Research review

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Research may be dangerous for your health. Attempting a research review may be especially dangerous for your mental health: just searching for appropriate literature to review made me want to pull my hair out (– and "trichotil-lomania" is an explicit, "serious" diagnosis according to ICD-10 or DSM-5 ☺). Most "hard-core" research publications exist as abstracts only, or as pay(-a-lot)-per-access to them if you don't have the right institutional membership.

Only after a lengthy and mostly vain search did I realise that the former academic scientist (biologist) within me had a somewhat over-restricted idea or scheme of what I was looking for: to try and find something as close as possible to RCTs, randomised controlled clinical trials.

Recovering from that idea (also with encouraging and much-appreciated support from Carey Glass and Mark McKergow!), I realised that there's more to "research" than RCTs. Rather, the scope ranges from initial observations, creative ideas, case examples, simple hypotheses, exploratory studies confirming or disconfirming those hypotheses and creating new ones, comparative studies (including, yes, RCTs), meta-analyses and reviews of whole research areas to editorials and essays, and back to new creative contra-dictions. (The end of creative ideas, finally, may be a therapy manual . . .).

Another relevant distinction might be research investigating *outcomes* of interventions – therapeutic or organisational developmental – versus research into *presuppositions*: the "epistemological", "sociological", or otherwise tacit assumptions and logics underlying the research question, necessary to be believed true for this question to make any sense at all. For both views I found examples. So there is *hope*, too, in research (as you will see . . .).

From this enlarged perspective, I chose the following six-pack: a very "hope-full" view on solution focus (SF); an editorial update of SF effectiveness meta-analyses; a single case example of creative scaling; a primer on "as brief as possible" (aka single session) therapy; a view with three perspectives on the influence of readers on research; and an empirical investigation of co-created meanings in answers to the wonderful question "What's better?"

Cynthia Franklin: "An Update on Strengths-Based, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy" (Guest Editorial); Health & Social Work, April 2015 (DOI: 10.1093/hsw/hlv022)

Cynthia Franklin is the chairperson of the research committee for the SFBTA (Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Association) and a co-author of "Solution-Focused Brief Therapy: A Handbook of Evidence-Based Practice (Franklin, Trepper, McCollum, & Gingerich, 2011). In her brief "review of reviews", she locates SFBT in the tradition of social work's emphasis on strengths, resources, goals, self-determination, hope, and a collaborative relationship between clients and professionals. She describes a couple of meta-analyses from 2006 to 2015 and concludes, based on the growing evidence of its clinical effectiveness in specific areas: *"The evidence for strengths-based SFBT is growing, suggesting that this approach is advancing and that social workers can confidently use SFBT when their clinical judgment and client situations suggest that it may be useful"*.

Robert G. Blundo, Kristin W. Bolton, and J. Christopher Hall: "Hope: Research and Theory in Relation to Solution-Focused Practice and Training"; International Journal of Solution-Focused Practices, 2014, Vol. 2, No. 2, 52–62

Bob Blundo and his colleagues observed a gap between the clinical finding, *"that the presence of hope and the development and cultivation of hope plays an important role in the client change process [and…] has significance to outcome"* on the one hand, and *"the implicit [-only] nature of hope in SFBT literature"* on the other hand. They summarise for the reader: *"In this paper we address this gap by linking research findings on the concept of hope from various areas of study to both training in the practice skills and processes of SFBT"*. They conceptualise *hope* towards concrete goals as an active rather than a passive force, and thus very much related to SFBT, quoting directly from de Shazer et al. (2007): *"The overall attitude [expressed in SFBT] is positive, respectful, and hopeful."* Barbara Fredrickson in her book *Positivity* (Fredrickson, 2009) states more explicitly: *"Deep within the core of hope is the belief that things can change. No matter how awful or uncertain they are at the moment, things can turn out better. Possibilities exist. Hope sustains you. It keeps you from collapsing into despair. It motivates you to tap into your capabilities and inventiveness to turn things around. It inspires you to plan for a better future"*, which fits well with SF's idea of "future perfect". Indeed, of Seligman's 24 "character strengths", *hope* is the single one that correlates most highly with *satisfaction with life*. So they conclude: *"Given the significance of hope in research on change and the sparse explicit attention in SFBT texts, it is our contention that hope deserves more attention in the literature, training, and practice"*, and they describe ways and practical skill sets to manifest hopefulness in SF.

Lori Pantaleao and Anne Rambo: "Are You a LeBron Today? Playfully Expanding Scaling Questions"; International Journal of Solution-Focused Practices 2014, Vol. 2, No. 1, 20-23

This single-case study describes the use of scaling not with numbers alone, but with more concrete metaphors taken from the world of the client. Here, an 11–year old boy was a fan of a basketball team, so he used the quality of the individual players as markers for the values on his progress scale. His idol, a guy named LeBron James, signified the "ten" on the scale. The whole family joined in identifying ways in which the boy could be more "LeBron" each day. The paper encourages the creative use of scales in client-specific language – and fits well with my own enthusiasm for metaphors and the benefits of their utilisation in coaching and therapy!

Karen Elizabeth Paul & Mark van Ommeren: "A primer on single session therapy and its potential application in humanitarian situations", Intervention 2013, Vol.11 (1), pp 8-23

Accentuating the "brief" aspect in SFBT to the max, what you get is *single session therapy* (SST). This paper reviews SST in two directions: (1) SST protocols as developed in rich countries, mostly for cost-effectiveness reasons, and (2) SST as a means of support in post-catastrophe and emergency situations, exemplified here by hurricane Katrina or the civil war in Columbia. A systematic search for published SST effectiveness evidence found only a few unsystematic reviews, and exactly one RCT, with one follow-up.

SST follows some kind of generic heuristic: build contact and rapport, explain the possibilities and limits of the situation, focus on the single most important concern first, then on goals with respect to that concern, what worked already in the past, options in the present, client's resources, and possible small steps regarding the near future. This may

or may not (in emergencies) be embedded between pre-session activities through a phone call or a questionnaire, and post session follow-ups including evaluations.

It is interesting to see how close the model presented here resembles a "generic" SFBT session (even when remembering that "every case is different", of course). And it is interesting to see the explicit links to "hope" (the main topic of one of the studies introduced above), mentioning it as one of the "common factors" in therapeutic effectiveness and in the following two quotes: *"Recognize that exploring these questions is important to increase the client's level of hope, which can be the first step toward healing"*, and, *"Consider your own beliefs about the potential impact of a single session, e.g., how hopeful are you that a single session can create meaningful change?"*

Karen A. Richter: "How clients and solution focused therapists co-construct new meanings when having conversations about 'What's better?'"; A research project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Counselling, (School of Health Sciences, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, NZ) 2015

Where "What else?" is probably the most frequently used SF question of all, some variation of "What's better?" may be the most frequently used opening sentence in follow-up sessions in SFBT. This master's thesis investigated effects of the latter question by microanalysing video recordings of five therapy sessions, client feedback forms, and intensive self-reflections by the author. A newbie to the field of SFBT, the author initially doubted the applicability and appropriateness of such a question. Based on this scepticism, she formulated a set of questions culminating in her Research Question: *"What happens in the therapy room? – How do clients and SF therapists co-construct new meanings when having conversations about 'What's better?'"* She identifies "What's better?" as one of those pre-suppositional questions, and expresses hope *"that*

our understanding of SFBT interventions could be improved if there were more thorough investigations about interventions and the personal meanings of these to both the client and the practitioner".

In contrast to her initial scepticism, she discovers *"real-life therapeutic conversations to be more complex than those presented in therapy textbooks"*, and summarises her own findings: *"The analysis revealed the collaborative and co-constructive character of Solution Focused Therapy conversations. The 'What's better?' prompt led to a shift in meaning for clients. Comments made on the client feedback forms showed that the conversations raised greater awareness of their own achievements, competencies and positive aspects in their lives. Clients also expressed an increase in hope through conversations about 'What's better?'"*

Once again, "hope" seems to be a core factor touched by SF questions.

Gale Miller: "Readers Matter: reading practices and the future of solution-focused thought and practice", International Journal of Solution-Focused Practices 2013, Vol. 1, No. 1, 3–9

Can you imagine writing something yourself – for example the next research review for this journal – and then nobody reading it? Clearly, as the researcher-writer, and the editor, so the reader is important in furthering scientific discourse. Gale Miller unfolds this 'readers' focus' in his starting pages for the then new online journal. He states *"Reading is a complex activity. It is a form of interaction that links readers with authors and others participating in related interpretive communities. Reading involves applying one's knowledge about interpretive communities as much as acquiring knowledge from the text being read. Readers construct conditions for learning by orienting to texts in different ways. Texts can only teach us what we are prepared to learn. This is why it is useful to read texts from the standpoint of different*

interpretive communities". He distinguishes *"three interpretive communities: rumor, paradigm, and instrumental readings"*, and claims that *"These reading orientations represent three different pathways into the future of solution-focused thought and practice. The descriptions are intended to capture the assumptions, logic, and implications of each of the interpretive communities"*.

Together with Steve de Shazer he had introduced the frame of "rumour readings" in an earlier paper (Miller & de Shazer, 1998): *"We chose this language to emphasize the ambiguous meanings associated with solution-focused therapy, and the range of interpretations of it voiced by people across the therapy world. One of our purposes was to highlight the lack of a privileged position on what this form of therapy was and should be. Instead, we saw the field as consisting of multiple narrative versions of a solution-focused rumor."* He was hopeful that this orientation could help the development of SF: *"The logic of the rumor orientation is similar to that of a marketplace. Diverse ideas compete for readers' acceptance with some being rejected as others live on to compete with new claims. The promise of this orientation is that only the most useful ideas and practices will survive because readers (like solution-focused clients) are consumers who know what works in their lives"*. And again, there's a link to "hope": *"There is also a bias toward drama and novelty in the rumor marketplace. Listening to and spreading rumors can be fun. They offer new and different possibilities for our lives, new worries, and sometimes new hopes"*.

Gale's second frame, "paradigm", as defined based on Thomas Kuhn's view in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1970), differs from "rumor": *"An important distinction between paradigm and rumor readings is their treatment of unanticipated claims. Rumor readers welcome such claims and consider their potential usefulness. Once assessed as not solution-focused, paradigm readers set unanticipated ideas and practices aside"*. It is useful in its own way: *"The paradigm reading is a framework for answering outsiders' questions about 'what is it?' 'how does it work?'*

and 'why is it effective?'" And it contains several risks: *"A major risk involves paradigm readers' avoidance of anomalies. This practice speaks to the considerable faith that these readers invest in their paradigms. Their faith sustains their work, but it may also blind them to issues that others can see".* Proponents of this view may be so sure about their "truth" that they may feel threatened in their (expert) status and even in their identity when confronted with a differing view.

The third frame is "instrumental reading": *"Instrumental reading emphasizes readers' interest in finding answers to practical questions".* Compared to the other views, *"Instrumental readers are similar to rumor readers in being willing to entertain multiple definitions of solution focused thought and practice. These readers differ, however, in the extent of their flexibility. The bias toward novelty and drama in the rumor orientation is constrained by instrumental readers' focus on addressing current practical issues. Instrumental reading is also a way of avoiding paradigm paralysis. Paradigm readers risk intellectual paralysis in insisting that there is only one proper construction of the solution-focused tradition. Instrumental readers, on the other hand, may sometimes embrace contradictory versions of the solution-focused tradition in seeking workable answers to their changing practical concerns".*

So to summarise, (one reading of) this whole text shows that *"the meaning of texts is neither intrinsic to them nor a matter of individual opinion",* but rather relative to *"how we read from the standpoint of interpretive communities".* Gale concludes: *"My purpose is to highlight that both reading and work involve using knowledge and skills to get something done. Both produce value. Reading and work can be opportunities for people to assert their personal agency in and on the world",* while he warns that *"Both have intended and unintended consequences".* What did I take away from this paper? To become conscious of this multi-perspective, multi-purpose variety of reading modes can help us to be more careful with "final truths", as well as with becoming more curious in

re-reading a text, even several times – each time from a different orientation or perspective.

(This may be tried, to start with, with each and any of the texts reviewed here, as well as with this review itself . . .)

As Gale Miller puts it at the end of his text: *"There is value in asking oneself: 'What did I do that helped to make that text relevant to me?' and 'What was I prepared to learn and not learn from that text?'"* If you, dear reader of *this* text, have any explicit answer to *those* questions, I'd love to hear from you!

P.S. The challenges of writing a research review reminded me of "The Difficulties and Benefits of Being a Simple Therapist" (Panyoto, Macdonald & Strahilov, 2015;
http://en.solutions-centre-rousse-bulgaria.org/files/the_
difficulties_and_benefits_of_being_a_simple_therapist.pdf),
which is at least as much fun to read as a research review is fun to write . . .

References

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Klaus Schenck first met Insoo Kim Berg and Ben Furman in 2001 in Vienna, and has been actively involved in SF discourse ever since, including a dozen visits to SOLworld conferences. He evolved from a PhD research biologist and medical device industry manager into an SF enthusiast, teaching-level systemic consultant, agile coach, project improver, therapist, and academic lecturer. He loves to combine SF with his other areas of interest, some of which can be found at https://sites.google.com/site/klausschenck