

July 2020

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# Journal of Solution Focused Practices

Volume 4, Issue Number 1 – 2020

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**EDITORIAL POLICY**

The *Journal of Solution Focused Practices* is a scholarly journal that aims to support the Solution Focused community through the publication of high-quality research in outcome, effectiveness or process of the Solution focused approach and the publication of high quality theoretical and/or case-study related material in the area of Solution Focused practice.

The journal invites submissions as follows:

**Research reports** – We are committed to helping expand the evidence base for Solution Focused Brief Therapy and Solution Focused Practices. The journal seeks scholarly papers that report the process and results of quantitative and/or qualitative research that seeks to explore the effectiveness of Solution Focused Brief Therapy or seeks to explore the aspects of the Solution Focused process. We are also committed to research reports being “user- friendly” and so invite authors submitting research-based papers to address specifically the implications of relevance of their research findings to Solution Focused practitioners.

**Theoretical papers** – The Solution Focused approach raises many issues relating to psychotherapy theory, to our basic assumptions of working therapeutically and to the philosophical stance adopted by Solution Focused practitioners. The journal welcomes papers that explore these issues and which offer novel arguments or perspectives on these issues.

**Case study/Practice-related papers** – We are committed to the journal being related to Solution Focused PRACTICE. Therefore, we invite papers that explore the experience and perspective of practitioners. This might be a single case study, with significant analysis and reflection on the therapeutic process and which distills some principles or insights which might be replicable, or it might be a paper which explores a series of clinical/practical cases and which seeks to draw out overarching principles which might be used by others. Please discuss your ideas with the Editor (sarasmockjordan@gmail.com).

**Not just “therapy”** – The Journal recognizes that many useful and interesting manifestations of the Solution Focused approach occur in settings that are not to do with therapy. Nonetheless, Solution Focused interventions are all concerned with helping to facilitate change. The journal is called the *Journal of Solution Focused Practices*, at least in part in homage to our heritage. Nonetheless, the journal welcomes submissions that explore the use of Solution Focused ideas in other settings.

**SUBMISSION OF MANUSCRIPTS**

**Manuscripts**

Manuscripts should be sent to the Editor as Microsoft Word or Apple Pages word processing documents. Please do not submit your manuscript elsewhere at the same time. Please send the manuscript double spaced with ample margins and a brief running head. The title of the paper should appear on the first page. Since all manuscripts will be blind reviewed, please include names, affiliations, etc. of the author or authors on a SEPARATE first page. Please also include on this (or a

next) page details of any grants that have supported the research, and conference presentations relating to the paper, any potential (or even perceived) conflicts of interest.

Solution Focused Brief Therapy and Solution Focused may be abbreviated to SFBT and SF after the first mention.

References should follow the format of the American Psychological Associations (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th ed.). Papers should include an abstract of no more than 150 words.

Any tables, figures or illustrations should be supplied on a separate pages (or in separate computer files) in black and white and their position indicated in the main document. For any images or photographs not created by the author, the submission must include written permission to reproduce the material signed by the copyright holder.

We would expect that papers will ordinarily me a maximum of 5,000 words; however, this limit is negotiable if the content of the paper warrants more.

### **Clinical/client material**

This journal's policy is that any actual clinical details in a paper (including but not limited to, therapy transcripts, client/patient history, descriptions of the therapy process) should have signed consent from the clients/patients for the material to be published. If a paper includes clinical material or descriptions, please include a declaration, signed by the first author, either that signed consent of clients/patients, specifically for the publication of their clinical information in this journal, has been obtained and is available for review OR that clinical material has been altered in such a way as to disguise the identity of any people. Fictional case examples can be used to illustrate techniques/ideas if consent from real clients in your practice can't be obtained.

### **Peer Review**

Manuscripts will be reviewed by at least two members of the Editorial Board or ad hoc reviewers, who will be asked to recommend that the paper be accepted, revised, or rejected for publication; however, a final decision about publication rests with the Editor. Reviewers will also be asked to indicate what kinds of changes might be needed in order for the paper to be published. Where reviewers have indicated that the changes are required or recommended, we are happy to work with authors to address the reviewers' comments. When the reviewers recommend that the paper not be accepted, and the Editor accepts this/these recommendation, a final decision of reject is made by the Editor and no further consideration of the paper will be given. When the reviewers (and the Editor) suggest that your paper, while it may have merit, does not meet the requirements for this journal, we will endeavor to suggest other journals to which the author might submit the paper; however, we are under no obligation to help achieve publication in our journal or in other journals. Where one or more authors of a paper is a member of the Editorial Board, that person will take no part in the review process and the review process will still be anonymous to the author or authors.

## Editorial

Sara Smock Jordan

Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Solution Focused Brief Therapy*

The world has changed dramatically since the journal's last issue. COVID-19 moved into our world impacting everyone. Despite the devastation of a pandemic, I'm proud to celebrate the journal's changes and accomplishments.

After the last issue, the editorial board voted to change the journal's name to *Journal of Solution Focused Practices (JSFP)*. This change reflects our commitment to publishing solution focused *practices* around the world. We are excited about this shift (for more details, tune into episode #103 of Simply Focus <https://www.sfontour.com/?s=103>). Also, please join us July 28<sup>th</sup> for our first ever journal party launch. The launch will occur in 3 time zones featuring contributors to this issue of *JSFP* (for more details, please email [sarasmockjordan@gmail.com](mailto:sarasmockjordan@gmail.com)).

*JSFP* can't exist without our sponsors and donors. The Australasian Association for Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (AASFBT) and the Solution Focused Brief Therapy Association (SFBTA) made commitments to co-sponsoring *JSFP*. Their contributions are invaluable. Donors across the globe, such as China Zhong Yuan, Fondazione Franceschi Onlus, Austrian Solution Circle, Academy of Solution Focused Training, Swedish Solution-Focused Practice Organization, have contributed. The European Brief Therapy Association (EBTA) committed to raising funds for *JSFP* and other groups and organizations are willing to support *JSFP* in other ways (i.e. future translating services). A few donors have contributed statements in this issue as to *Why* they've chosen to support *JSFP*. Thank you everyone for your support, especially during a pandemic.

Several structural changes have also occurred. We welcome Mark McKergow as our new book review editor. You will find several book reviews in this issue. We are excited about including these papers in *JSFP*. If you have suggestions for books to review, please reach out to Mark ([mark@sfwork.com](mailto:mark@sfwork.com)). We are also in the process of increasing our ad hoc reviewer pool, as well as diversifying our editorial board. *JSFP* now has a management committee, led by David Hains, that oversees the financial management and accountability of the editor for *JSFP*. All sponsors and donors are invited to serve on this committee. As mentioned in my first editorial, David's commitment to the journal has been instrumental to its revitalization. Lastly, *JSFP* is now free, open access for all readers. This platform allows everyone access to our papers. Other advantages of an open access journal include unlimited page limits for manuscripts, an electronic review process, author copyright privilege, and unlimited papers per issue. We are very excited about this distribution opportunity.

In a continued effort to support our diverse global community, *JSFP* created a diversity statement in January. In this statement we acknowledged the diversity (i.e. various disciplines, backgrounds, experiences, etc.) that exists in our SF community. Most notably, social privilege and inequities. We stated our aspirations of creating a community that respects and values our differences, as well as creates opportunities to diversify the *JSFP* editorial board and its contributors. We also provided our plan to revise our efforts as needed to accomplish our aspirations. In June, the *JSFP* editors created and distributed a statement in response to ongoing issues of inequality around the world. *JSFP* stated that we will "create a space for the publication and promotion of articles which are useful and relevant to everyone who practices and is interested in learning more about solution-focused practice." We provided three action steps to accomplish this goal:

1. The *JSFP* is working to improve representation of black people, indigenous people and people from post-colonial countries in all parts of the journal from seeking contributions, throughout the editorial process to publication.
2. The *JSFP* Board are undertaking a process of reflection and education in order to improve our understanding of how to make the journal one which serves our entire community and not just those with privilege. We are committed to this process and willing to be challenged and to listen and act on that challenge.
3. The *JSFP* editors are undertaking to decolonise this process and to change the way we encourage submissions and review them to ensure that alternative methodologies and knowledge are welcomed and fairly treated.

*JSPF's* editorial board was asked to take an active role in these action steps. As editor, my best hope is to create a culture of inclusion and equity to further the solution focused approach around the globe. This best hope includes: a) providing translated versions of manuscripts (see Shennan article in this issue) in several languages; b) encouraging non-academics and students to submit and publish their work (see Thomas & Bloom article in this issue); c) publishing opinion/experience/historical pieces (see both Miller and Wheeler articles in this issue); d) providing free open access to all *JSPF* (including *JSFBT*) issues; e) soliciting papers from Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized practitioners; and f) furthering the evidence-base of solution focused practices.

Change is always occurring. Just as the pandemic and social injustices impacted our world in a devastating manner, hope continues. The core solution focused principle of *hope in the future* has never been more essential. I challenge everyone to focus on the possibility for positive change in an ever -evolving world. Its never been more important to come together as an international community furthering the message of *hope in the future* through our conversations, practice, and promotion of the solution focused approach.

A heartfelt THANK YOU to EVERYONE reading this issue!

Sara

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## COVID-19 Challenge cultivates creativity and connections

Debbie Hogan and Dave Hogan

*JSFP* Donor: Academy of Solution Focused Training

During the initial phase of COVID-19, the Academy of SF was in the midst of our 2020 SF Therapy and SF Coach training. When it became apparent that the F2F training was not possible, we co-constructed alternatives with our participants. One group wanted to play it safe by deciding to take the training to an all online platform, which they adapted to quite well. We were already used to doing online training, but not everyone had this experience, so there was quite a bit of scepticism. In the end, participants were both pleased and surprised by the value and intimate nature of online training. We kept to the original training dates, with 1.5 hour session blocks, with breaks and a long lunch hour each day. For another group, they wanted to maintain the F2F format so they elected for a later date. As a concession for the 4-5 month delay until the next F2F training module, we offered free weekly “Coaches Meetup” sessions until we could resume our F2F training. This proved to be a valuable lifeline for most of the participants who were isolated as individuals or as a family unit. Some shared that our weekly sessions were the highlight of their week or the one oasis from their rather chaotic and stressful family life, taken over by home schooling or endless zoom work meetings. Our weekly meetings solidified relationships and created possibilities to practice their SF skills that otherwise was not possible. They were often re-grounded and re-aligned with the SF mindset, an important anchor during uncertain times when negativity can creep in.

During the subsequent weeks of the COVID-19, we saw the accumulative effects, the wear and tear on people’s nerves and the sense of helplessness many were feeling. Common themes of struggle emerged with both clients and trainees in our programs. With a firm belief that focusing on the questions “What is going well, in spite of?”, “What have you learned about yourself during this time?”, and “What difference has this made?”, useful conversations occurred. These discussions helped people to gain a sense of control, build their sense of resilience, and redirect feelings to hope and possibilities, all while acknowledging the hard pieces. This balance seemed to help.

We have a very strong and active SF community in Singapore and throughout the region. Our pre-COVID-19 Singapore based monthly SF Coaching Circle gatherings usually had around 8 – 15 attendees. Once we recalibrated to our online platform during COVID-19, our attendance has increased to more than 30 SF Coaches. Again, the message was clear, people long for and appreciate the support, meaningful connection, and the encouragement they receive from fellow SF practitioners.

As SF trainers and practitioners, we felt there was more we could do to support the wider SF community of therapists and coaches who were not already connecting on the channels described above, but were part of our Facebook, LinkedIn, and peer group gatherings. A lot of support was already being offered to individuals and families in the form of crisis lines. We felt more could be offered to front line workers, not just in the health care arena, but counsellors, especially school counsellors. Many were very creative in how they used social media and other alternatives for keeping in touch with students and families. The Academy reached out to professionals and offered free counselling, or coaching, for front-line workers. The stories we have heard are very touching and inspirational.

### Top 10 Collective lessons from the field

1. These tough times have brought out the best in people we know.
2. Everyone struggles and when you reach out, you realize you are not alone.
3. When you focus on the care of others, it helps to take the focus off of your own situation
4. Self-care is vital, especially during high stress times (e.g. adequate sleep, eating well, and exercise)
5. You can’t pour from an empty cup
6. Stay connected to others, especially to people that help you remain hopeful and optimistic
7. Stay tuned to your best coping strategies (common themes: mindfulness & gratitude)
8. Cultivate your personal ‘workspace’ and *HOW* you show up at “Your Best” (physical or mental)
9. This too shall pass.



10. Imagine you are sharing your experience, in a future time, of how you managed to survive well during the COVID-19 challenge, and your listeners are inspired and impressed by what they hear.... What is your story? (or your relevant version)

### **Importance of Supporting the Journal of Solution-Focused Practice**

We believe it is important to support cutting edge research in the field of Solution-Focused Practice, as well as highlighting creative applications of its use across different areas of practice. We also believe it is important to build contextualized, emergent practice and critical thinking within the context of the Asia Pacific region. Building a strong evidence-based body of research can only strengthen the appeal, understanding, and credibility of Solution-Focused approaches in the global arena.

Because of the close proximity of Australia and Singapore, it makes even more sense to build a strong alliance and collaboration between these two communities. This will promote the validity of the Solution-Focused approach in a wider context, not just in Singapore (Asian) or just in Australia (Western), but beyond both borders to the wider Asia Pacific region and beyond.

For many years, a common question asked by participants in Asia has been: “Yes, but does it work in Asia?” as there was a sense in which a perceived western concept or approach might not be relevant in Asia. There is a growing body of research to substantiate that Solution-Focused practice is both relevant and suitable within the Asian-Pacific context, but more evidence is needed. In 2017, the first seminal book was published, *Solution Focused Practice in Asia* edited by Debbie Hogan, Dave Hogan, Jane Tuomola and Alan Yeo. The 48 authors in this book represent SF practitioners across the Asia Pacific region. In May 2020, *Solution Focused Practice Around the World*, edited by Kirsten Dierolf, Debbie Hogan, Svea van der Hoorn and Sukanya Wignaraja was published to highlight the international appeal and applicability of Solution-Focused practice.

A limited amount of research on Solution-Focused practice is conducted in the region surrounding, and including, Singapore. Currently, the Academy is collaborating in a research project with Joe Chan and the REACH Youth Team in a research project in conjunction with National University of Singapore. The Academy has also collaborated with another SF practitioner conducting a research study on the efficacy of Solution-Focused approach (i.e. compliance of patient treatment outcomes) in the government hospital. We are excited that more research is being conducted in Singapore and the region.

The *Journal of Solution Focused Practices* provides a platform for newly emerging practitioners to highlight their work and creates an avenue for sharing, reflecting, and advancing best practices.

Finally, we want to celebrate with and applaud the work of David Hains, Sara Smock Jordan and their team for the impressive, high quality *Journal of Solution Focused Practices*. This journal will definitely elevate the work of Solution-Focused practice in the international community.

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## Always adapt

Andrea Leonardi

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*JSPF* Donor: Vicepresident Fondazione Franceschi Onlus

*Naturae enim non imperator, nisi parendo*  
Francis Bacon

Life is constant adaptation. Any variation produces a corresponding change in response to what has occurred. These changes are often sudden, sometimes catastrophic and unexpected. It is worth dwelling on this last point: the expectation. The man, as a psychophysical living organism, is "programmed" to plan and, above all, anticipate in the best way what could happen to him in the future. Our past experiences, for example, teach us to avoid making mistakes in the future: the mature person knows that by acting in a certain way they will steer their actions so that the consequences are to their advantage. Therefore, each person builds a configuration of expectations about the world and the future that is as coherent and reliable as possible. But what if their anticipations do not match what they expected? It happens that the person is taken by surprise. This emotion has very particular characteristics. In fact, it has the intensity of fear in itself but does not fully correspond to it unless later, after understanding if the event can cause harm or not.

The surprise reminds us that everything can change in an instant and this can only represent the beginning of a chain of catastrophic changes or the beginning of a transformation that may not be entirely negative. This is exactly where the concept of adaptation comes back into play. Only organisms that succeed or want to adapt survive. Of course, is not only a matter of strength of the fittest, but also of knowing how to transform crises into opportunities.

My collaborators of the Franceschi Foundation and I, we found ourselves very surprised and puzzled (like everyone else) by the events related to Covid-19.

However, we felt somehow trained to think differently, thanks to the Solution Focused approach. What was crucial was to imagine not only a "*desirable future*" but also "*a present without the problem.*" This allowed us to face with a greater resilience what we have subsequently done with our psychotherapy work. The crisis can be seen as an opportunity.

Often events that change situations suddenly cause upheaval and problems but also accelerations in the change of previous situations. Psychologically, the crisis can change the way we see reality and act on it. We can radically transform our way of adapting, in a new and constructive sense. This depends on our point of view and our opinions, as Epictetus claimed thousands of years ago.

Covid-19, as Nicholas Taleb states, is not in a black swan because it was not a foreseeable event. Furthermore, it makes one think that the black swan, intended as *Cygnus Atratus*, a bird discovered for the first time by Willem de Vlamingh in 1790 in Australia, was a beautiful discovery in the naturalistic field.

Regarding this journal, it was a real pleasure for us to have contributed with a donation that we hope will be useful in spreading the Solution Focused thought. We would like this intervention model, which is effective in various fields, to take root also in our country, Italy, where unexpectedly it is not known as it deserves.

It comes to think how everything needs time and suitable conditions to develop, despite the adverse and surprising situations.

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**ARTICLE****“Write What You Know” (Twain):  
How to Write a Practical Journal Article**

Amber D. Bloom and Frank N. Thomas

Texas Christian University (US)

**Abstract**

The *Journal of Solution Focused Practices (JSFP)* seeks manuscript submissions written with the practitioner in mind. Unfortunately, there are few resources informing authors on how to go about this kind of writing. The authors of this article have brought together resources from various disciplines to create guidelines that are easy to follow and adhere to the submission guidelines for *JSFP*. We also explore ways one can make a manuscript more relevant to an international audience and include tips for writing well.

**Introduction**

You are likely aware that the *Journal of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* recently underwent a name change and is now the *Journal of Solution Focus Practices (JSFP)*. According to Australasian Association for Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (AASFBT) President David Hains (2019), the goal of this change is to “highlight that we are not just about ‘therapy’” (para. 1). Here is the official *JSFP* invitation to submit manuscripts<sup>1</sup> (AASFBT, n.d., para. 2):

The journal seeks scholarly papers that report the process and results of quantitative and/or qualitative research that seeks to explore the effectiveness of Solution Focused Brief Therapy or seeks to explore the aspects of the Solution Focused process. We are also committed to research reports being ‘user-friendly’ and so invite authors submitting research-based papers to address specifically the implications of relevance of their research findings to Solution Focused practitioners.

The Editorial Policy goes on to describe other types of manuscripts appropriate to the Journal, including ‘theoretical’ and ‘case study/practice-related’ papers, and discussions among the Editorial Board have overwhelmingly endorsed the desire to publish and disseminate high-quality articles that embrace SF practitioners across contexts and cultures. In an effort to communicate this desire to prospective authors, we (AB and FT) accepted the challenge to articulate guiding ideas for those interested in writing pieces directly related to solution-focused (SF) practices outside the typical research-based articles so common in academic journals (Ribeiro-Soriano & Berbegal-Mirabent, 2017).

Writing for practitioners offers many advantages to potential authors including reaching a wider international audience, immediate applicability of the subject matter, and a clear connection between your work and why it is important to solution-focused practice (Emerald, n.d.; Wiley, n.d.). Many publications focus on how to write scholarly or academic articles; little is written about how to write for the practitioner (Jalongo, 2013). In this article, we bring together literature on writing for the practitioner (scarce, but applicable to our *Journal*) and distill it to inform those writing for a practical journal and the global SF audience. It is not meant to be a definitive work on how to write for the practitioner but rather to give you a place to begin.

**Practical Writing 101****Before You Begin**

Our intention in writing this article is not to constrict expression; instead, we drew from international publications and diverse fields (business management, literacy, early childhood education, and higher education) in an attempt to erect signposts on your

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<sup>1</sup> the Editorial Policy for *JSFP*'s can be found at <https://www.solutionfocused.org.au/journal/editorial-policy>

journey toward publication of practical material. We firmly agree with Helen Sword (2012, p. vii) when she said, “intellectual creativity thrives best in an atmosphere of experimentation rather than conformity.” Both rigor and imagination are necessary; rigor alone stifles, and imagination without precision is often bedlam (Weakland & Wilder, 1981). We believe your ideas deserve to be elegantly expressed, and such expression is the product of craft, conversation, practice, and editing without mercy.

Successful practical articles require careful consideration before any serious writing can happen. You will need to identify three things before beginning: *Who is the intended journal or audience? What values am I trying to communicate with this article? Which article style is most appropriate to facilitating these goals?* Addressing these three questions will focus your work and save you time in the review and editing process (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019).

### Considering Values

Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019) state “every author, whether consciously aware of it or not, considers particular approaches, styles, and standards of writing to be important” (p. 34). Your writing choices speak to your readers, with or without intention. Therefore, it is vital that you think through your own values to ensure you are communicating intentionally. For example, we have chosen to write this article in the first person to decrease the distances between ourselves, the text, and our audience. Conversely, third person is often used in scientific writing because they often “value distance between the writer and the written work” (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019, p. 34).

Most writers in *JSFP* are themselves practitioners. Therefore, the journal can be seen as an ongoing conversation about solution-focused practices. Tammar Zilber (quoted in Cloutier, 2016) states, “By writing a paper you are engaging in a conversation with other scholars, they offer their ideas in their papers. I offer mine in my papers. This is a dialogue” (p. 72). It is important to consider what you are trying to say as part of this conversation. Questions you might ask yourself include: *How am I joining the conversation? Am I respecting differences across time and cultures? Is my value to further an existing idea? To challenge an unexamined assumptions? To contribute case study or practice examples to flesh out the research and theoretical literature?* *SFP* was not invented in a vacuum; it has flourished, in part, because of its appeal, which includes honoring others’ experiences, valuing differences, promoting curiosity, learning collaboratively, and resisting normative (and often judgmental) ideas and practices (see Cade, 2007). Box 1 provides questions to help you consider your personal values and potential contributions to *JSFP*.

1. "How can you use writing about" solution focused practice to...	<p>"shape your identity in the" solution focused world?            "be present in your writing and express yourself with a clear voice"?            "engage both emotionally and intellectually"?</p>
2. "What opportunities does writing in" JSFP "afford you to"...	<p>"inquire into the complexities" of solution focused practices?            "participate in ongoing conversations or created new ones within the solution focused practitioner community"?            "push the boundaries of discourse in the community by drawing on your own expertise" and experiences?</p>
3. "How might you embrace the potential of writing about" solution focused practice to...	<p>"acknowledge, affirm, and constructively critique rather than attack or undermine"?            "illuminate and expand, rather than obscure or diminish"?            "represent context-specific complexity well, rather than reduce to generalizable simplicity"?</p>

Box 1 – Sorting out your values. (adapted from Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019).

### Choose a Journal

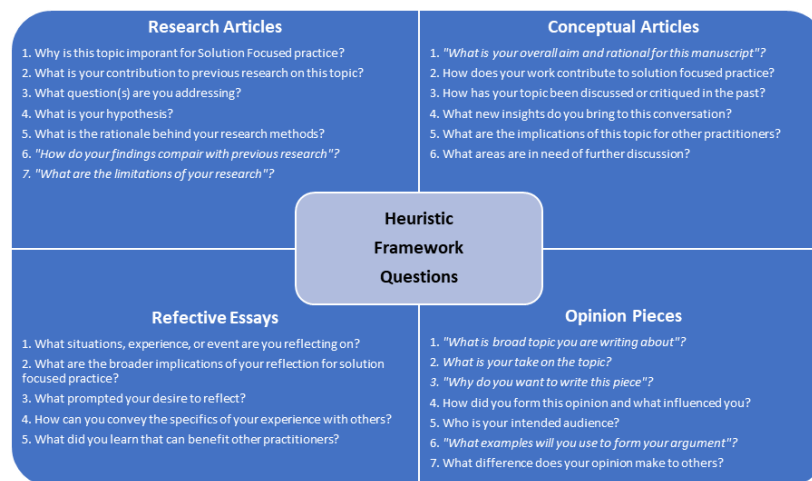
We are assuming you are reading this article because you would like to write for *JSFP*. However, we would still like to discuss the art of choosing a journal, and therefore an audience, as it is a very important step in the writing process. Choosing for whom you write allows you to tailor your article to a particular audience and a journal that is most likely to reach them. Be sure to read

about the journal, its mission statement, and the kinds of articles already published. You will be able to follow the guidelines for the journal from the beginning, which can save you time and possibly rejection (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019).

As you write, focus on your anticipated readership, if known. Audiences will be interested in why your work is important to them. For SF practitioners, this is especially important. Be sure to ask, “What is new about my work? What is generalizable? What is good about it, and how can the benefit be translated into something tangible from which others can learn?” (Emerald Group, n.d., section 3, para 4.).

### Choose an Article Style

The final task before you begin to write is to choose an article style. Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019) created a heuristic framework for four types of articles: empirical research, conceptual, reflective, and opinion. We have added case studies to this list. This framework includes questions for you to use after you have identified the type of article you intend to write. You will find the questions for all article types in Box 2



Box 2 – Formulating your article (adapted from Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019).

**Empirical Research Articles.** When writing about a study you have conducted, it is helpful to have an idea of how and where you will get your study published before you begin your research (Wiley, n.d.). A strong research article will include justification for both the study and your methods, a solid grounding of your study in the literature, clearly communicated results, a thorough discussion session, and any implications for your field (Wiley, n.d.).

Make your research and findings accessible to a wide audience by avoiding overly technical language. Be concise and direct, link research to real world examples, and speak directly to your reader (Wiley, n.d.). To be the most useful to your audience, your article needs to connect directly to solution-focused practice, while at the same time adding something new to it (Barley, 2006; Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019). Practitioners will be more interested in the implications for themselves and their work than in minute details about the hows and whys of your research method. You may lose readers if you spend too much time on the methods section of your paper (Emerald, n.d.; Wiley, n.d.).

Within the *JSFP* tradition a few empirical articles stand out. Worsley and Hjerdal’s (2016) scale development of the Resilience Doughnut tool is certainly worth reading as it is organized in a traditional research article fashion familiar to most readers. One of the most current research articles in circulation related to SF is Wallace, Hai, and Franklin (2020). These authors also adopt a conventional writing organization utilized by most researchers when writing up research results.

**Conceptual Articles.** These articles do not include new research but pull from published works. Conceptual articles seek to “offer a new perspective or reframe existing theorizations” (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019, p. 37). They offer fresh perspective, disagreement, or reimagining of those conversations (Wiley, n.d.). Conceptual articles must have a solid grounding in relevant literature and a creative understanding of other possibilities. Gale Miller’s (2014) essay on culture and SF is an exceptional example, if one is looking for guidance. He introduces his article as an “approach (that) represents an anthropological-

sociological interpretation...An explanation of how my intercultural perspective extends cultural themes in the Solution-Focused literature is discussed” (p. 25). Another example by Miller, one I (FT) find thoroughly provocative, is “Readers Matter: Reading Practices and the Future of Solution-Focused Thought and Practice” (2013).

**Reflective Essays.** The most personal of articles, reflective essays, are focused on “lived experiences, and the sense you made from them” (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019, p. 38). These authors report that, rather than focusing on current or past research, the goal is to take the reader through an event or time in your life and share “what you attempted, struggled with, learned from, or realized” (p. 37). There is more freedom in writing reflective articles as they are based on personal experience and can be written much less formally. They also provide more guidance, as reflective articles “show, as opposed to tell through offering vivid, detailed examples instead of simply stating that something happened” (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019, p. 37). Therefore, reflective articles usually have a limited number of citations. An example of a reflective article is Thomas and Durrant (2014). Here Thomas responds to Durrant’s questions, many of which invite Thomas’s reflections and speculations on the past, present, and current affairs in the SF world.

**Opinion Pieces.** Opinion pieces are generally the shortest article type and need to be connected to a body of literature to allow you to “state a clear and direct position and then support it with a persuasive argument” (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019, p. 39). As with the other types of articles we have discussed, it is vital you include how your opinion is important to your reader’s practice by drawing parallels between your topic and solution-focused practices. One of the finest opinion pieces I (FT) have ever encountered in the field of psychotherapy is Salvador Minuchin’s “Where is the Family in Narrative Family Therapy?” (1998). Minuchin’s challenges are clear, supporting his positions with relevant scholarly and personal source materials. Others respond to his arguments, writing reflective rejoinders in the same issue.

**Case Studies.** The SF tradition has traditionally centered on learning-by-doing. The inductive clinical approach Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer, Eve Lipchik, and the other prominent members of the Milwaukee team, relied on current therapy cases to inform their group thinking, model development, and writing projects (Cade, 2007). This is still our SF tradition, and the Editorial Board welcomes manuscripts from practitioners applying the SF approach in counseling, family therapy, coaching, training, education, and other contexts.<sup>2</sup> The culturally informed case study article by Moir-Bussy (2014) in the first issue of the *Journal of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* is an excellent example of connecting practices across history and cultures. She addresses multiple cultural bridges connecting SF to educational and mental health practices in Hong Kong, challenging Western ideas and adapting SF tenets and techniques to Chinese and indigenous Australian peoples.

### A Writing Template

Our writing must start somewhere, and we suggest you begin by forming ideas around how your manuscript will be organized. Below we create a template that may be of use – it is a template, not an outline, but it may provide the structure you need as you put thoughts to paper.

#### Title

The title is quite literally the gateway to your article. Jalongo (2013) and Emerald (n.d.) agree that many people will decide whether to read the abstract based on the title alone. Search engines also largely rely on titles to sort articles. Therefore, a title needs to be both descriptive and, when appropriate, catchy. Sword (2012, p. 188) says this about book titles: “I classify as ‘engaging’ any title whose author appeared to have consciously made even the most modest attempt to amuse, entertain, or capture the attention of the intended audience.” Jalongo (2013) suggests an article title “should not sound like a book title!” (p. 18) but needs to be much more specific. Other possible assists include “using alliteration, descriptive phrases, repetition” (Emerald, n.d., para 3) and terms related to solution-focused practice. Two examples of titles that illustrate these points from past volumes of the *Journal of Solution Focused Brief Therapy* (JSFBT) are Durrant’s (2016) article “Confessions of an unashamed Solution-Focused purist: What is (and isn’t) Solution-Focused?” and McKergow’s (2016) article “SFBT 2.0: The next generation of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy has already arrived.”

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<sup>2</sup> NOTE the important guidelines when writing about clinical work in the JSFP’s Editorial Policy: <https://www.solutionfocused.org.au/journal/editorial-policy>

### Abstract (and Outline)

Generally required only for empirical research and conceptual articles, the abstract is nearly as important as the title. Those who are drawn in by the title will turn to the abstract for more information to decide if they will read the entire article. Given the prominence of the abstract, it is surprising that “many people treat the abstract almost as an afterthought to dash off just before submitting” (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019, p. 42). An abstract, when written first, can be used to outline your article. Cloutier (2016) found that many authors find an outline a useful way to organize their thoughts. Referring to such a tool throughout your writing can keep you on track and provide structure for your manuscript.

### Introduction

Jalongo (2013) has created a formula for writing an introduction that may be useful to you as you create your manuscript. The goal for an introduction is to begin generally and move towards the specific. You want to bring the reader along on your journey from the context of your article and evidence supporting such a context to your specific thesis, your point of view, and how it relates to the more general context (Jalongo, 2013; Wiley, n.d.). Emerald (n.d.) states that a well-written introduction should “draw the reader into the subject, making clear its practical relevance” (section 4 para. 4). Greenblatt (2007, p. 5) addresses introductions in this way: “You do not have to write the dreary sentences that say ‘In this essay I intended to explore the theme of... My goal will be...blah, blah blah.’ Instead you plunge the reader into a story that has already begun, and you create – or at least try to create – the desire to know more.”

### Pronouncement Paragraph

Included as a part of the introduction, the pronouncement paragraph sets the stage for your article. This section “previews what is to come in the entire piece. Each item mentioned is perfectly matched to a main heading” (Jalongo, 2013, p. 19). Like a roadmap for your readers, this section will lead the way into your topic no matter what type of article you chose to write. Like the abstract, the pronouncement paragraph can be used as instructions for you as you are “rewriting, revising, and refining” (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019, p. 44). Here is an example of a pronouncement paragraph:

In this article, the authors first review literature related to outpatient therapy with persons struggling with disordered eating, including necessary monitoring by medical personnel. Then they outline some of the basic assumptions of solution-focused (SF) practice that seem particularly relevant to working with this population. Following the case example, the authors explore how they stayed true to the SF tenets while cooperating with physicians to create partnerships based on the goals and experiences of this young client. Finally, the authors dialogue about the effects of this particular person and case on their own perspectives regarding disordered eating and collaborating when potential life-threatening circumstances must inform everyone involved – the client, therapists, family, and collaborating medical experts.

### Main Headings

The main headings of your article should match those put forth in the pronouncement paragraph, guiding the reader through your outline (Emerald, n.d.; Jalongo, 2013; Wiley, n.d.). Jalongo adds main headings are best when you “make them specific to the focus of the manuscript; no ‘generic’ headings!” (p. 20). APA style, according to the seventh edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, follows a specific format for headings that includes five levels. Additionally, “Do not begin a paper with an ‘Introduction’ heading; the paper title at the top of the first page of the text acts as a de facto Level 1 heading” (2020, p. 44). Subheadings are not required by *JSFP*; see the *JSFP* policy link for other guidance.

### Illustrative Material

Many journals targeting practitioners require visuals to increase article accessibility to the reader. However, according to Jalongo (2013), illustrations need to “save words” (p. 20) and have some specific value for the reader. To be useful, a visual must be the most effective way to depict a topic within your article (Emerald, n.d.). An illustration created for its own sake will add little to nothing to your article. Some authors, according to Cloutier (2016), found “drawing, doodling, or sketching ideas in visual form” (p. 75) a useful tool for developing and organizing ideas, even if these visuals did not end up in the final published article. Hopefully you find Boxes 1 and 2 in this article useful as visuals and summaries.

### Examples

A goal of writing for professional journals, according to Emerald (n.d.), is to “link the article to the real world whenever possible” (section 4, para. 6). Examples can be pulled from other articles, real-world clinical experiences, and/or personal experiences (Emerald, n.d.; Jalongo, 2013; Wiley, n.d.). Jalongo (2013, p. 20) suggests examples be “very short...based on your experiences; try to pack more than one example into a sentence” (emphasis their own). Instances are helpful in identifying the why (as in “why should I care?”) and can be used to make your article more relevant to an international audience.

### Conclusion

Jalongo (2013) suggests beginning with a reintroduction to the thesis statement. Then, work through your introduction backwards, ending with the broadest applications of your argument. Avoid introducing new ideas in the conclusion while keeping it from repeating the introduction.

### General tips

#### Easy to Follow

Make your article easily accessible to the practitioner by writing in a lively, clear, simple and direct way. Visuals, along with bullet points, will help you meet this goal (Wiley, n.d.; Emerald, n.d.). Pinker (2014) states that “the reader can recognize the truth when she sees it, as long as she is given an unobstructed view” (para. 12) One of the more difficult things to do when writing is to remember that your readers may not have the knowledge that you take for granted. *JSP* draws readers from many different fields and cultures worldwide, with English often being the reader’s second, third, or fourth language. Include a wide variety of possible connections to your work.

#### Technical Jargon and Purposeful Complexity

One way to avoid alienating or boring your reader is to avoid technical jargon when possible (Emerald, n.d.; Wiley, n.d.). This is especially true of frequently used abbreviations in your field, which those outside your area or culture may struggle to make sense of. When completely avoiding technical terms is not possible, “explain them or give explanations in a glossary or box” (Wiley, n.d., p. 8).

We would also suggest, when possible, you use common language. Obfuscation confounds.<sup>3</sup> You can always utilize a thesaurus to clarify your intended meaning but trust your own words and edit later. Your words are good enough; start with what you know and seek out informed colleagues you believe will be honest yet kind in their reading and criticism so future drafts become clearer and more accessible.

#### Be Relevant to Your Reader

Place yourself and your reader into the context of your article by using person-first and active language (Emerald, n.d.; Wiley, n.d.). Be sure you are answering the following questions for your reader:

##### ***So What?***

Keep in mind while writing your article that your readers will be asking this question and wondering why they should care about your article. As a writer it is your job to convince them your topic matters to them (Thomson, 2017). Take the time to explain the importance of your work to as many different contexts as possible.

##### ***What Now?***

Answering the “what now?” question can be done when discussing the limitations of your article, or in stating next steps in research, thought, discussion, and theory development (Thomson, 2017). Solution-focused practice is an evolving philosophy and

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<sup>3</sup> An example of obfuscating, or confusion (a little humor!). We have all read papers that might be useful to read, based on the title and abstract, if only the writing style did not get in the way. For an example of an essay that is “completely meaningless and..randomly generated,” see McElwaine (n.d.)



by publishing in *JSFP* you are part of an ongoing, decades-long dialogue. Identifying where you fit into that discussion will give your reader an opportunity to respond (Thomson, 2017; Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019).

### Writing for international audiences

*JSFP* is an international journal whose authors, editors, and readers live all over the world (Editorial Policy, n.d.). Your article may be more valuable to an international audience if you attend to the guidelines from the above sections. Keep in mind that readers may not be familiar with abbreviations, jargon, idioms, clichés, or laws that are considered well-known in your country or culture (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019; Thomson, 2017). One should not assume the reader will understand your intent or illustrations if they contain culturally specific colloquialisms. Often humor and sarcasm are lost in translation. The following are suggestions for creating a manuscript with an international audience in mind.

#### Broaden Context

Whenever possible, use your local context “to explore/say something about the wider, international concern, debate, issue, question, or interest” (Thomson, 2017, para. 4). Do this by including a variety of references from international settings so your “so what?” and “what now?” questions are tied to an international context. Be sure your “conclusion connects back to the international context” (Thomson, 2017, para. 11). Thomas’s (2016) article on complimenting draws from literature across multiple approaches to applying SF ideas. In addition, he situates the practice across time and cultures, noting different emphases on complimenting through SF history and the necessity for cultural competence.

#### Collaboration

Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, p. 40) write, “we have generally found that work with others enables us to cover more ground, is more enjoyable, and has benefitted the quality of writing” (p. 40). Writing collaboratively is the foundation of academic writing, according to Cloutier (2016) who states, “we tend to forget that the origins of academic journals were personal letters that scientists wrote to their peers and to which their peers responded” (p. 80). Luckily, today we have the advantage of technology which allows us to collaborate in real time. In order to avoid potential conflicts and frustrations during a collaboration, take into account your own temperament and time commitments. The amount of work for each participant should be carefully negotiated up-front, and potential conflicts, such as author order, need to be discussed on the front end of the project (Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2019).

#### Submitting and Responding to Reviewers

Submitting your work can be an emotional and vulnerable process, particularly for novice writers (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009). Authors can err on the side of overworking their article or aiming for perfection. Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, p. 45) ask you to keep in mind that “unconditional acceptances are extremely rare ... Minor and major revisions are much more common”. Reviewers at *JSFP* aim to provide helpful comments and suggestions that encourage the development of the author(s) being reviewed.

#### Finalize Before Submission

Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins (2009) remind readers writing “entails initial messiness and failure”. Your first draft is just that, a first attempt. The goal of a first draft should be to put words on paper. Many revisions between the first draft and submission is the norm for most who write for journals. The process of rewriting brings clarity; each draft is a step towards a cohesion (Cloutier, 2016; Cameron, Nairn & Higgins, 2009).

#### Conduct Self-Assessment

Jalongo (2013) suggests conducting a self-assessment by reviewing key characteristics of your article, such as “audience appropriateness, originality, persuasiveness, organization, focus, voice, (and) synthesis” (p. 21). Important questions to ask yourself during the editing process are: *Have I used Turnitin to check originality and avoid plagiarism? Have I been honest in my findings? Is the paper coherent? And, does it hold together from the title to the final paragraph?* Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019) suggest rechecking your article with the content and formatting requirements of the journal you are planning to

submit to. The submission requirements for *JSFP* can be found on the first page of this article. This article can be used as a guide to self-assessment by providing a loose framework to structure a practical article.

### **Ask for Help and How to Respond to Reviewers**

Once you have conducted your self-assessment, seriously consider asking for help. Cloutier (2016) suggests that an initial review conducted by a friend can be used as a way to gauge how your article might be received by the community of solution focused practitioners. Having your work reviewed can be “both challenging and frustrating” (Cloutier, 2016, p. 73), and your mental framework of the review and revision of your work will be a key factor in the emotional impact of the feedback process. Embracing the review process as not only necessary but as a beneficial tool for learning and improvement of yourself as a practical writer is helpful in increasing your willingness to revise your work. Improvement is unlikely without such feedback (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009; Cloutier, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Here we have attempted to provide a framework for writing a practical journal article. However, there is no one right way to write such an article. We intend these guidelines to a jumping off point. And while our focus has been on helping you to prepare for submission to *JSFP*, we believe that these ideas will be helpful when writing for any practical journal. Steven Greenblatt (2007, p. 6) summarizes the process appropriately: “You should try to write well – and that means bringing to the table all of your alertness, your fears, and your desires. And every once in a while...tell yourself that you will take a risk.”

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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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*OPINION***Horses, Histories and Futures:  
Some Thoughts on the Evolution of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy**

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The French sociologist of science Bruno Latour (2006) tells us that roughly 20 years ago he visited the Natural History Museum in New York City. Latour started on the top floor where he found a two-part exhibit dealing with the history of horses. One part consisted of an arrangement of fossils tracing the evolution of horses from their earliest known presence on earth to today. The other part showed the history of scientists' interpretations of how horses have evolved. He noted that scientists state that horses have generally been moving from being small animals with three toes and short teeth to being large animals with one toe and long teeth.

Latour adds, however, that there is great variation within this trend. Even as most horses have evolved in the typical way, we see fossils from the 20th century of smaller horses with three toes and short teeth. The history of horses as told by fossils is much more varied than the history told by linear depictions of this process. Latour next turns to scientists' interpretations of the fossils' meaning. Here, too, he discovers significant differences, including scientists who question the certainty of their statements about the evolution of horses. Latour (2006) states that, "...the whole floor is punctuated by videos of scientists at work, little biographies of famous fossil-hunters at war with one another, with even different reconstructions of skeletons to prove to the public that 'we don't know for sure...'" (p. 4).

The two parts of the exhibit show that while scientists' interpretations of the evolution of horses are connected to discoveries unearthed by archaeologists, the interpretations are more than simple reports on these discoveries. Scientists' interpretations are also related to where they look for fossils, how they date fossils, the ways in which they assemble fossils into representations of horses, and the prevailing assumptions about the proper scientific study of horses. Such decisions can become institutionalized as typical assumptions and methods of assessing the scientific credibility of one's own and others' research. The assumptions and methods become justifications when scientists use them, for example, to minimize the significance of the existence of three toed horses during a time when most horses have one toe.

Latour's skillful description forms a starting point for reflecting on a number of questions about scientists' use of the social category called *horse*. For example, how might scientists respond to the discovery of a herd of large, three toed, horse-like animals with long teeth, living in the contemporary world? Would they treat the animals as an interesting oddity that is irrelevant to their scientific knowledge? I can imagine some scientists declaring that the category of "horse" applies only to animals that were once small, three toed and had short teeth and today are large, one toed and have long teeth. Therefore, the newly discovered animals would not be viewed as horses.

Others might say that the newly discovered animals show that horses' body size, teeth length and number of toes evolve somewhat separately from each other. This could be a basis for classifying them as a distinctive variation within the evolution of horses. A third group might insist that the newly discovered herd foretells the future of horses. If we could only live long enough, we would see that most horses in the future will be large, have three toes and long teeth. Thus, scientists who define large three toed horses with long teeth as not real horses, prematurely declare the end of the evolution of the horse. Given these possibilities, is it any wonder that scientists' conversations about the limits of their knowledge are ongoing?

My point may be obvious. Solution-focused therapists have no more insight into their future lives than anyone else does. This should not, however, keep them from imagining what is possible in the future. Such imaginings are important because they inform therapists' assessments of potentially emergent changes in solution-focused thought and practice. The close connection between imagining what is possible in the future and assessments of unanticipated discoveries is central to my

hypothetical disagreement between some scientists claiming that large three toed horse-like animals are early evidence of what the future entails and other scientists' dismissal of them as something other than horses.

I recognize that these types of comments are common sense for solution-focused therapists who facilitate change by encouraging their clients to see and think about actual and potential events in their lives in new ways. This common sense is also potentially useful in imagining and seeing possible future developments in solution-focused thought and practice. For me, the process of engaging potential futures begins with the following imagined reality: something like large three toed horses with long teeth exist in the therapy world, although solution-focused thinkers and practitioners do not always recognize them for what they are.

This assumption helps me see possible solution-focused futures in the ideas and practices of therapists who do not classify themselves as solution-focused, and in the deviations in typical ideas and practices of therapists who are recognized as solution-focused. Unfortunately, these potential sources of change are largely absent from solution-focused therapy conferences, journals and other established sites for participation in the solution-focused community. Their absence is unfortunate because it robs solution-focused therapists of potentially rich resources for imagining their futures. I conclude by discussing some ways that solution-focused therapists might assist each other in collectively imagining and noticing possible new directions in the evolution of their community.

Perhaps the richest source for insight into possible futures is the techniques used by therapists in interacting with their clients. I see solution-focused techniques as loosely similar to the body size, toes and teeth of horses. The evolution of horses is a history of changing environments to which horses slowly adapt. This lesson is easily forgotten when it comes to changes in solution-focused therapists' practices. Too often, advocates of new techniques over emphasize how their practices derive from established solution-focused principles and under state how their interactions with clients are contexts of invention. This emphasis risks ignoring how clients are agents who influence what sorts of questions therapists may ask and, perhaps most important, what therapists' questions mean within the context of therapy interactions.

An alternative way of making sense of a new technique is to ask, "How did that therapist's clients teach her or him to do that?" A related question involves the shifting professional environments to which solution-focused practitioners adapt. These questions are also a basis for challenging the dismissal of past techniques as no longer relevant to solution-focused practice. Treating any past practice as no longer relevant is risky for people who work in environments that they do not fully control. The future sometimes hides in remnants of past assumptions and practices that are marginalized in the conventional wisdom of the moment. Clients can be very skilled at revealing these futures.

A second way of engaging possible futures involves reinterpreting official versions of what it means to be solution-focused. Consider how revered texts, dominant histories and typical training methods could be recast to construct new insights and practices that might better fit with your work circumstances. Ask those who justify their innovative techniques as derived from longstanding solution-focused ideas to also discuss how their inventions alter or even challenge some aspects of established solution-focused thought. This is not heresy. It is basic to how solution-focused brief therapy was created in the first place. I know that solution-focused therapists like to say that you should not try to fix a problem that doesn't exist, but that claim was made in discussing clients' situations. It does not accurately capture the attitude of the early experimenters with this approach to change, or the work of current innovators.

Third, keep interacting with one another, particularly around areas of disagreement. This is the most important lesson of Latour's story for me. Scientists' continuously disagree about how to study horse fossils and what they have learned from them. They also recognize that without serious conversation there is no evolution. Serious conversations involving multiple perspectives remind us that no one really knows what the future will entail. Solution-focused therapists might take heart from Latour's scientists who use their uncertainties about horse evolution to energize their ongoing efforts to understand what it means to be a horse.

This brings me back to those large three toed horses with long teeth that don't attend professional conferences. Who are they, what do their clients want from them, how do they address their clients' desires and needs, how are their work environments similar to and different than those of most solution-focused practitioners, and how did they acquire their skills and knowledge? I see solution-focused conferences as particularly promising settings for interacting with therapists

whose ideas and practices might challenge the conventional wisdom of solution-focused thinkers and practitioners. Their ideas may stimulate new conversations about what it means to be solution-focused and the limits of mainstream solution-focused therapists' understanding of what solution-focused thought and practice might become.

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*CLINICAL***Twenty-Eight Years of Amazement-So Far**

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**Abstract**

The following account describes the author's transition to using SFBT whilst working in a Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service, and reflections on the influences on his practice prior to discovering the approach. Through two examples of practice the author shares his continuing sense of amazement over the potential for SFBT to be both effective and efficient. This paper concludes with a first-hand account of someone who experienced the effectiveness and efficiency of SFBT when seeking therapy for a long-standing set of challenges.

**Introduction**

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) offers practitioners and clients an opportunity to work together, drawing on the best that each can bring to the conversation. The development of my own competence in SFBT required me to set aside much of the expert thinking that influenced my practice prior to learning the approach. Setting aside this expert thinking has, I believe, left more space for clients to be the experts on their lives, as well as to be more aware of both the life they want to be living and the strengths and resources they have at their disposal.

Looking back over my 28 years of using SFBT, I notice that I have also experienced more of something else that might be of significance – amazement. Amazement has been defined as “the emotion produced by truly unusual and surprising things” (vocabulary.com, n.d.).

An experience of unusual and surprising things could be relevant to Bateson's thinking about the information that is derived from “differences that make a difference” (1972, p.272). When amazement happens in therapeutic conversations, this might be a clue to the client that important information has emerged, and a clue to the therapist that something in their practice has helped that to happen.

My first use of SFBT was amazing, for me, in terms of how quickly and simply complexities were resolved. Keeping space open for clients to make amazing changes in their lives has required me to ensure I do everything I can to privilege their perspective. In keeping with this, the paper concludes with the perspective of a recent client, leaving readers to discern for themselves the extent to which the use of SFBT has contributed to her experience of therapy she describes, and perhaps also her own experience of amazement.

**Background**

I first came across Solution-focused Brief Therapy through a one-day workshop, by Chris Iveson from BRIEF, on a Friday in 1991. At that time I was utilizing my training in Family Therapy, working as a Social Worker in a Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Prior to the workshop my work setting positioned me as an expert in relation to the families, parents, young people and children I worked with. Given that my training in Family Therapy had been prior to the post-modernist change in the field, heralded by papers such as Hoffman's “Constructing Realities” (1990), my therapeutic approach also positioned me as expert.

Over time I also came to realise that I had been heavily influenced by Structuralism. Working in CAMHS I had been trained to explore the problems people came in with and then use my expert knowledge to find the underlying causes, causes either hidden to the clients or lost in history. Finding origins to problems had at times been quite exciting, like being a detective. However, the end result often brought me and my clients to a place of difficulty. Sometimes clients didn't agree with my

formulations, and my engagements sometimes turned into acts of persuasion or coercion. At other times we were both left thinking “now what?”

I recall working with one eight-year-old boy with encopresis. Through my careful detective work his parents and I worked out that this had probably started when he was a three-year-old at nursery school, waiting to go to the toilet. A siren from a passing emergency vehicle had frightened him and he'd had an accident in his pants. At that realization we finally understood how the problem started. Unfortunately, we were still left with no idea about how to help an eight-year-old use the toilet when he needed to go. As I became more familiar with SFBT I came across the following observation, usually attributed to Einstein, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them” (Einstein, n.d.). I was clearly not the first to notice a disconnection between problems and solutions.

### **My Introduction to SFBT**

The early part of the workshop I attended on SFBT raised significant challenges to my usual ways of thinking about my work. Many of the key ideas felt counter-intuitive. The presenter spoke of clients being experts on their own lives, having the potential to find their own solutions. Effective therapy also did not require the therapist to find underlying causes. The therapist did not necessarily need to know what the problem was.

However, exercises on times when problems in my own life did not happen, scaling my progress on dealing with a challenge and how I could tell the next day that a miracle had happened in the night fascinated me. I was also fascinated by watching the presenter's videos of his practice. His clients were clearly energized, animated, and resourceful. Looking back, I could see how my clients did not usually look like that and then realized the difference was probably due to the presenter asking his clients different questions from the ones I usually asked. By the end of the workshop, I noticed a number of significant changes in myself. Having been to other therapy workshops previously, I was familiar with thinking I might try some of the new possibilities for practice I had learned. This time I was determined to try the questions from SFBT with clients as soon as I could.

SFBT questions were questions I had never asked before. These were questions that could take me into parts of people's lives I had never previously thought to ask about. These questions had clearly worked well for the presenter and his clients. I was keen to see how they would work for me with mine. Although at the beginning of the day many of the propositions from the presenter had felt counter-intuitive, by the end of the day I was thinking that SFBT was the closest I had found to the way I had always desired to work with people. Although the approach had initially jarred with my assumptions about practice, I sensed that it fitted well with my values and ethics. Other changes were more specific to my thoughts about being at work. I noticed that at 4:30 pm on Friday I was eager to return to work after the weekend. I also noticed that I was hoping everyone would turn up for their appointments so I could try out this new approach. These were unusual thoughts for me at the time, as failed appointments usually provided welcome opportunities to catch up with paperwork.

### **The First Day Back at Work**

When back at work, it was probably obvious to those I had already been working with, that I had attended some sort of training since I had last seen them. As far as I could tell, no-one wanted me to stop asking the new questions from SFBT. The first thing that amazed me after the workshop, came from my work with a family I saw for the first time that day. Mandy, and her five-year-old son James (not their real names), had been referred to CAMHS by their general physician as a result of Mandy struggling with a number of challenges. Mandy explained that for most of James' life she had lived with her parents. Six months before the referral they moved into their own place. I heard that James refused to sleep in his own bed and had temper tantrums when he could not have his own way. I also heard that when they visited her parents, James would ask to stay with them rather than go home with his mother. Mandy's parents undermined her authority by saying James could stay if he wanted. The still functioning expert part of my brain mapped out a plan. First, help Mandy establish a bed time routine, and then, once Mandy felt more confident through the success of this, proceed to address the temper tantrums. Finally, would come the *pièce de résistance* of my Family Therapy, a meeting with Mandy and her parents to establish clearer boundaries and bolster Mandy's authority over her son. Despite the persistence of my expert thinking I managed to try out something from the workshop, the miracle question. “Suppose”, I asked “When you go to bed tonight, a miracle happens, but because you are asleep you do not know. When you wake in the morning how would you be able to

tell?" Mandy's immediate reply was "James would have slept in his own bed." Recalling more of the training I asked a series of follow up questions. "Suppose this happened, how would you be different? What would be different between you and James? How could your friends tell? What might be different when you pick James up from school?"

Soon the session ended, and off they went, ready to come back for another meeting the next week. Anticipating the possibility of a three-month involvement, I was somewhat surprised to hear Mandy say on her return that everything was improved, and she required no further involvement. When asked to say more, Mandy explained that on the way home on the bus James stated "I'm a big boy now and am going to sleep in my own bed" and subsequently he had. I could only assume that whilst playing with a sand tray in the room James had heard his mother's description of the life she wanted and decided he wanted to be part of it. Assuming there was still more work for me to do, I asked about the temper tantrums. Mandy explained that there had been none since James had started sleeping in his own bed. Assuming there was still a need for my expert Family Therapy, I asked about the undermining by her parents. Mandy explained how that had also stopped happening. Taken even more by surprise I asked how this had come about. Mandy explained that this had been easily done. The day after James had slept in his own bed she had gone to her parents' house whilst he was at school and told them that if they did not stop undermining her they would never see him again. Mandy concluded the second, and last meeting, by sharing she had not always been as unconfident as she had probably looked at the first meeting. Prior to James' birth she had been a confident young woman with plans for her life. James' unexpected arrival had put the plans on hold and necessitated them living with her parents. Now her confidence was back, as was her readiness to start planning for her life again.

### Reflections on Practice

Prior to discovering SFBT I had endeavoured to be as helpful and respectful as I could be with those I worked with. It is only after committing myself to the assumptions of SFBT that I became more aware of the power-relations possibly at play at that time. Through further training in Family Therapy I came across the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault who proposed that societies typically operate by dividing practices (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p 208) which separate out those who are considered a threat. As a professional working in a health setting, I was particularly challenged by Foucault's view that professions contribute to this demarcation through practices commonly found in my service - assessment and diagnosis. Prior to discovering SFBT, had I been an active participant in such a process? Had I contributed to some families thinking they were dysfunctional whilst others were not? Had I contributed to some young people thinking they were abnormal whilst others were not? These were uncomfortable questions.

The resolution of Mandy's challenges in one meeting, when I expected to be engaged for three months, was certainly unusual for me at the time. Whilst I did manage to ask the miracle question in good faith, trusting the question and trusting Mandy's potential to make use of it, I was subsequently surprised by how well my first use had worked. Over time I have often seen how the rapid change that can come about with SFBT can quite easily make perfect sense after the event. Maybe James did see benefit in being part of the life his mother wanted. Waking in the morning after James had spent his first night in his own bed had probably made quite a difference to Mandy, perhaps restoring the confidence she used to have. Maybe this made it more likely that James would more readily accept her authority. Maybe all of this had given Mandy the confidence to issue the threat to her parents that they dare not ignore. Given these possibilities, it makes more sense how all of this happen after one conversation and even through the course of one day.

### Twenty-Eight Years Later

I continue to be amazed at how quickly and well SFBT can work. 'Millie' is one who sought help with habits she had been struggling to overcome for a long time. At the outset Millie described a number of habits she did not want to have in her life and had been unable to remove. When asked what she hoped for from us talking together, Millie named that she wanted to ensure that worrying was not getting in the way of everyday life. Using this to define 10 on a 0 to 10 scale Millie evaluated that she was at 5. Exploring the difference between 5 and 0 enabled Millie to recognise how she was learning to manage worry and be calm. Exploring other times when she managed to prevent worry getting in the way brought to mind other successful strategies, and tips, from her parents that proved to be useful. The scaling question also gave Millie an opportunity to consider how 6 might be different from 5, helping to identify the habits she was ready to address. When I first learned to ask the miracle question, I would use the phrase "and the problems you came with today are resolved..."



Over time I found that the question was more likely to help clients make detailed descriptions of what they wanted when the wording included the hopes from the conversation. So, for Millie the question became, “When you go to bed tonight a miracle happens, and worrying is no longer getting in the way of everyday life, but because you are asleep you do not know. When you wake in the morning, what would be the first sign that the miracle has happened?”

Rapid change happened for Millie, just like Mandy. Unlike Mandy, Millie came for a few more meetings to consolidate her progress, during which time she reported further improvements in areas in her life she had not mentioned in the first meeting, including a fear of flying. Millie’s quick improvement was for me another example of something unusual happening. After 28 years of using SFBT I was, however, less surprised, having witnessed unusually quick changes so many times before.

After a third meeting Millie agreed to share with me, for this paper, her experience of SFBT in our first session. I am particularly indebted to Millie for taking the time and effort to put into words what was, by the look of it, an amazing experience for her. At the end of the day, the people who are in the best position to comment on the usefulness of SFBT are those who have experienced the approach and seen how it works for them. With that in mind, I will now leave the last word to Millie.

### Millie’s Account

I first walked into John’s office in June. I was excited, nervous, anxious and very sceptical. I’d heard great things about therapy, but to me, the idea that what seemed to be my lifelong ailments could be broken down and removed from me was something that seemed inconceivable. For the last ten (plus) years, I’d lived with these ideas and thoughts that, often, had a terrible effect on my mental health. At the mention of therapy, I would cringe or feel embarrassed or feel as though there was something seriously ‘wrong’ with me. I much preferred to say, ‘I’m going to see the man at (*the place where we met*) or ‘I’m seeing someone to help me manage my stress’. In hindsight, that was untrue. The reality was that I’d suffered too long with anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder, exacerbated by stress.

During our first session, John and I discussed a range of things and he asked me various questions – when he could get a word in edgeways. Many of the things we talked about, I will remember forever but one thing in particular that still resonates with me now is the idea of ‘the miracle’ – the miracle is the notion that when I woke up the following morning, all of my ‘issues’ would be gone and I’d notice it minute by minute throughout the day. I cried. I cried because to me, it seemed nothing more than a lovely dream that I wished I could have, something unachievable but nevertheless, something I wanted so desperately.

The next morning, I woke up and went about my day as usual, yet the inclination to complete these obsessive tasks had diminished considerably. I was suddenly so conscious that I wasn’t ‘doing’ my usual actions in the same obsessive way. I felt a sense of control. If I had a problem or felt badly, I would find a way to get through it. Another thing I knew was ‘it will pass’, a phrase that has repeatedly been music to my ears. Surely things could only get better? And that they did.

In only a few short sessions I felt refreshed, rejuvenated and ready to live my life. Nobody is perfect and everyone has troubles of some kind. Many are able to overcome them, and others can’t, but sometimes it isn’t about doing things perfectly but more about conducting yourself in a way that is perfect for you.

I won’t lie, I am fairly nervous for when my time with John comes to an end, but I could not be more grateful to him for helping me get my spark back. I now know for sure that I CAN and I WILL find a solution for whatever I am yet to face. It really is just like a miracle (Millie, personal communication, 9/8/19).

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**BOOK REVIEW****Solution Focused Practice: Effective Communication to Facilitate Change**

Guy Shennan

Red Globe Press, 2019, 248 pages, ISBN 978-1-352-00599-8 Can\$32.99/GBP £22.99 Paperback (e-book available)

Review by Lisa Blond Booth

Social Worker; Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

As is often said, and indeed is attributed to Steve de Shazer himself, Solution Focused Brief Therapy is simple to understand and extremely difficult to execute well. As a newcomer to the field, and being mindful of the need to learn and practice on a regular basis, this is a book that can provide the reader with a solid foundation in not only the theory but also the use of this model.

Guy Shennan invites the reader to think about the practice of solution focus in a manner that is congruent with his own training methods. And in order to do so, he presents the reader with ways to use and understand language, activities to practice, detailed transcripts with comments from the author, as well as suggested reflections to further the reader's own conceptualization of the material.

The book reads in a narrative format and uses questions in the SFBT manner that invite the reader to craft answers and notice their own responses. The transcripts allow the reader to focus on what has been previously delineated in the text as important to the process. As a beginner, having the guidance to determine what is important is most helpful, as all beginners find that everything new is important. So the reader is able to notice and be guided towards the concepts that are integral to the model in a gentle, forward moving direction as they read through the book.

The book is broken down into 10 chapters, each of which begins with a brief description of what will be addressed. At the end of each chapter there is a summary of important points, and it was quite validating to see that many of these 'important' points were the same ones that I took note of myself. Additionally, the end of chapter summary clarified what is important in a more global manner, not just in relation to the chapter, but to the model as a whole.

The chapters work towards an introduction of the model, then each chapter provides a more individualized break down of the concepts, ending with a reunion of all the elements in order for the reader to see the 'whole' version. Concepts that are explored include best hopes, establishing the direction of the sessions, and types of questions to gather descriptions. The final chapters speak to the broader use of the model, as well as the start of the reader's own practice. There are two appendices that provide the reader with multiple sample questions, as well as further resources.

In particular, the comprehensive listing of resources opens the door to further learning for the reader and is a most welcome source of information. There is also a concise and relevant review of the history of the model throughout the book that provides the reader with context and does not intrude upon the flow of the book as a learning tool.

There is a refreshing feel to the book as it moves from topic to topic, that appears to reflect the author's style and keeps the reader connected to the material. Questions that arose throughout the reading of the book were answered quickly, either in the next sentence or paragraph. For the reader this becomes a "conversation" with the book. As the reader progresses through the book and is asked to question and practice creating questions, it feels alive and within the scope of possibility that the reader, albeit being a beginner, does have the ability to understand the model and put it into practice.

This was a great addition to my learning, and provided me with hope that I can move forward in the model and made me desirous of attending the author's trainings. It seems to me that any book that ignites the desire for further learning has done a great service to the reader and to the Solution Focused community as a whole.

**The reviewer**

Lisa Blond Booth is a social worker providing services to Children, Youth and Families in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, is new to the SFBT world and very passionate about the model.

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**BOOK REVIEW****Solution-Focused Brief Therapy with Clients Managing Trauma**

Adam S. Froerer, Jacqui von Cziffra-Bergs, Johnny S. Kim and Elliott E. Connie (Eds.)

Oxford University Press, 2018, 246 pages, ISBN 978-0190678784, \$US 44.80 hardback (Kindle edition available).

Review by Michael Durrant

Brief Therapy Institute of Sydney

I remember, when I was at university in the 1970s, the university library acquired a new book that was described, in hushed tones, by some of the psychology and social work faculty, as being “The Bible of sexual abuse treatment”. I no longer remember the name of the book nor anything about it, except for the opening sentence. The first chapter was headed something like “the state of the art in sexual abuse treatment” and the very first sentence read, “Child sexual abuse INEVITABLY leads to long term, IRREVERSIBLE psychological damage” (Caps mine).

Contrast this with the following observation,

Recent research indicates that the most common reaction among adults exposed to [traumatic] events is a relatively stable pattern of healthy functioning coupled with the enduring capacity for positive emotion and generative experiences (Bonanno, Rennie & Dekel, 2005, p. 985)

There is a sense in which both these statements contain some truth. We do not want a “Pollyanna” approach that underestimates the difficulties people may experience following trauma; however, we equally don’t want an approach that is blind to the possibilities that still exist for healthy functioning and positive emotion.

In the opening chapter of this book, about working therapeutically with people who have experienced trauma, Elliott Connie opens with the word “Hope”; and says, “This is a book about hope”. Read the two quotes above about child sexual abuse and trauma. Which quote may encourage a clinician to have hope for his or her clients? Which is most likely to encourage clients to experience some hope (however small)?

Some Solution-Focused therapists, who have been working with peoples’ hopes for some time, may have (blissfully) forgotten what it’s like “out there”. One of the most frequent questions I am asked in training is, “But you couldn’t use Solution-Focused with complex trauma, could you?” After Elliott’s hopeful opening, Johnny Kim and Adam Froerer dive into the world of trauma — the research and the professional debates. They write accessibly about the potentially complex development of thought and research about the role of trauma in mental health, from the introduction of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as an anxiety disorder in DSM-III (APA, 1980) to a major category of “trauma and stress related disorders” in its own right in DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Not only has PTSD grown up to become a whole new category of disorder, but they also introduced a new subtype of PTSD for children aged 6 years and younger. The sentiment reflected in my remembered quote from my university days is alive and well and guiding much trauma thinking today. After reviewing research on different types of trauma and other treatment approaches that are considered evidence-based, the authors then review SFBT as an evidence-based treatment for the effects of trauma.

I think this chapter is one of the most important in the book and I would have welcomed it being longer. It goes some way to allowing those of us in the Solution-Focused world to *engage with* the more traditional views and research that dominate the trauma field, rather than trying to pretend that it isn’t there or doesn’t matter.

Chapter 3 is about SFBT and language and about the different kinds of questions used in SFBT. It particularly considers some of the insights gained from the microanalysis research — grounding, formulations, lexical choice and so on. This leads

to a discussion of the way therapists deliberately choose particular language and how this contributes to the joint process of co-constructing the possibility of difference.

Consider the following statement:

Client: Things have been very difficult since my recent sexual assault. I haven't been able to sleep well, I have horrible flashbacks, and I feel like I am constantly on guard waiting for something like that to happen again.

The authors then offer two possible responses:

Therapist: Oh, wow! It sounds like these things have really been troubling you. That must be very difficult.

Therapist: Oh, wow! It sounds like this has experience has really affected you. I'm wondering how you have been able to cope despite having to manage all of this?

You see how this small difference in language selection potentially makes a huge difference to the way the client is beginning to make sense of her/his experience.

The next eleven chapters each focus on a particular context for experiencing trauma and how SFBT can be used in these settings. The range of contexts is comprehensive — violent crime, suicide in the aftermath of trauma, interpersonal violence, war and international conflict, substance abuse, PTSD in the military, child sexual abuse, childhood trauma, bereavement, sex-trafficking survivors. I will not comment on these chapters here; except to say that I learned something new or gained a new perspective in each chapter.

Appropriately, the final chapter is on Vicarious Resilience — the “positive” impact working with clients who have experienced trauma can have on clinicians! Each of the authors writes candidly (and humbly) about a particular experience that has strengthened them rather than further deplete them. Importantly, vicarious resilience is NOT about ignoring the reality of the upsetting and sometimes painful or sad stories one hears when working in this area. Rather, it is about recognising that, despite the sadness, clinicians can learn from and be inspired by their clients' strengths and successes.

Some minor quibbles. The book does a good job of locating Solution-Focused within broader research about trauma, Therefore, I kept waiting for a discussion of post-traumatic growth — a concept which offers some useful research. Two of the chapter authors mention it; however, it would have made the whole theoretical and research framework more complete. Second, the main authors seem a little selective in their referencing. They often refer to the work of various of their Solution-Focused predecessors but rarely cite a work or a quotation. However, these are minor points.

This book is a significant addition to the Solution-Focused literature. A discussion of Solution-Focused work with trauma that is thorough, human but also academically more than respectable is quite an achievement. If you work with people who have experienced trauma, you should read this book. If you don't, you should read this book too! It will stretch your thinking about SFBT.

### **The reviewer**

Michael Durrant is a psychologist and Director of the Brief Therapy Institute of Sydney. He has consulted to a number of personal trauma-related services and also to government and non-government services working in recovery from natural disaster.

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**BOOK REVIEW****Signs on the Road from Therapy to Conversations Led by Clients**

Plamen Panayotov and Bogdan Strahilov (editors)

LAP Lambert Academic Publishing: Mauritius. 2019. 128 pages. ISBN 978-620-0-300092-8 £29.00 paperback

Review by Dr Alasdair J Macdonald

Freelance

The original concept described in this volume was called Simple Therapy. It is now named CoLeC: Conversations Led by Clients. This book is a collection of publications by the editors and others describing the development of the ideas. Musical terms are added to express the energy felt in each publication. A number of Road Signs are highlighted which mark major developments in the thinking of the editors. The concepts are described with clarity and brevity. Useful connections to new philosophical ideas are given.

The first Road Sign (*Andante ma non troppo*) occurred when Dr Plamen Panayotov had begun his psychiatry internship in 1984. His trainer focused on the patient's goals and not on their symptoms. Further examples of this orientation were demonstrated by a mental health nurse in 1990.

In Bulgaria it is apparently common that clients of any professional will advise them on how to proceed with their case. In 1993 Dr Panayotov's driving instructor, a truck driver who had lost his job in a recession, advised the use of 'The Ultimate Self-Helper': 'Ask yourself the most useful question that you can think of'. He asked himself 'What resources have you in your current situation?' (*Profundo*). He had an old car and many driving certificates, so he set up a driving school.

In 1994 Panayotov and Macdonald published a paper on the use of medication in mental health practice 'From Compliance to Adherence' (*Vivace*). An updated version is presented here, showing how the use of medication is affected by the language used in the conversation. In 1997 Steve de Shazer suggested 'Use the client as your supervisor, and ask them what we could have done that would be more useful.' This became a Road Sign towards Simple Therapy 'What do you propose that I do differently now, that is more useful for you?' (*Da capo al fine*).

In the European Brief Therapy conference in Lyon in 2008, Simple Therapy was presented for the first time. The text was published as a separate volume which is reproduced here (*Presto*). Key points include the client as leader while the therapist follows. The sequence Thinking-Questioning-Answering-Doing-Reviewing (Th-Qu-An-Do-Re) is presented as the mode of thought used by many people in everyday life.

The next paper moves towards comparing the Miracle Question of solution-focused brief therapy in Milwaukee, the Best Hopes question used by BRIEF in London and the Opening Question used in Simple Therapy (*Grave*). It comments on the difficulties and benefits of being a simple therapist, while reducing the role of the therapist to a minimum. The following (2014) chapter (*Infinito*) gives examples of Simple Therapy in action with the emphasis on reducing the therapist's input. The therapist is redefined as a 'Conversation Conductor' or ConCon.

The importance of asking oneself good questions is revisited in 'My Steps to Success: the Good Questions Diary' (*Spirituoso ma non troppo*). This was intended as an educational tool for teenagers but has also been used in personal crises. It is currently being updated.

The next Road Sign in 2017 (*Larghetto*) was an encounter with a disturbed and angry man in the street, who became calm and thoughtful after a brief description of Simple Therapy. This provoked the thought that perhaps therapists will change their ways only if their clients demand it. Subsequent reflection identified that we have 'Firsthand Knowledge' of ourselves and only 'Secondhand Knowledge' of others. (This distinction is difficult in English but several other languages



have separate words for these concepts.) So therapy is based on the client's firsthand knowledge of what is helpful to them and therapy becomes assisted self-help.

The next chapter revisits the comparison between the Miracle Question, the Best Hopes question, and the (Simple Therapy) Mind-Activating Question (*Presto*). It makes the point that all three questions seek what the client wants, but on different time-scales: in future days, in future hours or in the coming minutes and seconds.

The Skeleton Key to Assisted Change (*Puntato*) is presented as the maximum involvement of the client in the conversation. The editors point out that clients choose when to seek help, what kind of help they want and where to look for it. Thus all clients have already carried out some pre-session activities. Simple Therapy suggests Questioning for Useful Questions (QuQu): the Mind-Activating Question (MAQ), the Time-Orientation Questions (TOQ), Multiple-choice Questioning (therapist drawing questions from a list) (MuQ) and Delayed-Answers Questioning (DAQ). The conclusion is that this is no longer named 'therapy' but is better known as CoLeC: Conversations Led by Clients.

Alexey Mikhalsky in Russia independently developed therapeutic work along similar lines to Simple Therapy. In 2019 he and Plamen Panayotov published 'It will never be the same again' in the Journal of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (*Andante ma non troppo*). It describes the QuQu tools in brief and emphasises the value of clients' self-questioning. QuQu responses are expressed in the client's own language, which suits them. The answers arrive at the right time. As clients practice self-questioning, they become more skilled at such thinking.

Finally, the book includes the material from a previously published flipchart of Simple Therapy questions, intended for use as a desk-reminder of the questions (*Da capo al fine*).

In conclusion, the editors point out the good news that Simple Therapy is popular with clients and often rapid in its effects. As bad news, they suggest that many therapists will regret the loss of their complex therapeutic models and pre-established theories (*Immeasurable*).

The book makes reference to many authorities from within and outside the field of solution-focused therapy. A few typographical errors are found, which do not affect the sense of the text.

### **The reviewer**

Dr Alasdair J Macdonald became a consultant psychiatrist in 1980, joined the Board of the European Brief Therapy Association, on which he served until 2011, was a founder member of the UK Association for Solution-Focused Practice in 2001, and pursued a number of interests within university practice including locum work and as an international researcher and trainer.

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**BOOK REVIEW****Solution Focused Practice Around the World**

Kirsten Dierolf, Debbie Hogan, Svea van der Hoorn and Sukanya Wignaraja (Editors)

Routledge, 2020, 193 pages, ISBN 978-0367134341, £29.99 paperback (Kindle edition available)

Review by Mark McKergow

Centre for Solutions Focus at Work

This long-awaited volume comprises chapters based on sessions at the first World SF conference in Bad Soden, Germany in September 2017 held at the instigation of Kirsten Dierolf. The event itself was a resounding success with 350 people from many countries and all continents (except Antarctica) and a wide variety of fields coming together, supported by a range of international groups including EBTA, SFBTA, SOLWorld and many national organisations – a veritable ‘festival of SF’.

This collection has taken a while to come together, and it is clear that the editors have been hard at work collecting and clarifying the material. The result is well worth waiting for; a collection of the latest SF ideas, applications and practices which show how the field is both maturing and expanding. Each of the chapters manages to present something new (albeit with a familiar background). In a field which prizes simplicity and rigour, this is no mean feat and the editors should be pleased with their efforts.

The book is in four sections looking at SF theory, organisational work, therapy and (most intriguingly) ‘utilising the everyday in SF practice’. Each of the editors look after a section, and it’s the everyday practice part which begins the book. Debbie Hogan has curated this section which looks at novel ways to use SF in a wide range of contexts. Jonas Wells, Sander van Gor and Guy Shennan share their thoughts about how music’s power to affect body and mood might be used in support of SF work, which is neatly followed by Christiaan van Woerden, a paediatrician who created a hospital service for children in the Caribbean and found his piano a useful tool. Ian Smith contributes a very useful piece about creating SF games for things like preferred futures, resources and exceptions. I liked the way Ian encourages us to invent our own games, as well as using those he presents in the chapter as starting points.

The mobile phone features in two chapters. Anne Marie Wulf looks uses micro-analysis to examine how to make text messages effective SF interventions. In a later section Esther de Wolf and Guy Shennan look at the ‘Extended iSelf’, drawing on extended mind theory to see different ways that smartphones can be brought into our work in a thoughtful and non-gimmicky way as an extension of our mind/bodies. Another interesting chapter is the review of the EBTA Summer Camp experience by Naomi Whitehead, Ursula Buehlmann, Peter Sundman, John Wheeler and Ferdinand Wolf – these events are continuing to be transformative in connecting new practitioners with old hands, as I can personally attest from a week’s farmsteading in Germany last year.

The SF theory section is compiled by Kirsten Dierolf, and contains together five chapters each of which brings something accessible and innovative to the table. Leoš Zatloukal from Czechia has a hand in two of them, with a ‘theory theory’ piece based on Recursive Frame Analysis with Edita Bezdičková, and a ‘practice theory’ chapter about wide and narrow solution-building with Lenka Tkadlčíková. Joe Chan brings news from Singapore about his eight SF markers, illustrated in his work with youth groups. Full disclosure: I have a chapter in this section too, in print for the first time about how SF can be seen to work by ‘stretching the world’ of the client. You’ll have to read the book to find out how useful that is...

Svea van der Hoorn takes on the organisational work section of the book, six chapters which once again bring new ideas from both fresh and experienced voices. I was particularly intrigued to see the chapter about SF and the ‘Clean Space’ approach by Fania Pallikarakis, Klaus Schenck, Tim Newton and Sandra Collin, which builds on the Open Space approach to make even greater use of spatial relationships and differences. Julia Kalenberg brings a nice case about working with a CEO,

while SF mediation is explored by an international consortium of Martina Scheinecker, Peter Röhrig, Sieds Rienks and Leo Blokland. New work by Klaus Schenk and also Susanne Burgstaller is always worth taking time to read and reflect, while Enikő Tegyi and Áron Levendel from Hungary look at using SF to improve meetings – a subject close to many hearts!

The final section, slightly surprisingly, is about SF therapy. After all, this where SF started – but no means the only place where it ends up. Sukanya Wignaraja oversees this part of the book, with Plamen Panayotov from Bulgaria having a hand in two of the chapters in his inimitable and direct style, seeking as ever to incisively point to simplifications which put the client even closer to the centre of the work. Steve Langer and Dragana Knezić share their experience of working with refugee torture survivors, using a short-term SF intervention which makes the work “immensely less painful to the clients and far less daunting for the therapist”. Sounds like a result! The book closes with Pamela King, winner of the 2017 Steve de Shazer Memorial Award for Innovations in Solution Focused Brief Therapy from SFBTA, describing her work solution building with children.

This is a book of great variety, innovation and inspiration. In our field where so many of the basics are widely known and used, it is refreshing to see experienced practitioners keeping going to bring new ideas to the table in ways which expand rather than dilute the SF approach. Another SF world conference is planned for 2022, again in Bad Soden, so it might be a good idea to start planning to be there and building some ideas to bring with you.

### **The reviewer**

Mark McKergow is director of the Centre for Solutions Focus at Work, based in Edinburgh, Scotland. His latest book is *Hosting Generative Change: Creating Containers for Creativity and Commitment* (BMI, 2020).

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**BOOK REVIEW****Recrafting a Life: Solutions for Chronic Pain and Illness**

Charles Johnson and Denise Weber

Brunner-Routledge Publishers, 2002, 337 pages, ISBN 1-58391-356-4, USD \$36.54 Kindle edition

Review by Rod Sherwin

Solutioneer

While this book was published in 2002, it arrived in my life in late 2017 about 18 months after I had been diagnosed with a serious health condition. It provides strategies for those who are perplexed about how to deal with the multiple challenges that accompany the experiences of long-term illness and/or pain. The book is written for mental health professionals, yet I found it an incredibly valuable self-help book.

For those dealing with chronic pain and illness, mainstream medicine focuses primarily on symptom relief through pharmaceuticals. You are seen as the patient and they are the experts. You get on the treadmill and follow the standard of care with little investigation into your own agency in coping with the condition. SF instead recognises the client as the expert in their world and, with the right help, being able to find solutions to not only cope with their condition but to enhance the quality of their lives. I found strong parallels with the Biopsychosocial Model for Chronic Pain Self-Management presented by Jay E. Valusek at the SFBTA Conference in 2018, as an alternative to the rising opioid addiction.

The book is organised in two major parts. Part 1 covers some of the theory underlying their approach (Chapters 2-4) while Part 2, the majority of the book, has 3 main sections: the Stages of Recrafting a Life (Chapter 5), using SF to enable refracting (Chapters 6-7), and using hypnosis as a therapeutic and self-help tool (Chapters 8-9). The final two chapters are about self-care as a caregiver and a handy catalogue of experiments in self-care.

Johnson and Weber use the story of Robinson Crusoe as a metaphor for those dealing with chronic health conditions as they go through in their journey. They explore Crusoe's different stages of progression after being shipwrecked on an island and also use his relationship with his companion Friday to talk about being a useful companion, carer or therapist. You don't need to have read the story of Robinson Crusoe or to have seen a movie to still find this metaphor useful.

As a way to meet the client in their resources and align with their current model of the world, Johnson and Weber describe five potential stages that a client may be in with their condition. A person who is just beginning their journey with a new health condition can benefit from different interventions compared with someone who has been dealing with it over the long-term. The five stages of recrafting are: Visitor, Sufferer/Victim, Seeker/Searcher, Explorer/Experimenter and Recrafter. These stages are not a linear progression and a client may move between the different stages depending on their energy levels and severity of symptoms at a given point in time. There are useful tables within the text which summarise the interventions suggested at each stage.

The SF section starts to describe familiar SF tools such as listening, goals, future orientation (the Miracle Question), looking for exceptions and scaling. These tools are modified in important ways to work around the reality that chronic pain and health issues aren't always getting better and may be getting worse over time.

For example, the Miracle Question is phrased around identifying the skills to have a higher quality of life rather than not having the condition at all. Looking for exceptions helps to identify self-care strategies that work for you, and follow up sessions using EARS (DeJong & Berg, 2013) start with "What's different?" rather than "What's better?" as things aren't always going to better. Johnson and Weber developed a tool called the Solution Identification Scale for Health (SISH) to help the client further identify useful exceptions between sessions.

As relapses are a part of life for chronic health conditions. A number of tools and tasks are suggested that can be developed with the client to help them plan for and cope for these situations, such as the Roadside Repair Kit, a Rainy Day Letter, the Memory Virus and the Fortune Cookie task.

I found the chapters on hypnosis very dense; it was easy to get bogged down in the theory and technical terminology. I do like the way that hypnotic suggestion could be combined with the SF tasks like noticing and experimentation.

The authors' depth of experience comes through very clearly, as well as the depth of knowledge and skill in applying SF and hypnosis skills, for the benefit of their clients. I highly recommend this book for both mental health professionals and for clients themselves.

### **The reviewer**

Rod Sherwin is a Solutioneer specialising in using Solutions-focused approaches to help business respond and adapt to change.

### **References**

DeJong, P., & Berg, I. K. (2013). *Interviewing for solutions* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

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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](http://solfocollective.net)).

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**BOOK REVIEW****Team Talk: Building Excellence with Solution Focused Skills**

Susanne Burgstaller, Chris Iveson and Harald Karrer (illustrations)

Published by Usolvit, 2019, 73 pages, ISBN 978-1700056641, \$15.99 paperback, [www.team-talk.usolvit.com](http://www.team-talk.usolvit.com) (Kindle edition available)

Review by Anne-Marie Wulf

Danish Solution Focused Institute

*Team Talk* is a different kind of book, as you will notice right away when you see the front cover. The subtitle refers to creating and developing teams using Solution-Focused skills. Fifteen particular skills are depicted as people, creating a gallery of individuals in different colours, shapes, and types. For example, the “Preferred Future” is portrayed as a geography teacher with a map representing the skill. “Positive Assumption” is represented as a woman with a flower head wreath and a bark skirt, appearing as if she was Hawaiian. The front cover really stirs the curiosity and the reader is immediately drawn to engage with the book. There are only 73 pages, aiding in the book’s accessibility.

Following the foreword, the 15 members of the team, their aims, and specific colours are presented. We get to meet the sporty Mr. Best Self, the business look-alike Mrs. Tomorrow Question, the very tall long-limbed Mr. List, the adventurous Miss. Miracle Question, and the grumpy old Mr. Previous Solution, just to mention a few. Each team member is described along with a short, clear, and useful description of the particular skill, which is useful. Along with the descriptions are illustrations of how it may look when use Mr. Best Self in interactions with others. The illustrations make the book readily accessible and useful; surely anyone will gain something from this book.

Each skill comes along with applications for practice, supported by relevant tasks. For example, there is an exercise for self-coaching, an observation task for you and your team, and tasks centred on actions. The tasks are easy to do and are tailored towards teams or anyone wanting to master the Solution Focused approach.

The booklet ends presenting bonus material for “curious learners”. For me, this was the most interesting part of the book. Burgstaller and Iveson introduce “the Solution Focused Philosophy” by writing about “being” and “doing” Solution Focused. This single page (p. 68) lists their beliefs and assumptions about Solution Focused. Despite their renowned status, the beliefs presented from the stance of “being” might be slightly new to readers. The distinction between philosophy and process (the doing) makes it easy to understand the Solution Focused Approach, however, practicing might be more challenging. The book also refers to a website ([www.team-talk.usolvit.com](http://www.team-talk.usolvit.com)) where you can find more material and inspiration.

Towards the end of the book, the authors present and discuss turning the Solution Wheel, a four part conversation about teamwork. At this point, I began to think “Oh well, there is nothing new under the sun, and this is what I’m already doing”. Not to say that I’m an expert, I’m not, but it became clear to me that this book was just another way of presenting the process of solution focused conversations.

The purpose of this isn’t to introduce ground-breaking solution focused ideas. Instead, it provides basic techniques and skills from a fun and light perspective. I think the book will be useful for both newcomers to understand, learn, and master the Solution Focused approach. For more experienced practitioners, the authors’ innovative presentation can inspire their training and teaching. I definitely see the potential for this book. The authors state that: “This illustrated playbook we have created will help you understand and apply the most important Solution Focused skills.” (Burgstaller & Iveson, 2019, p.3), I couldn’t agree more. This is a playbook of how to understand and apply Solution Focused Skills.



Personally, I was pleased to find skills like The Miracle Question, The Experimental Task, and The Break. These skills sometime seem to belong to the “classic” manner of doing Solution Focused work. By incorporating all the skills, (i.e. new, current, and past) this short book is a significant contribution to the Solution Focused Approach include variations of practice. For that, I am grateful to the authors.

**The reviewer**

Anne-Marie Wulf is a family therapist & founder of Danish Solution Focused Institute, Copenhagen.

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