

7-2021

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy with Families

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Recommended Citation

Schwab, Matthias (2021) "Solution-Focused Brief Therapy with Families," *Journal of Solution Focused Practices*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/journalsfp/vol5/iss1/14>

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BOOK REVIEW**Solution-Focused Brief Therapy with Families**

Thorana S. Nelson

Routledge, 2019, 215 pages, ISBN 978-1138541160 367187620

Review by Matthias Schwab

Psychologist & Conceptual Artist

In 1919 the later surrealist Max Ernst created a painting like construction which he called, what might be the motto for Thorana Nelsons book: *Fruit of a Long Experience*.

However, Max Ernst was at the very beginning of his artistic journey when he put together those small, partly painted pieces of wood. Things that might be rubbish or miscellaneous in a craftsman's workshop. Screws and glue hold together, what might be a periscope in a landscape or a vessel on a journey with unclear destination. There is also maybe a broken metal switch and some wire next to the poles of "plus" and "minus" and in the background imaginary zodiacs are created by means of a driller and pencil lines. All this is created in a dada-spirit to deconstruct the de facto given systems of making art at the beginning of the last century. His assembly of wooden leftovers of daily life looks simple to be made, but given the context of his time, was not that easy to come up with.

If one is familiar with the practice and development of the solution-focused approach, one can easily figure out, why this work of an artist comes to my mind. Many solution-focused practitioners have experience in putting together small things of daily life in a simple way and deconstructing former necessities in the art of doing therapy.

One hundred years later – having been a professor of family therapy at Utah State University and a founding member of the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Association in America – Thorana Nelson shares the fruits of her experience with us. These fruits grew in different, although connected gardens. Looking at the Appendix of her book – created together with her students – we find a condensed description of thirteen (!) different gardens of therapeutic models of how to help families to grow and live together in a healthy way. Assumptions, concepts, goals of therapy, assessment and interventions, the role and self of the therapist of very different approaches are described in what Frank Thomas (in his foreword) calls a "gold mine for anyone wanting a concentrated yet profound overview of most major marriage and family therapy models". The entry gates to these gardens carry names like: Structural Family Therapy, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, Cognitive-Behavioural Family Therapy, Contextual Family Therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy, to name just a few.

The journey of the book takes us from systemic thinking to solution-focused brief therapy and back again. In purposeful iterations the circular relations of how to look at families and what to do with them in order to support (first and second order) change, the book not only introduces the fundamental concepts and assumptions of systemic thinking and solution-focused practice, but also shows how they were historically connected and disconnected and how they can be reconnected and integrated. Illustrated with fruits of her rich practice, the book on the one hand introduces readers to the revolutionary deconstructions of therapeutic beliefs that was developed with the solution-focused approach and its simple way of re-assembling what we hear of our clients' daily lives. Something, that – given the context of our time – is still not easy to do.

On the other hand the book also demonstrates how the art of being helpful to others is not limited to one way of thinking and how solution-focused practices can be integrated in other models and in a way vice versa. Thus, solution-focused minimalists might think there are a lot of ideas in this book, that we could do away with. However, they might be reminded that conversations with others are most valuable if you stay close to the language of the person with whom you talk. Here the book is a rare and valuable example of encouraging a fruitful dialogue amongst the therapeutic gardeners, who are all-too-often to be found hiding behind their fences, defending their models or holding them to be superior to other ways of caring for growth.

In a nutshell, if someone shares the fruit of a long experience, there is a lot to be learned.

The reviewer

Matthias Schwab is a psychologist and conceptual artist. SF therapist, coach, trainer and supervisor in private practice in Germany. He is co-creating “social sculptures” in working within the Free International University and the Solution-Focused Collective.

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