aimed at - policy makers and designers of services, or practitioners.

We were unsure how useful it would be for solution-focused practitioners in their work with individual clients, which is not to say that it will not be of interest at that level. It might encourage some practitioners to involve in their work family

members and friends of their clients. Many professionals, such as social workers and family therapists, have of course always done this. There is an assumption inherent in what we have just written, however, that a 'client' is necessarily an individual. Another question is posed, a radical question, towards the end of this radical book: "Could we design around social networks rather than the individual?".

We believe that *Radical Help* would be most relevant and useful for those solution-focused practitioners, for example, members of the Solution-Focused Collective, who wish to enlarge their gaze to include the social as well as the individual. In our discussion we felt some excitement about a challenge ahead, to design truly solution-focused community-oriented projects. We were agreed that *Radical Help* will be a useful resource in helping to meet this challenge.

The reviewer

The Solution-Focused Collective Reading Group meets online about once every 6 weeks, to discuss a book or articles that relate to the aims of the Collective's manifesto (solfocollective.net).

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