Solution Focused practice: engaging with the client as a first-person, rather than a third-person

Mark McKergow, University of Hertfordshire

I propose that Solution Focused (SF) practice can be seen as a distinctively first-person, as opposed to third-person, approach. This difference points to what we do and think, almost instinctively, when we sit down with a client and take them seriously, seeking to help them build their language and experience rather than seeking to interpret their words to build an intervention. This distinction both shines a light on some key (but sometimes overlooked) elements of SF and points to some of the difficulties faced in seeking to establish it as a mainstream modality of therapeutic, helping and caring practice.

Introduction

I sometimes envy our colleagues who work in the tradition of Appreciative Inquiry. They appear to have a neat way of talking about what they do – the '4–D cycle' (Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver/Destiny) and the five principles, as originally outlined by David Cooperrider and colleagues (see for example Bushe, 2005, 2011; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Having a punchy and agreed top-level description makes it easy to show interested parties what the field is about, at least at an initial level.

Solution-focused (SF) practice has no such widely agreed and easily quoted summary. I have thought for a long time that there *can* be no such fully agreed crisp definition. Any such definition would potentially have the impact of ruling out possibly useful things that might help a client; always the first duty of an SF practitioner. However, the counterpart of this is that there is a wide range of ideas circulating under the name of SF work, ranging from the focused (the work of BRIEF and

Address for correspondence: sfwork, 15 St George's Avenue, London N7 0HB, United Kingdom

others on descriptions, (see for example Shennan & Iveson, 2011; Iveson & McKergow, 2016)) to the pragmatic ("if it helps the client it must be solution-focused") to the bizarre idea of SF work as a form of cognitive behavioural therapy (Bannink, 2013).

I think that there are pitfalls in accepting this difficulty of definition too easily – perhaps we have been looking in the wrong place for the ways we seek to define and describe SF work? In this paper I will argue that SF is a distinctively first-person, as opposed to third-person, practice. This is both a blessing and a curse – the blessing is the clear focus brought onto the skill of the practitioner in working with the client as an individual (rather than as a diagnosis or type of person). The corresponding curse is that such skills are not easy to talk about from a detached, objective perspective of the type routinely used by psychologists, scientists and academics.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel. If we can get used to talking about a first person practice in a coherent (and third-person) way, we may be on the road to being understood better outside our field. And even within it. Let's start by looking at these third-person and first-person terms. These are very large fields, from which I will draw more precise meanings and distinctions as we go along.

Third person

Many scientific and philosophical traditions start with a 'third-person' approach – the practitioner as observer, studying the situation at hand and seeking to understand it and perhaps then change it. This position is so widely accepted, particularly in the psychological, therapeutic and academic professions, that is it usually taken as read. The observer (usually trained so as to minimise or at least be aware of their own role and responses) sits 'outside' the thing they are observing, and takes care not to perturb the observed phenomena, or at least to be aware of their impact. The resulting observations can then be used for research, decision and action.

The third-person dominance extends into philosophy of

mind as well. The mainstream approaches to Theory of Mind (TOM) – 'theory theory' (see for example Leslie, 1987) and 'simulation theory' (see for example Gordon, 1986)– both contend that we understand the minds of others by observing them and then either applying our theory of mind to their actions (in the case of theory theory) or somehow imagining what we would be thinking in similar circumstances (in the case of simulation theory).

I will show below how this third-person position produces a stance which is hard to equate with good SF work. However, we will not completely leave it behind. The practitioner always needs to retain a little piece of third-person observation, to judge when a client is putting themselves or others at serious risk of harm and also to help the practitioner reflect on their own practice. However, we will find much more grist to the SF mill from taking a first-person position.

First person

Rather than being in an observer position, a first person approach starts with experience – our experience, and the experience of others as reported by them. When we sit down to do SF work, our main focus is on engaging our clients' very personal experience and imagination, rather than seeking to understand it for ourselves. In the philosophical tradition this is linked with phenomenology, founded in the early 20th century by Edmund Husserl and developed by others including Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Francisco Varela. (For a good recent introduction see Gallagher, 2012) In such a view we are always participants, seeking to join in with the situation, participate, influence and learn from first-hand experience. We don't *have to* engage in observation and analysis of others (though sometimes we might) – rather the focus is on experiencing them first-hand. We don't have to seek explanations for their thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires and so on – these are there *in* their behaviour, right at the surface (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012).

This distinction is not at all new. For years, anthropologists

and action researchers, amongst others, have worried about combining the roles of participant and observer. In her splendid study *Watching The English*, stay-at-home anthropologist Kate Fox (Fox, 2004) refers to the usual chapter of ritual flagellation about the difficulties of being both a participant and an observer which appear in most books in her field, likening it to trying to pat one's head and rub one's tummy at the same time.

In real life, we have a choice about how much of each position to adopt when we sit down with clients. I will argue here that SF practice points us to be much further towards the first-person end of the spectrum than most other practices. This brings with it a different stance, which we sometimes take as a given but can be very hard for those schooled in other professions to adopt.

A comparison

Let's start by looking at the differences between a first person approach and a third person approach, from the point of view of the coach/therapist sitting down with their client(s). How might we approach this familiar setting, from these two different positions – the first-person position of direct, unassuming engagement and the third-person position where the practitioner comes with an explanatory psychological theory through which to identify relevant data, infer unseen goings-on, devise interventions etc.

First person approach	**Third person approach**
The people in front of me are there to engage with	The people in front me of are there to be studied, analysed and evaluated
I should be open to what they say and respond to it	I need to infer conclusions based on what they say
'Everything lies open to view' (Wittgenstein)	There are hidden things I need to uncover – and my professional training gives me the skills to do that

Each case is specific and stand-alone – 'every case is different'	Each case is a version of a generalised and abstract type or structure – or if not it can be categorised as such
The language is specific to this case and client, their life and experience	The language is that of the profession, and the client's language needs to be translated or restructured into this grammar
I negotiate a joint project with the client in everyday client language – for example 'going to the shops on my own'	I talk about the client in abstract professional language – 'they are suffering from agoraphobia'.
I ask questions to help the client construct a personal experience/narrative	I ask questions to discover the facts I need to draw my conclusions – sometimes with questionnaires
I accept, respect, select and build on what my client says	I know what I need from the client to make progress
The 'principles' of my work are applied in a flexible way to fit the situation	The principles of my work are laid down in manualised procedures – it's good for research and protects the client
There are 'clues' to doing things usefully – but no one correct way to describe it	There is a definite right way to do what I do, and to describe it
My client's expression of their lives and experience is the primary starting point	The client's experience and language is a transitory epiphenomenon of their cognitive processes
My clients make their own decisions about what they might do next	I make decisions about what the client should do next and prescribe/tell/sell it to them

Remember that this is not presented as a total either/or. It's more about where the balance is struck and how much priority the practitioner puts on the first-person, as opposed to the third-person, stance. The two columns are different ways into a conversational interaction – which is what does the work in all kinds of talking therapy.

Who stands where?

Let's look at some current fields and think about where they sit on the first person/third person spectrum.

Conventional psychology is clearly a third person discipline. In doing this, psychologists are echoing the practices of physicists and other 'proper' scientists for whom the third person precepts are a key professional starting point.

Positive psychology is also a third person discipline – the same professional armoury is brought to bear, but on (for example) happiness rather than depression. The aim is to discover truths which are globally applicable to help people live better. This is not a bad thing at all, of course – but it is a very different endeavour from SF work, which is designed to help each person as a separate case.

MRI model brief therapy, the starting point of the brief therapy tradition, seems to me to also be based on a third-person stance. John Weakland, Paul Watzlawick and their colleagues pioneered looking at the interaction via one-way mirrors and getting another perspective with an observing team to notice more clearly what was happening in the room. This move, key in the development of family therapy, was clearly do with enhancing the view of the team as observers. However, they were observing what was happening in the room with the client and therapist as an interaction, rather than simply observing the client as a subject – a key breakthrough towards seeing the power of the conversation, as opposed to the therapist's interpretations. However, they then formulated

a 'do something different' task (Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982; Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick, & Bodin, 1974) and sold it to their clients (in the words I learned at MRI in 1994). Steve de Shazer's early practice (de Shazer, 1985) seems to me to be an extension of this – in particular the giving of tasks is a remnant of third person thinking, along with other developments such as engaging client imagination which became even more important later on.

Solution Focused (SF) therapy, when it emerged in the mid-late 1980s at BFTC and elsewhere, seems to me to have been another step away from a third person approach and an embracing of a first person approach. In particular, later takes on the subject including my own in *The Solutions Focus* book (Jackson & McKergow, 2002), the work of BRIEF (Iveson, George, & Ratner, 2011; Ratner, George, & Iveson, 2012, 2014), Harry Korman (Jong, Bavelas, & Korman, 2013; McKergow & Korman, 2009) and others, has emphasised more and more the first person element – every case is different, stay on the surface, respond to *this* client rather then get sidetracked into comparisons with other clients, adopt a 'beginner mind' to listen cleanly, radical acceptance of what the clients brings and the skills to build an interaction based on that.

Who has noticed?

It seems to me that not everyone has noticed this development, let alone agreed with it. Some (Franklin, Trepper, McCollum, & Gingerich, 2011) are toting a 'solution-focused treatment manual', while Tony Grant and colleagues at the University of Sydney (Grant et al., 2012) have published a paper very recently on their work in developing a generalised SF attitude instrument, the 'Solution Focused Inventory', in extreme third-person terms. While this may appeal to the scientists, it seems to me that these authors are trying to reassure people accustomed to viewing the world through third-person eyes that what we are doing is not that different really – while

potentially undermining their own positions through mixed messages and metaphors.

Appreciative Inquiry is in a curious position here. The approach is explicitly based on a social constructionist position (Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995) which acknowledges a degree of first person thinking. However, I have seen recent advertisements for using Ai to work with strengths using the VIA Survey of Character Strengths, a very third person implement. It may be that those involved have seen little difficulty given the academic roots of Ai at around the same time as the emergence of SF, and indeed the Ai school has given rise to much more in the way of academic literature. This literature does tend to be written in academic 'third person' language – indeed the words 'social construction' themselves are a clue about this!

I am not sure whether the fundamental difficulties of reconciling the first and third person schools of thought have been considered sufficiently. Indeed, the way that SF develops may depend on finding a way forwards that works. Let's start by looking at the difficulties for (any) totally first person approach.

Difficulties for a first person approach

1. It's hard to find a 'right way' to describe it

Any practice will flex to suit the client concerned, the practitioner and the particular context. There can be no hard and fast 'models' to be learned. A number of ways to learn SF and talk about it have been proposed – mainly focused (misleadingly in my view) on questions. However, these questions are meaningless without someone to answer them, and how to respond to the answer is even more important than the initiating question anyway. The six 'Solutions Tools' in *The Solutions Focus* book (Jackson & McKergow, 2002) were an attempt to bring focus to different elements of an SF conversation, without being prescriptive about what exactly should be said

and in what order. Some trainers insist that everyone should learn entirely from their own experience – which is coherent but inefficient and can lead to a multitude of unhelpful misunderstandings.

2. It's therefore hard to research

If something can be reduced to a 'manualised procedure', then it's easy to research. However, something that depends so wholeheartedly on responding to the specifics of a client's experience and language is very hard, if not impossible, to manualise – see above. How do we know if people are 'really' doing it or not? The SFCT 'Clues' (SFCT, 2010) can be seen as an attempt to make a first-person coherent yet detailed guide to whether a piece of work is SF or not – based on the idea that, in the end, it all depends on the context. The view of two skilled practitioners is therefore a part of the process of deciding whether work is 'SF' or not.

3. It's not easy to understand in academic terms

Academia is about arriving at universal truths, or at least reliable knowledge. It's very hard for a first-person perspective to gain credibility in these terms. Even with all the research results accumulated, there is only recently an academic centre for SF (HESIAN, Hertfordshire Enactive Solution-Focused Interactional and Narrative). Those few in academia are either working 'under the radar' to some extent in existing counselling departments or don't seem to see the problems outlined here. This matters, because politicians and managers pay attention to academics to point out reliable ways forward – look at the impact of CBT.

4. Anything goes?

A coherent response to a first person approach is simply to work with one's clients, get on with it and ignore any debates or discussions which don't relate directly to specific cases.

After all, that's just abstract nonsense, right? Strictly, this is a coherent position – but it's not a helpful one if political acceptance or research is sought. Similarly, practitioners can be prone to adding things into their practice 'because I and my clients find it useful'. I like a tomato with my steak, but that doesn't make the tomato meat, any more than doing a positive psychology questionnaire during an SF interview makes it SF. It also doesn't make me a vegetarian – just as asking an 'SF question' out of the blue doesn't make me an SF practitioner. Of course professional practitioners can practise any way they wish to, but it's good to know what one is doing and why at any stage.

5. Finding ways to talk about a first person approach in a third person way

There have been various attempts to move away from conventional third person research methods towards a more first person coherent position. Steve de Shazer's efforts to point to the importance of the way the language of the interaction was viewed led to his writings on deconstruction (de Shazer, 1991), text-focused versus reader-focused readings (de Shazer, 1994) and Wittgenstein (de Shazer et al., 2007). These seem to have had little effect on the third person academic community, who appear to shrug their shoulders and carry on regardless – to a point where it seems to me as if they are either not aware of the distinction, or have a very different idea of what constitutes SF practice from me.

The challenge for Solution Focused practice

I hope that this paper has helped to make clear one of the key distinctions about SF practice and one important way in which it is different from much academic tradition. Our challenge now seems to be:

- To discuss and make even clearer these distinctions – if indeed they are important.

- To find a way to talk about our first-person practice in a third person way that is accepted and understood amongst the community – the recent developments in enactive cognition (Hutto & Myin, 2013; McKergow, 2015) may have a role to play here, as does the HESIAN research hub at the University of Hertfordshire.
- To engage with those within our community, and others outside it, on this basis (rather than pretending that we're OK and that's all there is to it).

Then we will be in a good position to embrace and explore the 'big hypothesis' of SF – that our broadly first person approach is not only effective but effective more quickly than third person approaches. In a perfect world, people will come to realise that much about those approaches is inefficient, philosophically flawed, ethically questionable and therefore in need of reconsideration and abandonment. They take years to learn, leave clients disrespected and unresourceful, frequently take longer to implement and take responsibility and choice away from clients – the people who need to learn to use and exercise this choice.

Insoo Kim Berg said (alongside me on the platform at the SOLWorld conference 2006 in Vienna) that she and Steve de Shazer had started their work inspired to make therapy as brief as possible. What they ended up with (perhaps serendipitously) was a demonstration of the shortcomings of third-person practice. Isn't it time we took this idea, their work and these revolutionary conclusions out to the world in a more coherent and credible fashion?

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Mark McKergow is an international speaker, teacher and author, and is director of the HESIAN research hub at the University of Hertfordshire. He also runs the Centre for Solutions Focus at Work (sfwork), based in London. mark@sfwork.com

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