

# Editorial

## Research and the enactive paradigm

In this 11<sup>th</sup> issue of *InterAction* we are featuring papers which emerged from the Orienting Solutions 2013 conference at the University of Hertfordshire. These range from the philosophical (Gale Miller's refreshing look at the work of Kenneth Burke) to practical (Stephan Natynczuk's application of SF in adventure therapy). We also have a paper crossing the theory/practice divide from Zuzanna Rucinska and Ellen Reijmers, who examine systemic play therapy through a framework of embodied and enactive cognition.

This last peer-reviewed paper is a little outside our 'normal' SF range. However, this journal has always intended to explore the neighbouring areas to solution-focused work, be they social construction, agile methods, appreciative inquiry, positive psychology, systemic work or whatever. The enactive paradigm, as some of you will know, offers a very interesting up-to-date take on what it is to think, act, remember and be alive. The enactive movement can be traced back to the Embodied Mind book of Varela, Thompson and Roesch (1991), but has gathered momentum in recent years with the development of 'radically enactive cognition' (REC) by our friend and colleague Professor Dan Hutto (University of Hertfordshire, recently moved to the University of Wollongong in Australia).

REC holds that the conventional view of perception and cognition, of taking information in to be processed in the brain in some way, is fundamentally flawed. The view that the brain contains some kind of mental representation of the world, so beloved of the traditional cognitive outlook, is found wanting from at least two perspectives. Firstly, from a logical (and very Wittgenstein) perspective, we can see how 'mental' processes are wound up in the lives and activities of people, rather than being treated as separate and governing events.

Secondly, from a practical perspective, recent work in robots and artificial intelligence shows that decades of attempts to build ‘cognitive’ robots have made little progress – but when machines are left to interact with the world (rather than represent it to themselves) then a lot can be done with a little.

This is all highly connected to the importance of description and the interactional view, which are fundamental to SF work. Indeed, Gregory Bateson is regarded as a founder of the enactive perspective by many in the field. Mark McKergow is in the process of establishing HESIAN (Hertfordshire Enactive Solution-focused Interactional And Narrative), a ‘research hub’ at the University of Hertfordshire to investigate both SF and connections to other fields.

It is interesting to pause at this point to quickly remember the huge and growing research base that supports SF work in many fields. The latest summary from Dr Alasdair Macdonald shows 133 relevant outcome studies: 2 meta-analyses; 5 systematic reviews; 28 randomised controlled trials showing benefit from SF approaches with 14 showing benefit over existing treatments. Of 47 comparison studies, 38 favour SF. This is in stark contrast to neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) for example – a quick look through the journals reveals little of substance, with descriptions such as ‘quackery’, ‘unvalidated’ and ‘discredited’ being commonplace. Yet NLP courses and books continue to sell around the world, perhaps to people who would like the world to be that way (and will spend some money to find out that it probably isn’t).

Several other papers were submitted after the conference, which are still in the process of peer-review. We hope they will appear in revised versions in future issues of *InterAction*. We are not expecting the public to start getting interested in proper scientific research all that soon. However, it’s good to note that when the smoke begins to clear (as it may be starting to do), then SF methods will be on the right side of the scientific fence in terms of research, results and respect.

To offer a balance to this focus on research and academia, we have an interview with Canadian consultant Alan Kay, well known for his work using SF in energetic and everyday form

for ‘kitchen table’ conversations. There are also two contrasting case studies from Jesper Hankovzsky Christiansen and Marva Furlongue-Laver. Our classic paper this issue pre-dates SFBT, with a look back to Milton Erickson’s 1954 paper *Special Techniques of Brief Hypnotherapy*.

Varela, F., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The Embodied Mind*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press

### **Erratum**

Please note that in Volume 5 Number 2, the key to the graph on Page 82 of the Case Study “Using SF to Create Whole Systems Change in Social Care” should be reversed.