

Book Reviews

The Art of Solution Focused Therapy

Elliott Connie and Linda Metcalf

Springer Publishing Company, New York, 2009, 328pp,
ISBN 978-082611737-3, £38.50

Review by Mark McKergow

Although the prime focus of *InterAction* is SF practice in organisations, we also bring you reviews of other noteworthy books in the SF arena. *The Art of Solution Focused Therapy* is, in my view, a very noteworthy book indeed. It takes a different and very interesting view of SF practice – not as a set of techniques or tools but as the stories and experiences of leading practitioners.

The book is based around seventeen interviews with some of the world's most experienced SF therapists. As the collection was assembled over the past year or so, this does not include Steve de Shazer or Insoo Kim Berg. The authors go out of their way at the start of the book to acknowledge the role of these two pioneers – indeed, for Elliott Connie, a relative newcomer to SF therapy, it was the death of Insoo and the consequent realisation that he would never meet her that sparked the original idea.

Connie wanted to find out “How did you discover the way you work best with clients?” He noticed that this was never addressed in conventional therapy books with their models and techniques. However, he found that the answers to personal questions such as these could teach far more – some of the key elements of good SF practice are in the quiet subtleties of experience rather than in any strict framework. Connie teamed up with his mentor Linda Metcalf, herself a

highly experienced SF practitioner in many settings, including teaching and parenting as well as therapy, and this book is the result.

The authors have found an excellent array of practitioners to include – some ‘old hands’ like Yvonne Dolan and Eve Lipchik, newer arrivals like Rayya Ghul and Alison Johnson, and workers from different settings including psychiatrist Alasdair Macdonald and researcher Cynthia Franklin. Everyone is given space to tell their own stories about how they got involved with SF therapy, talk about interesting cases, reflect on what helped them to learn, and how SF has impacted their lives. All the interviews are written in the first person, so the reader gets a really up-close feeling to the people and their work.

I was particularly pleased to see the authors saying in their introduction that they also wanted to address “myths of SFT – the myths that baffle others who don’t seem to understand the model or criticise it”. The format of the book seems to me an excellent way to do this – it’s one thing to assert that “SFT doesn’t work with problems”, but then sometimes people get the idea that therefore problems are not addressed! Hearing how real people use and experience the approach in real life helps enormously to illuminate bald statements like this, and bring rich subtlety and life to the process.

The personal nature of the stories really brings these elements to life – little side stories such as Chris Iveson recalling how his colleague Harvey Ratner was asked a startling scaling question during a family afternoon: playing Monopoly, his daughter asked “If Old Kent Road [at one end of the board] meant you’d never set up your own clinic and Mayfair [at the other end] means that you definitely will, where on the board would you say you are today?” After some further pressing from the daughter, Harvey plumped for Trafalgar Square [about three quarters of the way round]. He looked at Chris in surprise and said “Did I just say Trafalgar Square? That’s good enough for me! Let’s do it.” So they did, and the Brief Therapy Practice came into being.

I was delighted by the range of contributions – Debbie

Hogan's stories of establishing SF in Singapore, Brian Cade's eclectic use of humour, Harry Korman's personal journey of 'learning to pay attention', Thorana Nelson's entreaty to go where clients lead. Each of the seventeen interviews has something to note, smile at and remember and each ends with an acknowledgement and compliments from one of the main authors. This heart of the book is topped by two introductory chapters, with some guidelines for new readers about SFT and what to expect, and tailed by a summary of reflections.

This is not really a book for newcomers to SF. I would wholeheartedly recommend it to those who, while comfortable with their practice, wish to build and extend it not by trying to make it more complicated but rather by joining in and drawing on these words of experience. It's rather like the ultimate conference opportunity, where you get to hang out with all these people and hear them talk about what makes them and their work tick – except that it's all written down to take away. All in all, the best SF book I've seen for some time.

Mark McKergow is director of sfwork, the Centre for Solutions Focus at Work. mark@sfwork.com