

5 Myth about the solution focused approach

As a trainer and supervisor I often meet practitioners stating they're working from a solution-focused approach (SF) because they need to solve problems for and with clients, - they need to make some agreements with the client on how to change and what to change. Thus I over the years have experienced the solution-focused approach (SF) has been challenged by its own name. One of the reasons might be, that nobody will argue they're working towards problems and therefore it is implicit, that all professionals (in the social field) work towards... solutions. This stance challenges the unique elements and the particular paradigm, that the solution-focused approach is based upon with *the questions* and *the collaboration* with the client towards *constructing the changes* the client wants for his life, *his preferred future*. Therefore I find it necessary to deal with some of the myths and preunderstandings I have met.

The solution-focused approach is about solving problems.

No, Steve de Shazer wrote about it in "Clues – investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy" and BRIEF repeated it - there is not necessarily a connection between a problem and its solution. Steve wrote: *...In fact solutions has been looked at so rarely that solutions has become the hidden half of the "problem/solution" distinction. This has led to a muddle because the distinction marker or the slash has become a barrier and the distinction itself has become a dichotomy (p6)*. This means that we do not need to know the problem in order to collaborate with the client on his preferred future, best hope or the life he desire. It is a traditional understanding, that in order to solve a problem, we need to know the causes and when we do that, we can "overcome" the problem. But this way of problem-solving refers to a scientific, medical, psychological thinking, and the solution-focused approach derives from a paradigm that contrasts with these traditional thoughts.

Positive psychology and SF are almost the same, they fit.

No, not at all. The following from wikipedia defines positive psychology (PP) and the focus on the positive parts of human development and functional levels, feelings and relationships, and has a theoretical standpoint on the shoulders of humanistics psychologists as Maslow, Rogers and others. Positive psychology takes a different perspective than traditional psychology, but it is in the same theoretical framework, the same paradigm.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi define positive psychology as:

... the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life.

Christopher Peterson defines positive psychology as:

...the scientific study of what makes life most worth living

According to Seligman and Peterson, positive psychology is concerned with three issues: positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions. Positive emotions are concerned with being content with one's past, being happy in the present and having hope for the future. Positive individual traits focus on one's strengths and virtues. Finally, positive institutions are based on strengths to better a community of people.¹

Steve de Shazer described the solution-focused approach with ideas from among others post-structuralist, linguistic, social constructionist, and stated that clients develop and change within their relationships, being together with other people². The focus doesn't relate to psychology, or inside a person's mind, but it's in between people³. I have previously blogged about "how to stay on the surface", and stated, that when you work from a SF approach, you're "staying at the surface" and don't "look down". The SF practitioner does not work analytically "in the depth" with the client, or think that he has an inner core, that needs to be "fixed" for better performance. In my point of view that's the main difference between SF and PP.

When working from the SF approach, one does not talk about the past.

Sure you can, - if it makes sense - for the client. And surely it depends on which parts of the past, you're referring to. It might be helpful for the client when the SF practitioner highlights past successes. The exceptions of the past can very well form the basis for future successes.

SF is about the client's skills, and is a resource-oriented approach.

Well, the purpose is not to bring forward resources, strengths and competencies, but they serve as elements in the client's descriptions supporting the client in reaching his preferred future. At BRIEF in London, they have (almost) stopped using compliments on strength or resources, due to the fact, that a compliment can be seen as the therapist's evaluation, and his assessment is of no good for the client. I do think, they have a point in the sense that complimenting, as a highlight of a resource or strength, is my subjective assessment and thus it must be clarified, how this might be helpful for the client – only the client can tell. And again, there're differences between compliments; you can compliment a new dress and its beauty or you can compliment the skills for fashion. Two different perspectives, and in a SF conversation you can explore, how the skills for fashion were developed and in which way this skill can be useful for the client while working towards the preferred future.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_psychology

² <http://web.uvic.ca/psyc/bavelas/2014%20for%20JSFBT%20%28with%20erratum%29.pdf>

³ Korman, Harry og McKergow, Mark: Inbetween – not inside or outside, may 2008

The solution-focused approach is a method.

Both yes and no. Different tools have been developed, such as Signs Of Safety, Family Road Map, Kids Skills, The Three Houses and many many others, all originated from and based on SF ideas. These are useful SF tools in assesment work, child and family discussions and other areas, but they can not stand alone. To work from the solution-focused approach requires beside tools and techniques the support by a mindset based on SF assumptions about mankind and how changes happens, for instans:

- people are experts in their own life and knows whats best for them.
- changes happens all the time
- focusing on the next steps, the client is already taking steps towards the life he wants.
- changes appears in relationships, in daily life,
- change in one area of life can lead to change in other areas of life.

Those assumptions work as a guideline for the therapist / the interviewer and determents the construction of the next question. Not taking the assumptions in mind, one construct the next question from another perspective. At these occations SF becomes "just a tool" such as the SOS to be used in a traditional psychological-medical paradigm without the particular mindset behind. I'ts like the butcher sells bread and cakes! Too often, at least in Denmark, SF "stands alone" as a "method on the bookshelf along with CBT or MI" and I've met lots of practitioners talking about a "manualization of the solution-focused approach".

In my opinion, SF faces the biggest challenges right now by being boiled down to an extract sold in bottles and to be consumed as a ginger shot; just take it, as long as you do that, you don't need to do anything else to avoid getting a cold - and by just using a few grips, tools or techniques you'll work from the Solution Focused approcah. Wauw! The solution-focused approach has a name, thats not necesssarily helpful for the approach, and therefore myths must be rejected. Many collegaues have done a huge effort in describing and clarifying this, latest at the SF World Conference in Frankfurt with the plenary "A theory about SF". Paradoxaly; as a SF practitioner we talk about 'keeping it simple', describing the approach doesn't seem that simple after all, still I think one must try ☺

Anne-Marie Wulf

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Danish Solution Focused institute