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## Book Review - Solution-Focused Supervision

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## **Solution-Focused Supervision**

Frank N. Thomas

2013. New York: Springer Science+Business Media.

Hard/softcover. \$US79.95 Available as ebook for \$US59.99.

### **Review by John Wheeler**

Independent Solution-Focused practitioner, trainer & supervisor

Once, I thought I might write a book on Solution-Focused Supervision. I am very pleased that Frank Thomas beat me to it. In this review I will set the scene, reflecting on what I have noticed about Solution-Focused Supervision and what I have noticed about Frank through my various connections to him

and his work over the years. I will then offer a perspective on the contents and my thoughts on who might benefit from reading this book.

Although I had first come across SFBT in 1991 and witnessed a remarkable impact on my work with families, parents and young people, a number of years were to elapse before it occurred to me that this way of thinking about people and change, and these conversational tools, might also be useful in supervision. As I reflected in a chapter Frank Thomas asked me to write for *The Handbook of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* (Wheeler, 2007), this delay was not unique to me. There was a seven-year gap between the first publications on Solution-Focused Therapy and the first on Solution-Focused supervision! I then went on to deliver training in Solution-Focused supervision to a wide variety of managers and supervisors, including social work managers, health professionals and clinical psychologists, an experience which exposed me to many “what-if” questions. “What if you have a supervisee who just doesn’t get it?”, “What if you have a trainee who is not producing enough evidence to pass the course?”, “What if you have a member of staff who should be sacked?” I currently supervise a variety of practitioners including family therapists, family intervention workers, school counsellors, adult counsellors and managers, individually and in groups. I remain fascinated by the contribution that Solution-Focused thinking and Solution-Focused questions can make to supervision conversations. Thanks to the questions that have been asked in training, I hope that I am also alert to the various stakeholders who can be effected by supervision conversations — supervisees, the people they work with, the people they work for, other services and so on.

I first encountered Thomas’ work at the EBTA conference in Dublin (Thomas and Shapee, 2001), through a presentation of research on practitioners’ experiences of supervision. Thomas’ research on supervision goes back a long way. In this workshop, I was also introduced to his “Mutual Admiration” paper (Thomas, 2000), in which he drew attention to the supervisor positions of Gatekeeper, Guru and Guide — distinctions which I have carried into many supervision sessions, training and my own subsequent writing about Solution-Focused supervision (for example, Wheeler, 2007). Thomas’ thinking and writing about Solution-Focused supervision also goes back a long way. Whilst others (for example Wetchler, 1990 and Marek et al, 1994) can take the credit for the first published papers on the transfer of Solution-Focused ideas and practice from therapy to supervision, credit goes to Frank Thomas for the first published chapter (Thomas, 1996).

When the Board of the European Brief Therapy Association planned the 2002 conference in Cardiff, they were keen to encourage a different format for workshops — collaborations between people from different countries,

preferably with people who had not previously worked together. Through the medium of the SFT List, I recruited a presentation team and constructed a workshop based on Frank interviewing me and Yvonne Greaves on our experience of Solution-Focused supervision with me as supervisor and Yvonne as supervisee. The remaining members of the presentation team, Roger Lowe and Gillian Fleckney, then reflected together on the interview (Wheeler et al, 2002). I would have been quite happy, and not surprised, if Frank had taken the lead in the workshop, but no — he preferred to be a member of the presentation team with me taking the lead. For me this said something striking about Frank's commitment to working in collaboration with others, his respect for and interest in other people's experience and his willingness to allow knowledge to emerge out of carefully constructed conversations. This was the first time I had been responsible for a workshop presentation team of five people where we had no idea what would be said!

Fast forward eight years. I was sitting in Frank's workshop on the consultation style of Insoo Kim Berg (Thomas, 2010). As archivist for the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Association, Thomas had studied numerous videos, 6 books, 18 published articles and book chapters and 30 unpublished manuscripts to unpack the wisdom Insoo Kim Berg had brought to her Solution-Focused supervision. Just as Steve de Shazer and others had studied a vast amount of information at the Brief Family Therapy Centre to distil Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, Thomas had committed a vast amount of time and effort to distil Insoo's contribution to Solution-Focused supervision.

Out of years of research, thinking, writing and study and with an interest and willingness to learn from others, has come a veritable magnum opus.

In 1996, Thomas had described Solution-Focused supervision as follows,

Solution-Focused supervision seeks to set up a cooperative, goal-oriented relationship that assumes that the therapist possesses strength, ability and resourcefulness to resolve a complaint and achieve training goals. It naturally follows that the supervisor is not the expert on the therapist's situation – the supervisor defines the goals, direction, and options with the therapist to construct a participatory experience through consensus and teamwork. (Thomas 1996, p. 131, emphasis in original).

In this text, Thomas revisits and expands on these assumptions, starting with a richly described presentation on the Solution-Focused stance in general and the application of this stance to supervision in particular. As a seasoned trainer, he draws well on his experience of sustaining the attention of others by dancing between ideas, anecdotes, examples and humour. Whilst Thomas'

earlier writing had focused mainly on Solution-Focused supervision, he has made good use of this opportunity to locate the Solution-Focused approach within a broader range of ideas, such as isomorphism and self-supervision. Thomas also takes a robust position on the ethical responsibilities of supervisors, addressing all the “what-if” concerns presented to me when I have introduced Solution-Focused supervision to others. Having acknowledged that not all who use the Solution-Focused approach would agree with his position on the contribution of systemic thinking to Solution-Focused work, Thomas provides a fascinating example of how multiple levels of context can inform and be informed by the supervision of one practitioner working with one service user. His ability to engage with other perspectives ensures that the text would not only be of interest to those who already know the Solution-Focused approach, but could also be of interest to supervisors who are more familiar with other perspectives.

Up to now, published accounts on Solution-Focused supervision have only provided a smattering of illustrations of how the tools from Solution-Focused practice can be of use in supervision. Here Thomas writes at much greater length, again alternating between explanation, description, and examples to show supervisors how they might use a future focus, exceptions, scaling, compliments and an additional tool of hedging. For those interested in documentation which has been tried and tested, he shares in the appendix a comprehensive goal-setting template and a weekly risk/goal chart.

The supervision thinking, wisdom and experience of Insoo Kim Berg take centre stage. Through his position as SFBTA archivist, Thomas shares a unique understanding of Insoo’s approach, noticing not only ideas and practices that would be familiar to those already engaged in Solution-Focused practice but also ideas and practices, such as hedging, which go beyond what Solution-Focused practitioners might usually do. As Thomas points out, whilst Insoo showed great faith in practitioners’ potential to practice well, she was also prepared to go outside of the practitioner’s own thinking when there were concerns that clients were not being served well enough. I particularly liked the way Thomas positioned two full transcripts of Insoo’s supervision as the fifth chapter, cleverly unpacking each transcript, referencing back to the thinking and practices described in the preceding chapters.

Following the example of De Jong and Berg (2012), Thomas includes an applications chapter in which he generously brings to his story of Solution-Focused supervision the voices of others, providing the reader with the opportunity to hear how the approach takes form in pastoral counselling, adversarial places, school settings, supervision of supervision, teams, the counselling of adolescents with addictions, practicum students, continuous supervision

in the workplace, college settings and family intervention services.

Finally, Thomas provides the reader with the state of play on research, sharing what has already been carried out whilst recognising how much more still needs to be done.

I can recommend this text to anyone interested in improving the effectiveness of their supervision by drawing on a Solution-Focused approach, both those who are already in clearly defined supervisor roles and those who through their management responsibilities find themselves mentoring other members of staff and monitoring the impact of their work on those who use the service.

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## The reviewer

John Wheeler is a freelance Solution-Focused practitioner, supervisor and trainer, a systemic psychotherapist and social worker. John first discovered

the potential for Solution-Focused supervision when supervising social work students on placement in a Child & Adolescent Mental Service in the UK. John currently supervises therapists, counsellors, coaches and managers, delivers training, works in private practice and works with families as an expert witness where abuse has been denied and future safe care might be possible.

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