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Book Review - Solution Building in Couple Therapy

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Solution Building in Couple Therapy

Elliott Connie
(2012). Springer Publishing, New York.

Reviewed by Don Coles

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In this elegant volume, Elliott Connie has combined the very personal story of his journey with couples, and couple therapy, with a concise description of the elements, ideas and skills of Solution-Focused process. The result is a refreshing voyage of discovery, dotted with anecdotes of his various encounters with people in the therapy room, his reflections on learnings along the way as he strives to keep true to the essence of the method (especially avoiding paths the model does not go down) and allowing the power of the process to do its work. So, this book is a testimony as much as a guidebook. His interest, passion and love of the work is clear through his writing.

There's a very nice story at the start about his "accidental" entre to this work — his first referral at his very first job as a therapist, where he was hoping to start his work with some sort of child and family situation, was for a couple. He did not feel at all confident to start off with this sort of client, and tried unsuccessfully to have someone else see them — but they wanted a male worker, and he was the only male in the agency, so he was booked in work with them. The session was not going well, there had been serious trouble brewing between this couple — feeling he was losing control of the session and not knowing what to say or do, Elliott asks, "So how did you two meet?". Somehow this produced a dramatic shift, significantly altering the tone of the session as they appeared to "become a different couple", opening up a positive and different context in which questions around their hopes for the session were able to be asked and explored. From that early experience of

being able to be helpful to a couple in serious difficulty, Elliott was effectively hooked on couple work, and this book is a result of that journey.

This book is a description, not an explanation. The various fundamental steps and processes of the Solution-Focused model are well described, organised into a few main chapters (i.e. establishing a destination; connecting with the couple; reviewing a couples' past successes; envisioning the preferred future; breaks, feedback, suggestions; follow up sessions) with a very useful concluding chapter titled "The questions" — in fact this brief 5 pages chapter would make a great generic Solution-Focused Therapy handout in itself. How these various ideas shape the therapist/client interaction are then demonstrated via transcripts of parts of sessions, some brief excerpts, and some more lengthy — the work with one particular couple is used as an extended example through the whole book, enabling us to see the process over time.

Elliot takes us inside the actual conversations, demonstrating the particular language structure of sessions, in a way that utilises and stays close to the language of the client. There is a useful discussion of the notion of using the words of the client's last answer to frame the next question, to keep the process as close as possible to the client's experience. I suppose this is a good communication technique generally, not something exclusive to Solution-Focused practice, but it certainly seems to be the case a Solution-Focused way of working assists, and is assisted by, this mode of communication. Similarly there is a very helpful description and discussion of the idea of "turn taking" in the 3 way therapist/couple conversation, and useful ways to think about this process.

I particularly appreciated the reminder in the book that a fundamental notion in the Solution-Focused model is that finding out first about the desired destination is crucial. Nothing (or maybe very little) can happen therapeutically until some notion of this for the clients, however small, vague, tentative, is understood by the therapist. Elliot has a wonderful illustration of this — he became lost walking in a foreign city, and hailed a taxi to get back. He didn't have the name of the hotel, and the cabbie, before setting off, asked some detailed questions about the appearance and location of the hotel. Only when the cabbie recognised Elliott's description, and was confident he knew the destination, did he then set off in the cab. So the journey was not commenced until there was some clarity of where they were going. Elliot makes the helpful point that this way of looking at the process of therapy may be more useful than the one of client "goals".

I was reminded of this recently in a process with a very challenging family I am working with in a home-visiting context, where a dad has been quite involved in various discussions about how he sees his family and what is

going on with his son — despite me asking a number of questions around what would tell him that things are getting better, it has taken until my 6th session for me to hear from this dad, in all the things he has said so far, something that is an articulated goal (destination) that he has for himself, that he would like to possibly like to work towards. Now, there may well have been ways to come to this sooner in the process of my work (although I actually doubt it), but thinking about the ideas in Elliott's book has helped me be patient with the process in working with this dad, and not try to do too much with him until I hear something from him that sounds like a destination he wants to get to — now that I've heard something like this, I feel I can now actually start to work with him therapeutically.

One of the great things about this book is the sense that Elliott trusts his clients and trusts the process — he is active, deliberate and rigorous in steering the therapy via the Solution-Focused roadmap, in a way that leaves the couple to fill in the important life details about what they want, what this looks like, what would be evidence of this, and how would they know this was happening etc. So it's a dance where the therapist plays his part and the clients play their part — Elliott captures well the wisdom of targeted questioning and curiosity and the patience of waiting for the details to emerge, and having faith and trust in the process.

Although the style and purpose of the book is to be brief (at 115 pages), there were a couple of things I would have liked to have heard more about. In some of the case examples, Elliott alludes to some of the very difficult and stressful problems that couples come with. The spirit of Solution-Focused practice is for people to leave these behind, not dig them up, so it fits that a book like this would not focus too much on this. However, I would have liked a bit more discussion, maybe even just a small chapter, on some of the different common types of difficulties that couples come with, and any thoughts Elliott has on particular considerations with these (accepting that the Solution-Focused process is not determined by the shape or nature of the problem). Some of these may be domestic violence, drug and alcohol issues, family of origin issues, mental health problems, in-laws related problems, affairs (this is mentioned a few times in the case examples) — does he have some different senses of what needs to be kept in mind in using the Solution-Focused method in these situations?

Also I feel the book would be enhanced by a little wider referencing and acknowledgement of some of the ideas that have been developed and used in other models or traditions of therapy. For example, the very useful idea of the therapist being a “curious observer ... helping the couple uncover even the smallest details” (p. 57) reminded me of the distinguished history of the

power of curiosity as a therapeutic stance in Post-Milan systemic work. The relational notion of using “third person questions to bring the absent partner into the conversation” (p. 99) has also been used widely in the systemic model (see, for instance, Brown, 1997). Similarly, the discussion about the power of the “How did you two meet?” question is very helpful, but there is no reference or acknowledgment that this is not actually a new idea in couples work. For example Solomon (2010, p. 360) describes the question, “Tell me more about you as a couple. How did you meet?”, and explains that this “invites a couple to revive moments of positive feelings in their relationship”. I acknowledge that in a slim volume such as this there is a practical limit on how much can be referenced, and for what purpose, but I feel this would help to place it in some sort of wider historical context, apart from the brief therapy and Solution-Focused historical influences that are mentioned. This also may be helpful for readers who are already familiar with some of these other modalities, to assist them not only to discern in this book the distinctiveness of Solution-Focused work, but also to see that some of the connections to other traditions are recognised and valued.

To me this book is a great example of the importance, for us as therapists, of finding enjoyment and interest in what we do, whatever the particular area of clinical practice. A few times while reading his book I had the urge, inspired by Elliott’s love of what he is doing, to just try and find more opportunities to work with couples, which I do get in my current role from time to time. Maybe this is fine to do (and no doubt this book will be very helpful when I do that), but maybe that is missing the wider point — that our challenge is to find this passion and interest in whatever therapeutic opportunity sits in front of us, with our very next client, of whatever sort they are or whatever service we may be offering. Certainly this book is a reminder of how a commitment to a Solution-Focused process, if one understand this and practices it well, can help build and maintain that passion and interest.

Thanks Elliott, it’s a great contribution to our body of knowledge of Solution-Focused practice, with couples but also more generally.

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The reviewer

Don Coles is a Social Worker and Family Therapist with the Cerebral Palsy Alliance in Sydney, providing family support, counselling and intervention to families with children and teenagers with disabilities, and supporting and mentoring other staff with this. The pressures of having a child with a disability often exacerbates any strains within the couple's relationship, so Don has done more than his share of couple therapy. Don enjoys surfing, cycling, playing guitar, coffee with friends, reading (Cormac McCarthy at the moment), live music, belonging to a church community, watching rugby and spending time with his family.

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