Editorial

Research

What can we know about Solution Focus? How do we conduct research into our subject matter most appropriately? The classic paper by Paul Cilliers featured in this edition of *Inter*Action talks about what we can know. It makes the point that a "modest position" between "absolute knowledge" and "relativism" is most appropriately adopted when you are dealing with complex systems. We assume that conversations, helping conversations, and interactions to draw forward an organisation are best understood as instances with a complex nature.

This poses a conundrum for those of us who want to research it: if something cannot be grasped or described in its entirety – how can you research it? Can you formulate hypotheses and test them? What can you know at all? And how can you make your research into the complexity of helping conversations (knowing that you are dealing with complex systems) relevant for a public that often falls into either the neo-positivist trap (treating complex-meaning problems as molecular problems) or the esoteric trap (going with hunches, anything goes and refusing to do any serious research at all).

Here are the kinds of research into SF that have so far been conducted:

Research into how SF works

Harry Korman, together with Janet Bavelas and Peter de Jong, have researched what happens in an SF conversation on a micro-level and contrasted it to what happens in other kinds of helping conversations. There are very few approaches which have started looking at what happens in such fine granularity. This research has enabled us to recognise crucial features of an SF conversation: the practitioner retains positive statements of the clients and uses the clients' language.

Research into the effectiveness of SF

Entering the realm of outcome studies, SF researchers have to veer into the territory of the positivist. To convince our colleagues who don't share our assumptions about the complexity of the issue at hand we have to pretend we share theirs: for example that classifying mental illnesses by diagnoses is relevant, that two therapists using the same approach do the same, etc. We enter their framework to show that SF works. Alasdair Macdonald has collected many outcome studies and metastudies and it is safe to say that SF works as well as other forms of therapies – but does so faster than others.

Research into the community

In a Wittgensteinian sense "meaning is defined by its use" – so also what "SF" or "Solution Building" is cannot be defined and written in stone. Our Clues are an attempt to do justice to this. Also Adam Froerer and Elliot Connie have conducted a "Delphi Study" asking SF experts what "Solution Building" means and walking them through a process of discussion.

Philosophical thought

How does SF fit with other approaches? The school of thought started by Ludwig Wittgenstein is currently expanding into new trains of investigation, such as discursive psychology, enactive cognition, embodied and extended mind, deconstruction, and narrative practice. How can these help and bolster both how the world sees SF work, and how we think about it and do it?

Steve de Shazer sometimes said (very firmly) that 'all research is a political act'. It's time we faced up to this, took the advice of Ken Gergen at EBTA 2011 in Dresden, and connected with a much wider group of researchers, academics, practitioners and policy makers. SFCT's first Research Conference with the University of Hertfordshire in September 2013 offers a first step in this direction. We hope you will be able to come, participate and contribute.

This issue has an external focus in the shape of the late Paul Cilliers, who has died suddenly. Paul was a philosopher and former electrical engineer with a keen interest in language and complex systems. He was one of the first people to agree to join our Editorial Advisory Board. You can read his classic paper 'Complexity, Deconstruction and Relativism', which is much more useful than it might sound – being a guide to modest positions and their value. There is an extensive introduction to the paper to guide you through it. Mark McKergow also recalls meeting Paul in 2008, where they discussed many aspects of interest to SF workers.

There are also three interesting per-reviewed papers, the first by Ken Gergen. Mark McKergow met him at the Conversation-Fest 2013 conference in Houston, and we are excited to present a specially extended version (extended by Ken himself) of his plenary speech on 'Relating the personal and the public'. This is a fine example of the latest thinking in social construction and the discursive focus. JennyClarke and Shakya Kumara write about the many ways in which SF can be introduced into an organisatuon and Stefanie Widmann explores the research around "Co-work" (two consultants working with one team or organisation), a yet rather under-researched, very beneficial way of working to which an SF stance can contribute a lot.

We have two interesting case studies. Paolo Terni takes us through the scenario of an SF retreat for executives in a pharmaceutical company. University professor Kat Barclay introduces us to how she uses SF to coach her PhD students.

Rayya Ghul provided the research review with many interesting finds. You'll also see a description of the latest results of our peer review process: Riku Jarvinen coached an Association for the Unemployed and Annette Gray helped create one team that respects one another and enjoys coming to work to effect business unit culture change at a professional services firm. Of course, there are also a few really interesting book reviews – if you read a book that you want people to know about or have written a book that you would like us to review: please contact us.

As many of you already know, John Sproson, an SF enthusiast and great contributor to the SOLworld community, passed away this year. We remember him fondly by appreciating his life and work in an obituary.