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*ARTICLE***Solution-Focused Zone of Proximal Development: A Vygotskyan Contribution to Solution-Focused Therapy**

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**Abstract**

This theoretical paper explores the possibility of combining principles of solution-focused therapy with theories of learning and development by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose thinking led to the development of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. The similarities and complementarities between these traditions merit attention. Further, SFT has been characterized as an eclectic and constantly evolving approach, the theoretical and philosophical foundations of which are somewhat scattered. Hence, the article attempts to redefine the philosophical and theoretical location of SFT through a “Vygotskyan and CHAT-informed” lens. Since the emphasis in SFT seems to be on the identification and detailed description of the client’s skills, the author offers a new view of SFT as a pragmatic version of social constructionism. Based on Vygotsky’s concepts of ‘cultural mediation and ‘the zone of proximal development’, the author proposes a new concept, namely solution-focused zone of proximal development. The concept highlights learning-in-SFT as an optimally designed non-individualistic and expansive process, leading to empowered independence and creativity.

*Keywords:* solution-focused therapy, solution-focused practice, learning, Lev Vygotsky, socio- cultural theory, cultural-historical activity theory, the zone of proximal development, cultural mediation, pragmatism

**Introduction**

This exploratory theoretical paper explores the possibility of combining principles of solution-focused (brief) therapy (SFT and SFBT)<sup>1</sup> (e.g. De Jong & Berg 2018; Furman, 1994; Furman & Ahola, 2012) with theories of learning and development by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose thinking led to the development of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)<sup>2</sup> (Cole, 1997; Engeström, 1987; Freeman, 2007, 2015; Leontjev, 1978; Stetsenko, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). As a scholar and practitioner of CHAT and Solution Focused Brief Therapy, I have found similarities and complementarities between the two traditions. It is, however, an under-researched topic and merits further attention.

SFT has been characterized as an eclectic and constantly evolving approach (Furman, 1994; De Jong & Berg, 2008), the theoretical and philosophical foundations of which are somewhat scattered. Philosophically, SFT has been linked to ‘social constructivism’ (see Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Caputo, 1997; Foucault, 1977; Gergen, 1985), which itself is a fuzzy umbrella term for a field of study that draws on a variety of disciplines (see also Miettinen, 2000). On a generic level, social constructivism is interested in language as a medium for social change. While intentional language use is at the core of SFT, it is, however, much more than this. Hence, the aim of this paper, which is to re-examine SFT’s philosophical and theoretical location through a “Vygotskyan and CHAT -informed” lens.

Enhancing the client’s ability to make informed decisions and take action in the face of unexpected challenges via minimal intervention is the primary objective of SFT (Furman & Ahola, 2012; Berg & Miller, 1992; De Jong & Berg, 2018). The SF approach has been characterized as future- oriented, outcome-oriented, client-centered, exception-and progress-focused, co-operative, creative, playful, humorous, eclectic, pathology-avoiding, positive feedback-centered,

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth SBT (including SFBT).

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth CHAT.

and merit-centered (Furman, 1994). In essence, the aim of the SFB practitioner is to find useful change in the ways in which the client presents their wishes.

In a similar fashion, Vygotsky and his followers (e.g. Engeström, 1987; Leontjev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978) adhere to the idea that people are capable of change, given the appropriate cultural tools and social support. Further, CHAT practitioners avoid pathologizing psychological phenomena; instead, they prefer minimal intervention by the helper and see higher mental functions as grounded in concrete goal- and future-oriented action and collaborative activity (e.g. Cole, 1997; Engeström, 1987; Leontjev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978, 1982). These fundamental commonalities between SFT and CHAT enable a deeper look at some of the basic assumptions and tools of SFT.

The SF therapist uses open-ended questions<sup>3</sup> to direct attention to the client's unique skills and qualities, past successes, concrete actions, future hopes, and social networks (De Jong & Berg, 2018). The therapist approaches the client from a stance of 'not knowing' (De Jong & Berg, 2018, 30-58) and utilizes the client's vocabulary when formulating questions (De Jong & Berg, 2018, p. 31). Hence, the client feels respected, and is more willing to collaborate (De Jong & Berg, 2018, pp. 349-350).

In addition, future and goal-oriented questions are used in an affirmative fashion, hence making it easier for the client to vision a way forward. Once clients understand that they play an active role in transcending life's challenges, they are more likely to succeed in finding new, potential solutions to test and evaluate. (Berg & Miller, 1992; De Jong & Berg, 2018). The therapist steers clients to see how they could utilize their qualities and abilities by concentrating on their own unique skills. As clients come to the realization that they already have some tools at their disposal, they feel empowered and more ready to further develop their skillset.

Since the emphasis in SFT seems to be on the identification and detailed description of the *client's skills*, it seems justifiable to examine SFT from the viewpoint of Vygotsky's well-established theories on learning and development (see also Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978, 1982). This article has a two-fold agenda. The first research question is philosophical in nature: *Where can SFT be located philosophically, given that client skills and change are a central linguistic topic in therapy sessions? The second research question is more theoretical and conceptual: How does SFT appear through the lens of CHAT, or more specifically, through Vygotsky's concepts of 'cultural mediation' and 'zone of proximal development'?*

I start with a philosophical discussion of SFT and social constructionism, and offer an alternative viewpoint, informed by CHAT and pragmatism. I then introduce the concept of 'cultural mediation' (Vygotsky, 1978), which is the core concept of CHAT. After this, I examine SFT through the concept of the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, I offer a new concept, namely *solution-focused zone of proximal development*, to better understand the core intention of SFT. I conclude by discussing the implications of these new ideas for SFT.

### Towards a Pragmatic Version of Social Constructivism

De Jong & Berg (2018, pp. 349-350) locate SFT in the arena of social constructivism. On a very general level, social constructivism focuses on the role of language in the emergence of socially-mediated and situated realities (cf. Berger & Luckman, 1967; Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 1982; Gergen & Davis, 1985; Mills 1940). The individual is seen as an active participant and learner in society (cf. Berger & Luckman, 1967; Heiskala, 1994; Hirvihuhta & Litovaara, 2003; Miettinen, 2000). Reality is constructed through reciprocal meaning-making (De Jong & Berg 2018, p. 350). Because meaning-making is tied to the individual's experiential history, the act of understanding the other is always a process of negotiation. Hence, identity itself seems to be negotiable, a result of dialogue.

SFT has also been linked to Derrida's 'radical constructivism' (see Pihlaja & Pihlaja, 2020). Derrida's concept of 'deconstruction' points to the method of making rendering power relations, different points of view and societal conflicts (Caputo, 1997; Derrida, 1995). It is a critical method of reading, in which text is not merely text: text contains contradictions (Rolfe, 2004). Authority is in a sense put 'out of joint' (Derrida, 1995). Deconstruction is thus the enemy of the authoritarian text (Rolfe, 2004, p. 276). I would interpret the SF therapist's attitude of 'not-knowing', that is, not assuming too much about the client beforehand, not only as an act of valuing the client and forming the basis for

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<sup>3</sup> Open-ended questions are also used in qualitative research for gathering authentic research material.

collaborative non-pathologizing therapy (De Jong & Berg, 2018, pp. 30-58) but also as a strategic “Derridean” attempt to deconstruct therapist dominance.

Although SFT is based on the idea of democracy (De Jong & Berg, 2018, p. 350), it is not totally power-free. Language can be used as a strategic tool for exerting power (Freeman, 2011, p. 157)<sup>4</sup>. Since language creates reality for both therapist and client, it is extremely important that SFT practitioners stay alert in choosing their words. What is said, as much as what is not said, has an impact on the client. In the end, however, it is the therapist who steers the direction of the conversation.

Since one cannot escape language-as-power, the next best thing is to be aware of the fact. Some questions are more uplifting and agency-enhancing than others. SFT questions have clearly been designed with the intention of enhancing client self-efficacy. However, the therapist needs to be sensitive with regards to what, when and how questions are put to the client. Timing is crucial, as timing is power.

‘Social constructivism’ is an umbrella concept for a variety of different approaches (Miettinen, 2000). The wider the arena of social constructivism becomes, the fuzzier the concept. As Miettinen (2000) reminds us, it is important to ask what is being constructed when we talk about social constructivism. Are we constructing (a) the individual’s knowledge and conceptual thinking, (b) a co-interpretation of something in a dialogue (c) a rule or institution, that individuals follow, or (d) an artifact or system of artifacts, for example, a house, a microscope, a computer program or a collection of poems (Miettinen, 2000, p. 276) (present author’s translation).

I would argue that all four of the above-mentioned modes of knowledge construction are present in an SFT session. What is uttered through words reflects larger societal discourses, concerns, and changes. The economic, social and political are reflected in the client’s personal narrative, irrespective of the reason for entering therapy. The client’s identities, interaction histories, value and belief systems, knowledge, and skills, are all intertwined. Hence, the therapeutic encounter is not just ad-hoc interaction. It is a conscious effort, on part of the therapist, to influence client well-being on the conceptual and concrete level.

Meanings are not constructed out of thin air, as the term ‘social constructionism’ might imply if used lightly. Meanings are always constructed in relation to an object of activity (e.g., Stetsenko, 2005), in the present context to the motives and goals set by the client in therapy. Thus, motivation is not a static or abstract phenomenon, nor is it solely innate or universal, but depends on what people concretely do, how they engage with the objects and people in their lives (Freeman, 2007, p. 6).

Knowledge construction in therapy is a multidimensional and systemic activity. It is unsurprising that SFT and ‘systems theory’ have been seen as connected (e.g., Pihlaja & Pihlaja, 2020). While systems theory was originally developed in the field of cybernetics, it is nowadays used as a generalized approach in explaining the interrelated and interdependent nature of the parts of any given phenomenon (see Skyttner, 1996, p. 16.). However, as I see it, a more scientifically closer systems theoretical approach to SFT would be CHAT, as its roots in cultural psychology and developmental psychology bring it closer to the world of therapy (see Cole, 1997 Engeström, 1987, 2004; Leontjev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978).

When clients enter therapy, they bring their communities with them. The systemic nature of human activity (Engeström, 1987; 2004)<sup>5</sup> can be seen when individuals move in and through their social networks. When one’s activities are running smoothly, one is not conscious of one’s network of communities. It is only when an individual’s goals clash with the goals of others who share that particular activity system, when the individual has to choose from among the contradictory goals of multiple activity systems or when someone leaves or joins the activity system, that their communities become visible. (see Freeman, 2007; 2011; 2015.) Hence, society is deeply reflected in the individual. There is a dialectical movement between history and the present, and between the individual and society (see Cole, 1997; Engeström, 1987).

SF therapists also bring their history into the session but make a conscious effort to keep it in the background. Further, the therapist relies on culturally and historically developing tools, rules, regulations, and divisions of labor in conducting SFT. Therapy is a learning process in which therapist and client co-create new meanings, tools, and innovations. In essence, each SFT session is both the user and producer of culturally mediated artifacts. A therapist who has a systemic understanding of human activity acknowledges that therapeutic work cannot be isolated from the cultural-historical

<sup>4</sup> See also Billig et al., 1988; Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> See Engeström (1987, pp. 73-87) concept of ‘activity system’, based on the work of Vygotsky and Leontjev.

developments of global society or from one's knowledge and skill development networks. Therapy work is itself a historically evolving linguistic and material institution.

SFT highlights the practical value of knowledge, that is, how clients can utilize their skills in concrete daily activities (see De Jong & Berg, 2008; Furman & Ahola, 2012). As I understand it, the striving of SFT - via linguistic means - for a concrete outcome of therapy from the outset, indicates not only social constructivism but also on pragmatism. Miettinen (2006, p. 389) analyzes the relation between pragmatism and CHAT:

...For both of the theories [John Dewey's pragmatism and cultural-historical activity theory as epistemologies and theories of transformative material activity], the concept of activity, the prototype of which is work, constitutes a basis for understanding the nature of knowledge and reality. This concept also implies for both theories a methodological approach of studying human behavior in which social experimentation and intervention play a central role. They also suggest that reflection and thought, mediated by language and semiotic artifacts, serve the reorientation of activity and is vital in the development of new, alternative ways of action...

On this view, SFT seems more pragmatic and culturally mediated than 'radical constructivism'. While it is true that behavior and roles differ somewhat from one context to another, there is also something very concrete and tangible about the human mind. The world of artifacts is essentially psychology externalized. Just one glance at the immediate material and digital world demonstrates that one's surroundings are steeped in products of the creative human mind.

Vygotsky's (1978) version of social constructivism, in his study of the socially originating human mind, also includes the world of cultural artifacts and material objects: "Psychological processes need to be conceptualized as object-related actions out in the world, making a difference in the world and participating in its construction and development" (Stetsenko, 2005, p. 82).

Philosophically speaking, I suggest that SFT be understood as a *pragmatic version of social constructivism*. Since SFT aims at anchoring the client's speech in concrete activity, I see Vygotsky and CHAT as complementing the SFT framework. In the next section, I introduce Vygotsky's concept of 'cultural mediation'.

### **'Cultural Mediation' as a Systemic Concept**

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of 'cultural mediation' bypasses the behaviorist S-R model and the subject-idealism of introspection psychology (Leiman, 1992, p. 210). Likewise, Miettinen (2006, p. 389) notes that the idea of a culturally mediated act transcends the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy. Vygotsky was a courageous trailblazer, who adopted a critical stance towards psychological pathologizing and causal explanations (e.g., Cole, 1997). The avoidance of unnecessary pathologizing, determinism and blaming are also key principle of SFT (Ahola & Furman, 2016, p. 19).

The insightful idea of 'cultural mediation' points to the personal sense of social activity. It directs attention to all the linguistic and material tools that are acquired through socialization. According to Vygotsky, the most important process in the development of a child's psychology is the internalization of the culture in which the child is embedded. All cultural products created by people in their specific cultures are artifacts. And it is through all the things we use, from simple objects such as a spoon, pen, or table, to more complex things like language, traditions, beliefs, and art and science that culture influences development (Cole, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky offers an example of this insight by showing how the movement of a child's hand towards an object becomes a sign. The meaning of the hand movement changes when the child's mother or caretaker arrives to witness the behavior. It becomes a socially oriented act. The adult understands that the child desires the object and gives it to the child. It is only later that the child forms a link between pointing and social activity, and the motion becomes "the act of pointing". Hence, the act of pointing is also an act of pointing to a social relation (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56).

It is therefore impossible to distinguish psychological development from the unique cultural and social situation of the individual. Consciousness is created in linguistic encounters with people, things, nature, and the whole universe. As Leiman (2011) notes, it is this sense that word meaning, as a unit of psychological activity, binds the intra-psychic and the interpersonal. For Vygotsky, 'word' is a microcosm of human consciousness (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 256) and 'sign' symbolizes togetherness (Leiman, 1992, p. 216). Further, language does not precede action but vice-versa: action came first, and word developed from it (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 153).

People create their private emotions and thoughts in the semiosphere, through context-specific actions (Valsiner, 2006, p. 9). It is through language and the use of cultural tools that we communicate with ourselves and others. Internal

speech is a psychological tool oriented to the private mode of the self. It is used to internalize what is happening in the world. Externalized speech is used to make internal thoughts visible, and to exert influence on the thinking of others and the world of objects. (Vygotsky, 1978.) The internalized social realities and the externalized internal realities exist in a dialogical relation. Psychological development, as explained by Vygotsky, comprises a continuous dialectical interplay among distinct, but interdependent, functions or processes of internalization and externalization (Lourenço, 2012, p. 283).

The cultural artifacts and tools we inherit are simultaneously material and conceptual. They are conceptual in the sense that their material properties have been influenced by their prior social history (Cole, 1997, p. 117) and that they express certain values and belief systems. By modifying old artifacts and creating new ones, we also create and modify our own and others' psychologies. In this way, important social capital is transferred and transformed from one generation to the next. New innovations emerge when "old" artifacts are assigned new meanings and use-purposes. (See Freeman, 2007; 2011; 2012; 2015). Through this lens, SFT can be viewed as an arena for co-creativity and innovation.

Socialization, personal re-orientation, and creative activity continue throughout life. The individual participates in many different social and professional communities and networks.<sup>6</sup> In these social formations, the individual experiences different motive contradictions that, when successfully resolved, lead to meaningful new career and retirement paths (see Freeman, 2007; 2015).

These ideas are in line with the thinking of Milton H. Erikson (Haley, 1997, p. 39) on how developmental crises are a natural part of life. How the individual goes about solving these dilemmas and social transitional phases is of key importance. As Furman & Ahola (2012) emphasize, it is crucial to pay attention to exceptions and progress in SFT. Concentrating on situations and circumstances where things are better - when the problem is absent - strengthen the client's perceived self-efficacy and achievement. When the therapeutic focus is on healthy behavioral patterns, resources and skills, problems can be solved without consciously dwelling on unwanted behavior. (see Berg & Miller, 1992; De Jong & Berg, 2008; Furman & Ahola, 2012.)

Hence, SFT's skill-focused questions, combined with Vygotsky's thoughts on learning and development, offers the therapist an uplifting way to aid the client combat life's socially and culturally mediated challenges.

### The Zone of Proximal Development and SFT

The zone of proximal development (ZDP) is based on the idea of culturally mediated human development, as described earlier. The concept of ZDP emerged from Vygotsky's observations on learning and development in the schooling context. He made a distinction between good and bad learning. Bad learning refers to transferring predetermined information and knowledge into the "heads" of individuals. Good learning, on the other hand, results in something that is unpredictable and new, something that did not previously exist. (Engeström, 2004, p. 19).

Although development does not often happen in the individual's comfort zone, overly difficult goals and future scenarios can be paralyzing. What is needed is an optimal zone of development, or as, Vygotsky defines it, a zone of proximal development:

...it [the zone of proximal development] is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

In other words, the ZDP is the distance between what individuals can achieve independently, and what they can do with a little help. The word 'proximal' means that the assistance given only slightly exceeds the learners' current level of skills, thereby complementing and building on their existing capabilities (Cole & Cole, 2001).

All this has important implications for SFT. The *therapist can be considered—momentarily—a forerunner of the SFT approach*, and hence a "more capable peer" with regard to the principles of SFT. The SF therapist is trained to ask open-ended questions that enable the client to act as expert. The test for therapists is their ability to activate and support the clients' independent problem-solving and the development of their life skills and self-efficacy. When faced with traumas and challenges, clients may temporarily "forget" what they know and can do. This is why it is important to map out the

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<sup>6</sup> Lave & Wenger (1991) use the term 'communities of practice'.

client's present skills via exceptions and progress-focused questions. It is equally important to invoke the client to think about the possibility of developing new skills. Essentially, it is new points of views that are created in the ZDP. While the therapist helps the client expand their *horizon of action*, it is up to the client to do the actual work.

In the field of education, ZDP has been operationalized through the notion of 'scaffolding'. The concept refers to activities where the teacher erects temporary supporting structures to help learners develop their understanding, conceptual thinking, and skills. As the learner acquires these new skills, the teacher withdraws support until the need arises for the learning of new skills. Later, the learner is able to transfer these new skills into new activity contexts (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, pp. 7-8).

SFT encourages and supports the client to examine the current situation, establish goals, and do things differently (Pihlaja & Pihlaja, 2020). Hence, with the assistance of a sensitive ZDP-informed SF therapist, the client produces a kind of "map" of their ZDP. This includes a representation of how to move from A to B with regard to the issue at hand: what old skills can be mobilized, what new skills need to be learned in order to make a change, and who to turn to for support. SFT questions that focus on past successes and future miracles, including the therapeutic rating scale and social network mapping, ideally energize the client to take charge of their own life. In between sessions, the client rehearses newly acquired skills, viewpoints, and behavioral patterns. Each therapy session allows the client to conceptualize and make visible new internalized perspectives and behavioral patterns. The cyclical therapy process ends once sufficient independence is reached. Thus, therapeutic support is only temporary. Once the client has achieved the new target the scaffolding is quickly dismantled. Together, client and therapist evaluate the success of the therapeutic process. If they decide to continue, the focus is on a new skill or viewpoint that requires the transitory support of the therapist.

The ZDP is a creative arena for externalizing the psyche and internalizing the social. In fact, externalizing and internalizing form a continuous dialogical relation (Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). In SFT, the term "externalization" refers to the tools that are used in detaching the problem from the person. Thus, externalization points to a specific technique used to minimize the emotional distress of the client. Detaching the problem from the client allows the objectivity needed to examine the challenge it presents. Some of these techniques includes using a white board, role play, and externalizing the problem into a creature that the client can feel comfortable with. (see Pihlaja & Pihlaja, 2020). However, theoretically speaking, the act of externalizing has already happened before the use of these externalizing techniques, precisely at the point when the client finds words for the problem. Hence, it might be conceptually more accurate to speak about *SFT distancing techniques*.

The therapist invites the client to externalize their thoughts through the use of SF questions. The therapeutic dialogue contributes to the possibility of an updated idea of self. Once the new view of "me" is internalized in the private sphere of the self, long-lasting behavioral changes are possible. And with them new kinds of social dynamics, and identities, new "we's". The outcome of therapy is the result of the mystery of collaboration.

The unpredictability of learning has been discussed in the field of education by Engeström (1987). His concept, 'expansive learning', is directly based on Vygotsky's ideas, among others. However, his systemic model of learning emphasizes the collective over the individual. The object of learning is not seen as a given or static phenomenon, but as something that evolves and expands with the learning process. This learning process advances as follows: (a) questioning the current practice, (b) analyzing the current practice, (c) modeling the new solution, (d) examining and testing the new model, (e) implementing the new model, and (f) consolidating, reflecting on, and generalizing the new model of activity. The cycle begins again when the current model encounters contradictions. (See Engeström, 2004, pp. 59-63).

SFT can be viewed as a ZDP-informed expansive learning process, in which the therapist and client negotiate and define the objectives of therapy with the help of specific SFT questions. For instance, the use of 'the miracle question', builds hope of a better tomorrow by helping to concretely envision this change. The client is asked to imagine a situation where the problem has miraculously disappeared, and to verbalize what is different, how it will be known that the problem no longer exists, who will know first, how will they know, and so on. (De Jong & Berg 2008, p. 88). Hence, the miracle question evokes new viewpoints, new behavior, and new social dynamics. To my mind, it accords well with Engeström's (1987; 2004) and Vygotsky's (1978) ideas of learning as a constantly expanding cyclical and systemic process, the outcome of which is an innovative eye-opener.

A therapist who relies on the Vygotskian idea of good learning understands that individual motivation is the result of positive and timely feedback. As De Jong & Berg (2008, pp. 116-139) note, positive feedback and merit are important

from the point of view of client empowerment. In my previous research, I have found that the desire for recognition<sup>7</sup> is an important social force motivating an individual to participate and contribute to collective activity (Freeman, 2007, 2015). Therapy is no exception: the client needs to be motivated to participate to make a difference.

However, positive feedback needs to be anchored in the individual's concrete linguistic actions and collective activities. Unmerited praise of the client does not lead to future independence. Conversely, once the scaffolding is removed it can lead to unrealistic objectives and learning paralysis. It is often the case that a person needs to transcend their old values and belief systems to genuinely learn something new. Hence, I would argue that expansive learning also requires the skillful toleration of change as well as the ability to constantly re-assess and realign one's objectives.

### **Solution-Focused Zone of Proximal Development (SFZPD) – Tentative Guidelines**

*Create the possibility for 'good learning' based on the ZDP.* A therapist who understands the meaning of 'good learning', recognizes that learning, personal growth, and creativity require that a person is not only aware of their current skill base, but is also willing to expand it, one small step at a time.

*Create the possibility for continuous reflection, re-definition, re-assessment, and realigning of life objectives.* The SF therapist should encourage and support independent SFT-informed thinking, including the ability to redefine personal traits, see things from new perspectives, reflect via distancing, and be vigilant and realistic with respect to setting objectives. Learning requires redefining the social. 'Perceived self-efficacy' (Bandura, 1977) could thus be viewed as the ability to see one's possibilities and seek to acquire the agency to realize them.

*Encourage the ability to face fears that may stand in the way of continuous learning and creative self-expression.* SFT is about collaboratively learning something that does not yet exist. This involves moving towards the unknown, a situation that can bring with it fears and emotional baggage. Although SFT doesn't emphasize focusing on the negative aspects of life, this does not mean that difficult emotions should be avoided or denied. Instead, they are handled in a more empowering way. By building an understanding of the client's current capabilities, the therapist builds a safe foundation on which to examine any fears that may inhibit good learning. In essence, the client moves from a state of "I can" to "I am learning, and I have the courage to attempt something totally new". This transition is of importance as it encourages the client to trust the learning process and master the unexpected. Hence 'perceived self-efficacy' (Bandura, 1977) can be also understood as the courage to do things differently and make peace with the unknown.

*Encourage the symbiosis-seeking client to experience the feeling of separateness and independence.* SFT in the ZDP is a useful approach for dealing with addictions, as it stimulates independence and healthy psychological separateness. It is often the case that people with an addiction search for solutions "outside" themselves, leading them to form unhealthy attachments to people, objects, and substances. However, SFT encourages finding solutions from within the self: from one's skills, one's resources – from things and people that boost and support the formation of a healthier life.

In my experience, people challenged by addictions may exhibit a tendency to form attachments to peer-support groups and see themselves as examples of psychopathological categories. Despite the good intentions of addiction programs, there is a danger in using expressions like "recovering from X or Z" or "Hi, my name is C, I am an X or Z". These phrases invite the person to consider their membership of their addiction group as lifelong. They are deterministic and deny the possibility of freedom. There is also a tendency for people with addiction histories to remain dependent on therapy or therapies. In turn, a therapist who has unresolved addictions may hold on to the client for too long.

On the basis on this theoretical synthesis, I would suggest adding the following to Furman's (1994) list of the characteristics of SFT: pragmatism, mindful language use, skill-centeredness, and working within the SFZTD to ensure Vygotskian 'good learning' and healthy independence.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The tentative new concept of a *solution-focused zone of primal development* (FSZDP) proposed in this paper highlights *learning-in-SFT as an optimally designed non-individualistic and expansive process, leading to empowered independence and creativity*. Moreover, it connects SFT to a strong socio-cultural and activity-theoretical tradition. Vygotsky's approach can

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<sup>7</sup> See Miettinen (2005) for a discussion of the concept of 'artifact-mediated desire for recognition'.



be seen as a forerunner of systemic thinking in the field of psychology. His work represents a form of social constructionism that includes material artifacts in the linguistic study of the creative human mind. I suggest that from a philosophical perspective, SFT can best be understood as a hybrid form of pragmatism and social constructionism or, in other words, a *pragmatic version of social constructionism*. Hence, the paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue related to the theoretical and philosophical foundations of solution-focused therapy.

The position taken in this paper is that understanding the human mind means studying individuals' activities, including their creative output and innovations (Freeman, 2007; 2015; Miettinen et al., 2008). My earlier studies on motivation (Freeman, 2007, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015) show clearly that a meaningful life is active and creative. This notion has important implications for the evaluation of SFT. What if, instead of using numerical self-assessment forms, we ask ex-clients about their daily creative linguistic and material actions? Might this not reveal more about their well-being than their fluctuating daily emotional states? Distinguishing between "creative and non-creative people and industries" distorts life. All fields and people are potentially creative. SFT, coupled with socio-cultural and activity theoretical thinking, has the potential to democratize creativity.

I will now quickly revisit the notion of 'self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) draws a distinction between 'perceived self-efficacy' and 'self-esteem': the former refers to individuals' subjective beliefs about their skills and abilities in relation to their set goals, while the latter refers to individuals' beliefs and evaluation of their worth. (Bandura, 1977, p. 309.) I would argue that perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem cannot be separated: the individual uses both psychological structures in forming an understanding of their possibilities. Moreover, mastering a new skill contributes to both perceived self-efficacy and self-worth.

A therapist who favors a SFZDP approach helps the client with minimal intervention. In this approach, the therapist supports and reinforces their clients' self-efficacy, self-worth and a healthy sense of independence via helping them identify and develop their skills and abilities. The idea underlying SF help is to ensure that the client's ZDP is realized in small, manageable steps. The helper, or therapist, aids the individual in creating a realistic, but hopeful motivational state. A good helper knows when to back off, give space, and eventually set free. The day the therapeutic relationship ends is a moment to celebrate. Berg & Miller (1992, p. 11), for example, recall a client saying: "You got me started and then you got the hell out of my way".

According to Leiman (2011, p. 441), psychotherapy takes place on the interface between the interpersonal and intrapsychic: between what is shared with others and what is constructed in the private sphere. This leads to questions of honesty and trust. A person can lie to others and the self, but the body rarely lies. I therefore consider it important, through increasing somatic awareness, to take the client's bodily expressions and sensations into account. As Burkitt (1999, p. 14) puts it, we are 'thinking bodies. The tools that we use, on the other hand, are extensions of our bodies (Shotter, 1975, p. 58). For example, when constructing an appropriate SFZDP, it is important to be sensitive to the client's energetic and non-linguistic cues. It is often the case that an individual's body language will indicate whether the goals being set are realistic. It is also important that the therapist's SF appraisal is genuine, as it impacts the achievement of set goals.

SFT is a form of therapy that centers around clients' ability to find and develop the resources and skills they need to make informed decisions about their lives. As Shotter (1975) points out when discussing the "dangers of psychology" in his classic book "Images of Man in Psychological Research", psychology should study how we take responsibility for our behavior instead of searching for "laws the govern behavior" (Shotter, 1975, pp. 60-61). The ZDP-informed SF therapist creates a safe and optimal space that encourages learning, change, creativity, and the expression of agency. Further, the therapist helps clients to accept themselves as part of a historical and cultural continuum. A good teacher does the same. In this sense, therapy work and teaching resemble one another: the teacher aims at helping the student to become an independent learner, while the *SF therapist aims at helping the client to become an independent user of SF thinking*.

I now return to the principle of 'not knowing' in SFT (De Jong & Berg, 2008, pp. 30-58). The idea that the therapist abstains from making any assumptions about the client or the client's challenges beforehand is an important attitudinal tool. It is the basis both of supportive collaboration and fresh new redefinitions. Not knowing leaves more room for the client to be the expert.

How then, is it possible for the therapist to not know, while at the same time possessing a large body of knowledge and a wide range of skills and abilities? How does the therapist reach a state of not knowing? In my experience, this can be done by knowing oneself: practicing a meditative state of being-in-the-world, where fleeting but precious ego-free moments can be experienced. Hence, not knowing could be viewed as a *conscious meditative state*.

Indeed, the SFT principle of ‘not knowing’ opens up interesting questions for future research in relation to the concept of ‘consciousness’. We often deal with fluctuating states of the mind as we move about in our daily activities. Could the meditative state of not knowing be viewed as a distinct ‘state of mind’ or ‘mode of being’? Or would it perhaps be seen as a category of action; ‘pure action’ or ‘acting without acting’? What might Eastern Yogic and Buddhist philosophers have to say about SFT’s pragmatic social constructivist notion of not knowing? I would think the interplay between action and non-action would certainly be a topic of interest.

Finally, I suggest *expanding the notion of ‘not knowing’ to also reflect the outcome of therapy*: the creation of something new and unanticipated. A skilled SF therapist is humble and understands that every interaction is a unique historical and social opportunity for learning, creativity, and innovation.

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