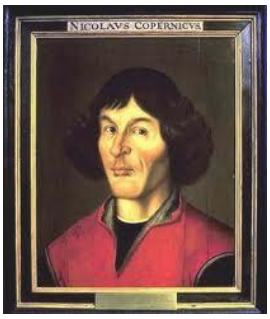
Another Copernican Revolution?



By Jenny Clarke - a Partner at sfwork – www.sfwork.com

In 1543 Nicolaus Copernicus published his treatise On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres, showing that the movement of the planets could be explained without assuming that the earth occupies a central position. He delayed publication of his conclusions for a decade or more, fearing (rightly) the response that they would receive. Indeed, his ideas were slow to catch on and it was not until Isaac Newton published his law of gravitation and laws of mechanics that the heliocentric idea became generally accepted.

As EBTA 2012 is meeting in the town of his birth, it seems appropriate to draw attention to the huge change that he initiated in scientific methodology and in our understanding of our place in the universe. This paradigm shift has been called the Copernican Revolution. Perhaps we can take comfort from the fact that his ideas caught on eventually – even if he wasn't alive to see it.

SF has also been described as paradigm-shifting. Let's look at some of the ways that the SF revolution turns conventional thinking Upside Down:

- No theory of change
- Emergence, not causal relationships
- Description, not explanation
- Progress, not static
- Every case is different – no diagnosis
- Surface, not depth
- Focus on what's wanted, not the problem
- Different differences
- Feelings/emotions
- Remembering the future
- The role of the expert

Theory of Change: Neither Inside nor Outside

Mark McKergow and Harry Korman (2009) describe a key difference between SFBT and other approaches to change: SF practitioners hold no theory of change! We do not work from the assumption that people are driven by mentalistic processes like their beliefs, values or motivations ("Inside"), nor from the assumption that people operate within larger-scale systems - which have to be changed so that the individual can change ("Outside"). Rather we take an emergent view of human interaction: people do things, say things and think about things in response to what is happening around them. Their response is not scripted or determined but rather made up in the moment - improvised or created from countless possibilities. Living beings – especially people – are continually responding to their surroundings, including other people, and in so doing they are continually influencing their surroundings – unpredictably. This is a fundamental aspect of the SF revolution.

There is a bit more to say about theory. In the classical, modernist tradition, theory is about explanation and prediction – a mechanistic search for what makes things "tick". SF fits better with post-constructionist ideas, and here, theory is a guide to what to pay attention to.

Emergence, not causal relationships

This emergent view of human behaviour is part of a much wider movement. When teaching SF, we usually start by observing that change is happening all the time. Therefore the elegant way to achieve desirable change is to find useful change (ie change in the desired direction) and build on it. SF is a conversational practice and conversation is an emergent phenomenon – few conversations are scripted as everyone who has ever planned "I'll say this and then she'll say that and then ..." will have observed. In an emergent world, mechanistic rules of cause and effect do not apply and the new science of complexity provides a better description of how things are in an ever-changing world. Although they used different vocabulary, the early proponents of the interactional view recognised the implications of complexity theory. They saw clearly that progress came not from asking *why* something is happening but from looking at *what* is happening, and in what circumstances (see, for example, Watzlawick & Weakland (1977).

SF practitioners recognise the power of conversation as a means of influencing the world, albeit in unpredictable ways. We share the Wittgenstein view of language as a tool for getting things done – so our interest is in language-in-use rather than dictionary definitions. We may spend some time exploring the meaning (to our clients) of particular words or phrases: "what will be the first sign that tells you that you so-and-so respects you?" Our questions are guided by our "theory" about what is worth paying attention to.

Description, not Explanation

People are meaning making beings and we naturally look for explanations for what is going wrong in our lives. This is another deeply ingrained trait which the SF revolution overturns. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) wrote that "We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place." In problematic situations at least, this is a good idea! (If there's no problem, no problem!) Typical explanations have the form "I did this, or I feel like this, because of the way I was brought up; or because of what you said to me; or because the delivery was late .....". The explanation may be satisfactory, but it doesn't give any guidance about what to **do.** On the contrary, it justifies the feeling of stuckness. Worse, it often has an accusatory element – "it wasn't my fault" or even "it was all my fault" – which makes co-operation less likely. On the other hand, description of how we would like things to be, what the first signs of progress would be and who would recognise them increases the chance of co-operation and adds energy and optimism.

So too do our questions asking for exceptions or counters – times in the past when things have been better, or when our clients managed to find a path through difficult circumstances or when they somehow managed to cope despite the difficulties.

Our focus on concrete description – what Bill O'Hanlon and James Wilk (1987) have called video description – is another revolutionary element of the SF approach.

Progress, not static

Explanation can be wonderfully satisfying: "Ah, now I understand why I'm like this!". Conventional psychology deals in diagnostic labels, a natural development of explanatory thinking. Labels become static descriptions of how things are: "she is depressed"; "he is unmotivated"; "they are dysfunctional" ..... Labels or explanations like these are not helpful in getting us out of problems; they hide from us valuable pieces of information: about what better would look like; about times when things are not so bad or when we cope better; about resources available to us that could be helpful; about grounds for hope; even about alternative labels.

The scaling tool is a wonderfully effective conversational device for uncovering progress and signs of progress. It denies the static nature of states of being and encourages the investigation of differences – what makes 3 on the scale better than 2, for this person, in these circumstances? What would 4 look like? Who would be the first to notice that you were at 4 now? What is the highest you have ever been? What was going on then?

Every case is different – no diagnosis

Diagnosis is a product of explanation: behaviour is explained by the label. Steve de Shazer often puzzled students when he answered "I don't know" to questions about SF's suitability for treating this or that diagnosis. De Shazer's response makes perfect sense though when one notices the two dubious presuppositions in questions of that form. The first is that the diagnosis is meaningful or is a valuable piece of information. Since a diagnosis provides no clue about what a client wants, it is of no assistance to an SF practitioner. The second presupposition is that there is an "it" (SF) that may or not "work", neglecting the skill used in an SF conversation in building solutions. McKergow (2006) has likened this to asking whether or not a piano works, ignoring the contribution the pianist makes in coaxing music from the instrument.

Surface, not depth

To quote Wittgenstein (1953) again, "Since everything is open to view, there is nothing to explain." So SF practitioners do not use the metaphor of depth, nor "dig" to discover what the client is hiding from us or him/herself or what "the real problem" is. The metaphor of depth runs deep (!) in our culture. Steve de Shazer 1994) describes his experience of trying to discern a Theory underlying the work of Milton Erickson: "... I decided that my only recourse was to follow Wittgenstein's advice and renounce all Theory. .....Somehow I had to take words at face value, to keep my reading on the surface, to avoid any and all reading behind the lines, and to somehow overcome the urge to look behind and underneath. This is not an easy job; the structural urge can be overwhelming." How reassuring to discover that, at least in the early days, de Shazer found it difficult to stay at the surface! How tempting it is to pursue our own theories, to draw on our own autobiographies or reading or experience with other clients in order to reach an "understanding" of what the client in front of us is saying! And while we are doing this, the chances are that we are not paying full attention to what the client is actually saying and we may well miss what is said about what he/she wants and when elements of this are already happening.

A more useful metaphor than surface and depth might be the terms used by narrative therapists: the idea of thick and thin strands of a story (see, for example, Payne (2000)). A client often brings a well-rehearsed, much pondered over problem story. Repeated telling and thought thickens the narrative – strengthens it and gives it greater and greater credence and validity in the client's life. But intertwined with this story will be another, thinner, version which tells of exceptions to the main story. The SF practitioner is interested in thickening the thin version. Keeping to descriptive rather that explanatory language is key to this – and again may not be easy if the client has bought into the pop psychology ideas about depth and similar theories about the need to dig in order to reveal what is hidden.

One of my coaching clients echoed Wittgenstein well when he commented after our work together “Now I can see what was hiding in plain view.”

Solution (= what’s wanted), not Problem

The importance of understanding the problem is so deeply ingrained in our culture that it comes as a great shock to many people encountering SF ideas for the first time to be told that problems can be safely overlooked (which is not the same as ignored). But people are not machines and it’s a mistake to think that a people maintenance manual would be as useful as a car maintenance manual. Indeed, even arch diagnosticians in the field of mental health are beginning to question this idea, as the struggles to update the DSM show. Absence of depression for one individual might be indicated by playing a round of golf; for another playing a round of golf may be grounds for depression!

The SF practitioner’s interest in what our clients want, in concrete detail including small visible signs from many different perspectives, helps them move from stuck positions to a realisation that there is a way forward. Often, this comes from recognition or recall of what has worked in similar situations enabling the client to be creative and optimistic. The energy generated by conversations about what life will be like when the problem has vanished is itself a great fuel for the imagination.

By focusing on what is wanted and what that looks like in our every day lives, we can spot examples of when it already happens, providing the building blocks for further progress. The BFTC interest in Exceptions drew attention to an invaluable tool for adding more concrete detail to the description of the Solution – see de Shazer et al (1986).

Different Differences

Gregory Bateson (1972) defines information as “a difference that makes a difference”. In the interactional tradition, SF practitioners also see difference as informational – and yielding far more information than within the rules of the arithmetic where minus 2 is simply opposite (and quantitatively equal) to plus 2. Thus, as indicated above, knowing what is wrong provides no information of value in determining what to do. Imagining going to the grocery shop and saying “I don’t want bread today.” Rarely would the shop keeper ask “What makes you not want bread today?” There is only one way that he can sensibly respond and that is to ask “What do you want?”

Why is it then that the traditional response to a client saying “I don’t want to be angry all the time” is “What triggers your anger?” rather than “What do you want instead?”

We are interested in positive difference, which is not the opposite of negative difference , just as what we want is not the opposite of what we don't want.

As Günter Lueger (2006) has pointed out, much of SF practice is about looking for positive difference – a difference that makes a **useful** difference. All of the following SF tools have this in mind: exceptions (finding what better looks like); the miracle question (setting the desired direction); scaling (a really helpful conversational tool for teasing out detail); coping questions (finding useful resources); small steps (movement in the desired direction); observation tasks (priming the client to notice when things are better).

Of course, our clients will want to tell us what is wrong. However, in our revolutionary approach, this is not where we focus our attention. Just as the earth is not the centre of the solar system, problems are not the centre of our concern.

Feelings/emotions

In the pre-SF-revolutionary world, emotions are second order constructs – abstractions built up from cultural categories. (As an aside, isn't interesting how culture-specific the notion of depression is? And yet US-defined definitions of mental illness are sweeping the world.) As seen after our revolution, emotions are not entities which can be taken out of their context, examined, processed and put back again. Treating emotions as such makes no sense in an interactional, contextual view of the world. De Shazer treated emotions as activities – observable things that people do in particular contexts – not a separate domain of life to be investigated in isolation. Set against a background of traditional therapy, this is truly radical. To quote de Shazer and Miller (2000), "therapists have constructed a professional field of emotions that treat emotions as abstract entities about which some therapists are uniquely knowledgeable and perhaps even experts. Clients may display emotions, but only therapists understand what emotions 'really' mean." More radically, SF therapists see emotion as an intrinsic part of a conversation, not an abstraction to be enquired about, measured and made the centre of attention. You will not hear a (good) SF practitioner ask "How do/did you feel about that?" This is not because we don't care, or because we don't think it's important. It's because feelings are a phenomenon of the here and now.

Of course, our clients might well introduce the topic – they will be aware of the prevailing view that feelings have to be "brought into the open", discussed and relived. Our response will be one of concern - "Things are tough right now" – but not prime interest.

Remembering the future

Human beings have an amazing ability to imagine things which have not (yet) happened. The magic of the Miracle Question lies in the way it taps into this ability so that the client experiences – in his/her mind's eye and body – what things would be like in the absence of the problem. Not only does this provide sensory clues to how things could be in a better world, it also widens the client's sense of what is possible and it provides a muscle memory that can be recalled later. Thus imagination is transformed to memory – a re-membering. The search for exceptions – examples of the desired outcome happening in the past – thickens this strand of memory.

Expertise

SF practitioners often describe their approach as non-expert "not-knowing". This is very different from the norms of therapy or consultancy where the client expects expertise and advice for his/her money. Perhaps this is disingenuous of us. Our expertise is not in the nature of problems – their origins, causes and cures. Nor is it in our clients' lives and what is good for them. But we do have expertise. It is in useful conversation: noticing and focusing upon what the client wants and what grounds for optimism might be.

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's there are few." - Shunryu Suzuki (1973)

Conclusion

In this short article, I have described many features which, added together, make the SF approach so special. Copernicus' work led to a paradigm shift that has been called the Copernican Revolution. In following the footsteps of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, who built on the work of their predecessors in describing the Interactional view, we can, I think, call ourselves part of a Revolution, turning understanding of human relationships Upside Down.

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Contact details

Jenny Clarke 15 St George's Avenue, London, N7 0HB, UK

jenny@sfwork.com

Jenny Clarke works as a solutions focused facilitator, trainer and coach helping people who want to change what they do or how they do it. She works with large organisations who are adapting to change, and as a personal coach to managers and directors. Her strengths are in communication, presentation, consultation and negotiation. These, allied with a facilitative style, enthusiasm and human insight make a vital contribution to meeting her clients' objectives.

She has travelled the world hosting workshops for managers, consultants and coaches. A founder member of the SOL International Steering Group, Jenny was a key member of the organising committee for the first 2 SOL international conferences and has presented at SOL conferences since then (see www.solworld.org). She is a founder member of SFCT, the professional body for SF consultants, coaches and managers.

Jenny has a huge range of experience of applying SF. She is co-author or editor of three books, including 57 SF Activities for facilitators and consultants (2008). She has wide functional experience in industry, including strategic and business planning, dealing with Government and regulatory issues, public inquiry management and administration.