

Classic SF paper

Introduction to “Four Useful Interventions in Brief Family Therapy” by Steve de Shazer and Alex Molnar (1984)

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Earlier this year I found myself gripped by reading a series of foundational SF papers, which - and I have the sense of a terrible confession here - I had not read before. In a fascinating recent account of reading practices, Gale Miller (2013, p4) suggests ‘it is useful to read texts from the standpoint of different interpretive communities’, and goes on to describe three such communities from which SF texts can be read, which he labels rumour, paradigm and instrumental. Whether or not we can place ourselves clearly in one of those particular communities, these ideas are helpful, I think, in encouraging us to consider the positions from which we read a text. And our positions are determined in part by our histories and by the particular time that we come across what it is we are reading about. I love the music of The Beatles, but I will never have the same relationship with it as someone who was 14 years old when they were waiting for I Want To Hold Your Hand to be released to knock She Loves You off the top of the charts (I was about two at the time).

After some stumbling pre-historic attempts, my own history of SF learning began through attending courses with BRIEF in London. This was in the mid-1990s, and I picked up the sense of excitement when Chris Iveson talked about how they learned to do solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) in the late-1980s, by having Steve de Shazer’s books, *Keys* and *Clues* (de Shazer, 1985; 1988), on their laps as they were sitting behind the one-way mirror. When I went to de Shazer’s

books, inevitably I had a different relationship with them, and the reading which initially had the biggest impact on my learning how to do it consisted mainly of BRIEF's hand-outs and course notes, supplementing the small number of books they had published at that time (George et al, 1990; Lethem, 1994).

When I started to teach the approach in earnest, I began to immerse myself more in de Shazer's writing, and this immersion became deeper after I joined BRIEF in 2004 and developed and co-led the more in-depth diploma course there. I focused mainly on his classic sequence of books (de Shazer, 1982; 1985; 1988; 1991; 1994), and on a small number of important papers, two of which have already been reprinted in this *Classic SF papers* series (de Shazer, Berg, Lipchik, Nunnally, Molnar, Gingerich & Weiner-Davis, 1986; Berg & de Shazer, 1993). However, my relationship with a number of other journal articles was based mainly on seeing them cited in the books I was reading and in lists of references, and hearing them mentioned by my mentors. It has been suggested that some books are so embedded in our culture that we might actually think we have read them when we haven't (Bayard, 2007). I may well have developed the idea that I had actually read de Shazer & Molnar, 1984; Molnar & de Shazer, 1987; Weiner-Davis, de Shazer & Gingerich, 1987; and Gingerich, de Shazer & Weiner-Davis, 1988. The references and names of these articles were so evocative, I knew them inside out. However, earlier this year I found that I hadn't actually read them before.

I had set about an SF writing project, which took me back to the ferment of ideas at the thinktank that was the Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC) in Milwaukee (Malinen, 2002). When I am teaching, I refer on occasion to how the approach was developed, typically providing only a thumbnail sketch. Writing about the development of SFBT was a different matter, and called for more precise explanations. This took me on a journey, back to de Shazer's books, and then beyond them, into what I began to see as the source material, the articles that emerged out

of the ferment and into the journals during the 1980s. I was fascinated in particular by those that detailed the results of the recursive process between theory, practice and research in which the BFTC team was engaged, the most important ones being, I believe, those I have listed above. My reading of these articles began to fill in some of the gaps in my understanding of how the approach was developed, gaps I had previously filled to some extent by referring to the genius or inspiration of de Shazer, Berg and their colleagues. These articles show the 99% perspiration that Thomas Edison thought genius required. I could have chosen any one of them as my classic paper here, but I have decided to go with the first of those listed. In *Four Useful Interventions in Brief Family Therapy*, we see the developmental process that famously unfolded at the BFTC come alive off the page. Steve de Shazer and Alex Molnar describe the development of an intervention as beginning from its design for a particular case, before, if 'found effective', being tried in other situations. Then, 'when a pattern of usefulness¹ emerges', the team would 'study what is going on that makes the intervention useful' (p297). The first intervention considered in the article came, of course, to be called the First Session Formula Task, and the pivotal role that this task had in the shift from a problem focus to a solution focus became clear to the team in later years (David Kiser's unpublished 1995 dissertation is fascinating in this respect, and is quoted liberally in Malinen's historical account). So, read this article and experience history in the making. Then, when you have worn its grooves out, you can take it off the turntable and replace it with the next smash hit release, the next *Classic SF paper* to detail the recursive developmental process that came out of Milwaukee in the 1980s.

¹ The criteria for effectiveness and usefulness perhaps depended on theoretical leanings regarding the process of change that were not fully spelt out, but that is for another day.

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