

# Classic Paper

Introduction to “Have you heard the latest rumor about . . .? Solution-Focused Therapy as a rumor” by Gale Miller and Steve de Shazer (1998)

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**T**wo authorities in their field sit together in 1998. Steve de Shazer and Gale Miller have been studying what works in therapy for two decades. Their writings and teachings inspire many therapists worldwide to do therapy in a different way. They have stimulated others to describe their findings, and encouraged people to give lectures about this new approach. I imagine them eating Chinese food and talking about the myriad of publications and presentations about SF. They note that some of these descriptions stimulate their thinking. Others make them raise their eyebrows . . . but instead of excommunicating these authors, as pioneers often do, they placidly and wisely accept that this is inevitable. There is not one story to be told about SF, a story that would match with “the truth”. Every representation brings aspects of SF to light and casts others in shadows. As true postmodern thinkers, they hold that the possibility of misunderstanding is even a necessary condition to keep SF alive. The development of ideas is better off with an ongoing dialogue than with an authoritarian declaration. As there is no right story, they conclude that all they can do is to add yet another story. “No particular storyteller “owns” a rumour. We do, however, think that we can make a contribution to the evolution of the solution-focused therapy rumour. That is our only goal: to keep the rumour of solution-focused therapy alive by retelling it in a little different way.”

They also discuss the questions they get asked both by their

trainees and therapists who adhere to other therapeutic approaches. Some questions address specific techniques and strategies. “Can you show us how the miracle question goes?”, “How did you discover the scaling question?”, “What is the formula first session task?” Other questions are about the further implications of SF. “What is the place of emotions in SF therapy?”, “Are clients allowed to talk about their problems?”, “Does it work with alcoholics?”, “How do you look at diagnostic categories?”, “Is it forbidden to give advice to the client?”, “If you remain at the surface and take your clients at face value, don’t you run the risk of treating the symptoms and not the causes of the problem?”, “What about the socio-political contexts of our clients’ problems, e.g. repression of women, racism and the lack of opportunities for minorities, etc.?” Other questions deal with the intellectual context of SF. For example: “What is the relation between SF and Ericksonian therapy?”, “Does SF fit in the cognitive behavioural or in the systemic tradition?”, “Is SF a postmodern approach?”, “Is SF a way to deconstruct the problem-story of the client?”

These sorts of questions are of course all pertinent for the people who ask them. But some of these questions would not have been asked if people understood what SF was all about. And again, instead of saying that the people who ask these questions are stupid, or pointing out what’s wrong with these questions, the two experts regard them – here in this article, at least – as an invitation to tell their story again.

The story they present here is not their definitive story either. It is a story that has been prompted on the one hand by the many versions of SF out there, and on the other hand by the kinds of questions they get. The aim of this article is to tell their straight story on SF. At the same time, and maybe more so, it is a reflection on how to talk about SF. How to make sense of SF? This is very relevant for most of us as SF trainers and for SFCT as an organisation. De Shazer and Miller follow the strategy of first showing what it is all about in concrete, observable, interactional terms. With Wittgenstein, they are convinced that when people become aware of the important

facts, these will lead to answers to the many questions they have about the approach. Some questions will no longer be relevant once people understand what doing SF therapy is all about. Other questions will remain interesting and allow further exploration of the implications of SF on a philosophical, social or political level.

“Have you heard the latest rumor” helps us to understand the postmodern aspects of SF and why SF practitioners prefer to talk about the politics of possibilities rather than politics in general. It is an invitation to continue to talk sensibly about SF. For me personally it inspires me to start a new rumour and to critically assess a rumour I started myself a couple of years ago.

One rumour I am involved in deals with the ethical aspects of SF, and the place of ethics in postmodernism in general. Being good or bad at talking about SF therapy is very different from being good or bad at doing therapy. The first one has to do with (mis)understanding, the latter with respect. Let me clarify this with a version of a thought experiment that we can find in Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on Ethics* (1965). Suppose I was very good at doing SF therapy, but bad at talking about it. In a conversation someone might point out what is wrong in what I say, but will not be offended if I say: “Well I’m sorry, I prefer to do it rather than to talk about it.” But suppose I was very good at talking about SF but treated my clients in a very disrespectful way. I probably would not get away with an excuse such as: “Oh, but at least my articles on SF therapy get great reviews.” Doing harm to the “truth” of SF is very different from doing harm to a client. It pleases me to see that de Shazer and Miller start their story about SF with a reference to the ethical dimension of SF therapy. Their post-modern views do not exclude ethics. On the contrary, “One of the most important reasons for therapy is to help clients change their lives. It is a justification for therapy, and a test of it”. This test is “a *major ethical standard* to which (SF therapists) hold themselves accountable”, (my emphasis).’ “Therapists who fail at this job fail at therapy, no matter what else they may accomplish in the process.”

As I am co-author of a book on resilience, first published in

Dutch in 2009, I bear some responsibility for a rumour that links SF to resilience. And although the concept of resilience can be found in many publications on SF, I am challenged by the following passage in this article. Miller and de Shazer talk about SF as a language game. In the problem-focused language game, the participants interpret and describe aspects of their lives as undesired conditions. “Problems-focused language games emphasize what is wrong with people’s lives. This language game also frequently involves portraying the sources of our problems as powerful forces that are largely beyond our control, and sometimes even beyond our understanding.” In the solution focused language game, we co-construct another story. “(It) focuses on finding ways of managing – if not remedying – one’s problems. Here, the emphasis is on identifying the resources that we are using, or might use, to change our lives in preferred ways.” This language game fits with the way in which we approach resilience. And yet, it may not be as SF as it could be. Miller and de Shazer continue: “One way of “playing” this language game is to treat change as a struggle to gain control over one’s problems.” I read this as, focussing on the resilience of people, i.e. their strategies to overcome their problems, is *one* way of playing the SF language game. “But”, they continue, “it can be “played” in many other ways, including by treating one’s problems and their sources as irrelevant to the change process.”

“Have you heard the latest rumor” is a true classic article. You can reread it time and again, and each time you will gather new things from it. Enjoy your discoveries.

## References

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