

Research Reviews

Brief descriptions and reflections on recent research articles and books relevant to the development of SF practice and theory

By David Weber

Wehr, T. (2010).

Phenomenology of exception times: Qualitative differences between problem-focused and solution-focused interventions.

Applied Cognitive Psychology, 24, 467–480.

The concept of exception time is central in the practice of SF therapy and coaching, and refers to a time when a specific problem is absent or limited in impact. Indeed, one way of thinking about SF work may be that it facilitates a client's process of increasing the number and duration of exception times. This study represents an attempt to explore the client experience of an exception time in contrast to the experience of "problem time."

In each of two experiments, one hundred and forty respondents (university students) were divided into two groups – a problem-focused group and an SF group. In Experiment 1, members of each group completed a pair of questionnaires, plus a survey evaluating one's perceived social skills. In the first experiment, members of the problem-focused group completed a questionnaire asking for a brief reflection on a

The last Research Reviews contained an error – the compiler was Paolo Terni, whose name was unfortunately misspelt. Apologies, Paolo!

problem situation, standard across all members of the group, involving a complication in social encounters. Half of the problem-focused respondents were each asked to remember and comment on *one* occasion when he or she thought about the situation's problematic nature, while the other half were asked to remember *five* such occasions. The SF group was given similar instructions, except that instead of thinking about a problem, they were tasked with thinking about the time in between such thoughts (i.e., the exception times). For all respondents, a second questionnaire followed up one week later with similar prompts. In Experiment 2, all respondents completed one questionnaire, not two, and based on whether they were in the problem-focused or SF group, were instructed to reflect on either a problem or exception times of their own choosing.

Here are some of the results:

- In the first experiment, those who thought about the problem rather than exception times were less confident about handling social encounters than those who thought about exception times, and demonstrated less cooperation and social receptivity.
- Thinking about exception times brought about changes in such conditions as mood and self-confidence.
- Participants in the SF group identified more exceptions to the problem than they named problems in the week between the first and second questionnaires.
- It was easier for members of the SF group to think about exceptions than it was for the problem-focused group members to think about problems.

McCurdy, K. G. (2006).

Adlerian supervision: A new perspective with a solution focus.

The Journal of Individual Psychology, 62, 141–153.

This article is more than two years old, but I wanted to include it in this commentary for a couple of reasons. First, it contains a good summary of what SF supervision entails. The supervisory context in this report is the therapy clinic; the protégés are clinicians in training and the mentors or supervisors are veteran counsellors who oversee the work and professional development of the trainees.

McCurdy derives his description of what SF supervision involves from the work of several scholars and researchers publishing in the 1990s. He describes supervision of this type as follows: “SF supervision is a process whereby a supervisor acts as a facilitator helping the supervisee explore his or her strengths, abilities and resources The supervisory process is collaborative, exploratory, developmental and strengths-based” (McCurdy, 2006, p. 146). In describing SF concepts and practices, McCurdy does sometimes rely on what may be called problem talk, i.e., proposing that a problem must at some point be identified in one’s work with a client (in this case, the trainee). Nonetheless, concerning SF work McCurdy adequately emphasises other touchstones such as the importance of focusing on the possible, cultivating curiosity and calling attention to small or perhaps overlooked successes that indicate capability within a specific behavioural domain.

McCurdy writes the article, however, to explore the ground shared by two supervisory styles: SF supervision and Adlerian supervision. The latter happens to be a very common approach to supervising clinician trainees. It and SF supervision differ in several ways. Most notably, the supervisor places substantial emphasis on what mentalist constructs (what McCurdy called “personal fictions”) derived from one’s autobiographical past are presenting

obstacles in the present to performing as effectively as desired in the clinic.

The styles may at first seem incompatible, but McCurdy attempts to find harmony between them in proposing what he calls Adlerian-based SF (ABSF) supervision. One example of common ground is the centrality of encouragement. In their relationships with a client, both Adlerian and SF supervisors will more heavily rely on encouragement rather than, say, “tough love” or contrarian counterargument, to facilitate change. Other key features of ABSF that an SF practitioner would recognise include: an orientation to solution, rather than the standard Adlerian focus on the problem; the use of the Miracle Question and scaling to enable a trainee to identify goals and accomplishments; and starting meetings with the supervisor by asking the trainee to identify successes that he or she has met with since the previous meeting. In turn, in ABSF, an Adlerian supervisor would recognise mentalist features such as enabling the trainee to identify the meaning to be found in a problem.

So would ABSF interest an SF practitioner working with organisations? Probably not. The second reason I recommend this article is that it accomplishes something that has reverberated around the SF community: it points to a possible link between SF and non-SF approaches that may enable members of the SF community to “talk the talk” of other approaches, and thereby be able to make understandable what it is that we do (or do not do). The organisational practitioner grounded in SF could, first, take from this article a useful summary of SF approaches to supervision – and expand the application of that summary from clinical supervisors to management and executive professionals generally. Second, he or she could find in this article a vocabulary for discussing behavioural change, management and leadership with clients who may not be fully comfortable with or conversant in the SF perspective and lexicon.

Lewis, R. E., & Hatch, T. (2008).

Cultivating strengths-based professional identities.

Professional School Counseling, 12, 15–18.

“Strengths-based” is not synonymous with “SF,” of course, but as a practitioner’s perspective, the latter originated within the paradigm of discovering strengths rather than the paradigm of delineating and correcting a problem. Consequently, the Lewis and Hatch article partners usefully with McCurdy’s – McCurdy examines SF approaches to mentoring trainee clinicians and Lewis and Hatch reflect on what must happen for a clinician (specifically, a school counsellor) to develop a “strength-based professional identity.” The concept of identity may at first sound insufficiently SF (after all identity is something that SF practitioners do not tend to address), but Lewis and Hatch remind us that “identity is never fully external or internal, but is constructed holistically in individuals transacting with the environment” (p. 15). The term “constructed” gives us entry to thinking about professional identity in a way that is compatible with SF, because it means shaped in conversation, and emergent by and through communication.

Lewis and Hatch suggest that a counsellor who has developed a strengths-based professional identity presumes that “all students have learning power” (p. 16) and demonstrates certain behaviours that manifest that belief in action. One is to gather data from relevant sources in order to evaluate results, as opposed to evaluating results based on guesswork or by phenomena that cannot be measured. A second behaviour of a strengths-based counselling professional is participating in leadership roles in mentoring juniors, writing grant proposals, submitting and delivering conference papers and other kinds of outreach. A third behaviour is “mindful advocacy” (p. 17), which is similar to the concept of encouragement of which McCurdy wrote.

In this article, the authors attempt to unpack professional identity’s operational and behavioural components in align-

ment with the key features of SF practice. For a while, especially as the SF community has grown and the term “SF” has too often been misused or misapplied, the question “What is an SF practitioner?” has occupied a fair amount of our thinking. Perhaps some of the insight provided by Lewis and Hatch may help us devise additional answers.

Smith, S. (2010).

A preliminary analysis of narratives on the impact of training in solution-focused therapy expressed by students having completed a 6-month training course.

Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing, 17, 105–110.

In this article, Smith reports the results of a pilot study of the impact of SF therapy training for nurses. Data for the study were generated by interviews launched by the SF question, “What has changed since you completed the course?” Responses to that question were met with scaling questions. In the article, the section headed “Background” is useful for its solid, accessible summary of the roots and growth in popularity of SF modalities of intervention.

For the nurses who completed the six-month training programme, three prominent themes emerged from analysis of the interview data. One was “positivity,” defined as “enthusiasm and positive outlook expressed by participants for working with clients” (p. 108). In particular, the process of looking for “what’s working” spurred the enthusiasm. A second theme was confidence – study participants reported an increased amount of confidence in their capabilities as counsellors.

The remaining theme to emerge was increased trust in clients. This in particular seems to be a noteworthy result because it suggests that a sort of virtuous circle gets constructed. As a practitioner of SF coaching or counselling, one operates from a position of trusting that the client knows

best what changes he or she wishes to enact, and how to enact that change. That in turn deepens the trust the practitioner has in his or her client, which in turn has an impact on how a relationship with the client is constructed.

Frederick, T. V. (2008).

**SF Brief Therapy and the Kingdom of God:
A cosmological integration.**

Pastoral Psychology, 56, 413–419.

Author Frederick opens the argument he puts forth in this article by observing that a key area of overlap between SF and Christianity is that both systems of thought and practice share a strong grounding in “the in-breaking of the future into the now” (p. 417), i.e., an orientation to identifying and pursuing an ideal future state. In SF work, a client “may experience an event, and the meaning of the event then becomes a future hermeneutic tool” (p. 415) for that client. In Christianity, “new creation” (p. 416) that a person of faith attributes to the future “focuses on the healing and redemption” (p. 416) that will characterise that future. In either system, the person seeking the desired future is coached or encouraged to “strategise to obtain the next steps associated with achieving their goals” (p. 416). Other areas of conceptual or philosophical integration include an assumption that “humans are . . . capable and resourceful in managing their daily existence” (p. 417), and that humans “should seek to enter into relationships with others and understand them from their [i.e., the other person’s own] perspective” (p. 418).

I am of the opinion that in the U.S.A. religion has a more visible presence in public life and discourse than in Europe and the United Kingdom, where most of the readers of this journal live. I personally am neutral-to-disapproving of the visibility of religion in my country; I tend to believe that the role faith or religion plays (or does not play) in one’s life is entirely a personal or private matter. Nonetheless, this article

captured my attention because in our work with organisations, clients who have strong faith in a Christian deity may find some SF principles less appealing than clients who do not engage with the world in a faith-based manner. (For example, consider the theological connotation of “miracle” for a person of strong Christian faith who has been asked the “Miracle Question.”.) I have met or encountered several members of the SF community who observe that a number of traditions in eastern spiritual practice appear to be compatible with SF’s basic tenets. The list of references in Frederick’s article indicate that a small body of literature already exists that articulates similar observations concerning SF and Christian principles.

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