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Book Review - Theory of Solution-Focused Practice: Version 2020

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BOOK REVIEW

Theory of Solution-Focused Practice: Version 2020

Peter Sundman, Matthias Schwab, Ferdinand Wolf, John Wheeler, Marie-Christine Cabié, Svea van der Hoorn, Rytis Pakrosnis, Kirsten Dierolf, Michael Hjerth

Review by Rayya Ghul

Academic Developer at the University of Edinburgh

This book is not a book. It looks like a book, but in reality, is an exploratory paper with some thoughtful and sometimes exciting ideas of what theory in solution-focused practice could look like, bound together with a collection of reflective responses to the paper. Once I realised what I was holding, it became easier to engage with it on subsequent readings where I was able to admire certain strategies the authors have taken towards theory development. The fact that it contains six excellent critically reflective reviews of the content means that I will not do that here as the best reason for reading this document is to join in that conversation yourself – and indeed there is an explicit invitation to everyone to do just that.

The authors' aim is to "present a coherent theory of solution-focused practice for those who wish to understand the rationale, together with a comprehensive description of solution-focused practice that can be used for training and developmental purposes" (p. 12). In this, it has fallen short of achieving either but that does not mean that it is not worth reading. Solution-focused practice has been notoriously difficult to define outside of a description of commonly-used techniques and speculations on why they work. That they do work is not in question anymore, but the 'why' and 'how' remain elusive.

The authors (who are all scholarly practitioners) have taken a discursive, collaborative approach to build a process theory from the ground up, testing it through discussion with the wider solution-focused community. Knowledge of the founders' thinking, most notably the relationship of solution-focused practice to spoken language within practitioner-client conversations is drawn upon, as would be expected. Here it casts a fresh perspective on meaning and purpose and particularly, on the reason why solution-focused practitioners pay such close attention to detailed descriptions of daily life. It is a shame that this was not expanded on more and in particular, on p30, the inclusion of opaque terms such as 'causal nexus', 'causal chains' and 'semantic relations' without any definition or elucidation would make the book less accessible to some readers. This was an example of a less successful aspect of the book, which was that the distillation of ideas was sometimes so great as to lose the richness of the argument (which I have no doubt exists). On the other hand, this distillation also produced some of the great quotes which I highlighted, such as:

> "Solution-focused practitioners do not think that there has to be an agreed upon and unified way of life and they value the diversity of the unique solutions by each client" (p36).
> "Empowerment is understood as inviting clients to become aware of their power and agency in taking control of the meaningful change they seek" (p37).
> "[Solution-focused practice is] a relationship of equals in which the practitioner takes the leading responsibility for setting in motion a constructive growth-oriented process and the client take leading responsibility for offering the content relevant to their desired change" (p48).

As might be expected, 'change' features in different ways throughout the text. It is used to help define the theory: "This theory is […] a theory of how change in the solution-focused practice happens and how it supports clients to implement those changes in their lives" (p22). This is unpacked in the second section, titled, 'Explanation: Why be solution focused?', which makes a reasonable case for the ethical underpinnings, but doesn't quite provide the full argument to answer the question posed and tends towards remaining descriptive rather than analytical.

The third section, which explores what makes practice solution-focused, avoids focus on recognized techniques (e.g. miracle question, exceptions) as defining factors, and presents something closer to a description of the orientation, stance and underlying ethics of a solution-focused practitioner and provides helpful illustrative examples. I think integrating this with the earlier chapters, or perhaps including illustrative examples that demonstrated theory in practice in the earlier chapters would also have improved the usefulness of the book.

The six critically reflective reviews also contain some very useful ideas for improvement, but their value lies more in the respectful and thoughtful way that they have both expanded upon and pointed to alternative ways to theorise about solution-focused practice. Initially, I wished that the authors had used more of their comments to improve the main document, but on reflection, I think that it adds to the sense of the book as an invitation to join in the development of theory.

If there were one thing which I would have wished to be different about this book, it would be that the authors had spent more time in thinking about the title. 'Theory of Solution-Focused Practice' implies a final, consensus view that will inform the reader of, well, the theory of solution-focused practice. Sadly, if the book were solely to be judged by the expectation inherent in the title, it has not succeeded. A better title might have been 'Towards a Theory of Solution-Focused Practice', 'Developing a Theory of Solution-Focused Practice' or 'Theory in Solution-Focused Practice – A Work in Progress'.

Why does this matter? In carrying out the review of this book, I spent considerable time thinking about what a book review in an academic journal is for; what is its purpose? By its nature an academic journal is the place where the knowledge within a discipline is reported, debated and honed through presentation of research and scholarship. This takes place through articles, counter-articles and articles which build on previous articles. In that sense it is a record of the ongoing discussions and debates within a discipline. There is recognition of the contested nature of knowledge and therefore, contingency.

An academic book, (any book whose title starts with 'Theory of …' is positioned as an academic book) on the other hand, is generally a synthesis of knowledge, usually carried out through a rigorous analysis of the available knowledge that is presented for the reader. Of course, a book can be whatever the authors wish it to be, but to put a book into the world is to take an action whereby they will be judged within the context of 'book' and in that context, titles matter. They matter because a 'language game' of book titles exists and that inevitably will colour the reader's expectations (and subsequent valuing) of the book. A review of an academic book is therefore one which should inform the reader of whether and why they should buy that book in the context of the purpose of an academic book.

Overall, I think this book is a useful addition for existing practitioners of solution focus and the authors are to be applauded for their tenacity in working together to start what are important conversations for the maturation of solution-focused practice. However, I am less sure that it would be a good way for solution focus to be presented to external audiences or to novices, such as students – at least not without an experienced interpreter. And that, in the end, is what is disappointing about the book with the title 'Theory of Solution-Focused Practice'.

The reviewer

Rayya Ghul works at the University of Edinburgh where she is an academic developer, using solution focus to enhance personal tutoring and PhD supervision. She also teaches solution-focused conversation to student peer supporters. Originally a mental health occupational therapist, Rayya is the author of The Power of the Next Small Step, a solution-focused self-help book.

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