

Classic SF paper

Introduction to Barry Mason (1993). Towards Positions of Safe Uncertainty

John Wheeler

Once, towards the end of a day of training in the SF approach, I was asked, “How do you decide what to say next, out of everything you might say or ask?” All I could think to say was, “I just go with whatever pops into my head.” Before I came across the SF approach a host of responses used to pop into my head – interpretations, judgements, advice, expert knowledge and so on. McKergow and Korman (2009) have helpfully pointed out that in SF conversations we usually:

“Listen very carefully to what clients say, believing that in the words themselves there lies everything necessary for clients to find and build solutions.” (p. 37).

However, on occasions I do still add something which I know has popped into my head and may not be in the client’s. At such times I reassure myself that I might not have strayed too far from SF principles by recalling what Insoo Kim Berg has been quoted as saying about the possibility of adding something to the conversation. Yvonne Dolan, for example in a text by Quick (2013), recalls the discussions leading to the publication of *More than Miracles* (de Shazer et al. 2007), during which Insoo commented, “Why would you withhold information from people?” Yvonne then goes on to comment, “The consensus was that it would be immoral to withhold knowledge if you know something that might be helpful to someone”. (p. 198).

Mason’s Safe/Uncertainty has popped into my head in three main situations since the first publication in 1993 – with

people who have not come across it before, with people who have also read the paper, and for me when I find myself in a position of unsafe uncertainty and wish I was in a place of safe certainty.

For me, Mason's framework is best understood as a map which may or may not be useful to the client. I hope that the addition of a map to the conversation is less likely to disrupt the SF framing of the conversation if I do so from what Cilliers (2013) has referred to as a position of modesty (p. 88), and if I am careful to avoid confusing the map with the territory (Korzybski, 1933). With someone who is unfamiliar I might say, "I know of a framework that may or may not be useful here, would you like me to show it?" If the client agrees I then draw the framework, ask the client where they think they or others are at the moment, where they would prefer themselves and/or others to be and what might help to locate them in the preferred position.

Marianne (not her real name), who was already familiar with Safe/Uncertainty, made use of a recent conversation with me to talk about a challenging event. Marianne is a relatively new manager of a service in an Institute of Higher Education, with most of her team having been in post longer than her. The event had been unexpected and unlike anything the service had ever experienced before. I commented, "I wonder if it might be helpful to look at this with Mason's four quadrants", drew the quadrants and asked,

"Where do you think team members are?"

"Where do you think you are being drawn to be?"

"Where would you prefer you and the team to be?"

"What might you be able to do as a manager to bring this about?"

When I asked Marianne to share her experience of my use of Safe/Uncertainty to this account she recalled,

"I started the conversation in a position of unsafety due to having felt attacked by members of my team, demanding guidance on what to do in a particular situation. Members of my team had complained of feeling unsafe as they felt

they were not sure of what to do in the particular situation. My immediate response was to try to find short term solutions to establish certainty. I felt self-imposed pressure to create this certainty by writing, in particular, step by step guides, to guard the team against any risk or uncertainty.”

Marianne looks back on the conversation as being “extremely helpful”, adding “I appreciated the space with John and the reminder of Mason’s framework to make sense of my situation”. Marianne has also shared the following, which I hope will encourage others to consider offering Safe/Uncertainty to clients for whom it may be useful,

“During my conversation with John I was able to reflect on the change process going on within the team and to acknowledge my intention to create a team dynamic, working from an ethical position of empowerment for staff. I realised they required certainty and by my responding, I was trying to create a certainty which did not and could not exist. Through discussion I was able to address the need for safety within the team and wondered what staff could do themselves to create this for themselves and for the wider team. I recognised that I have a very skilled and experienced team and I was able to consider how I could support them to hold onto this and hold onto uncertainty within the work context. Further to our conversation I have indeed started to create the guidance handbook required but this was much less of a knee jerk reaction. We are meeting together to work through this as a team, with individuals taking responsibility for contributing to this, sharing their wisdom of working in our sector and of the institution, of which I have only been a part for a short time. By holding onto my own position of safe uncertainty I hope to make sustained and positive changes. We have also arranged to set time aside for peer case discussion, working through scenarios.”

Finally, me. Whenever I am working with people and feel drawn to certainty, Mason's map helps me question whether enough has been done to ensure sufficient safety so that we can all take advantage of the creativity that is more likely to happen when we are in a space of uncertainty. Safe certainty can be very tempting, but as experience has taught me, it usually fails to deliver what is wanted.

References

- Cilliers, P. (2013). Complexity, deconstruction and relativism. *InterAction*, 5(1), 76–94.
- Shazer, S. de, Dolan, Y. M., & Korman, H. (2007). *More than miracles: The state of the art of solution-focused brief therapy*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Korzybski, A. (1933). *Science and Sanity: A Non-Aristotelian System and its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics*. Institute of General Semantics.
- McKergow, M., & Korman, H. (2009). Inbetween – neither inside nor outside: The radical simplicity of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 28(2), 34–49.
- Quick, E. K. (2013). *Solution Focused anxiety management: A treatment and training manual*. London: Academic Press.