

Reviews

RESEARCH REVIEW

Rayya Ghul

Sankaran, S & Brown S (2012) Coaching Collaborative Creativity and Innovation: An Action-Based Method for Sustainable Innovation, Learning and Development in Business Organizations. In Zuber-Skerritt, O (Ed.) (2012).

Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World.

Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing

Although this is a book chapter and not strictly research, I chose to review it because it does discuss action research methodology, which has a good epistemological fit with solution-focused practices in that it generates locally-negotiated knowledge within a collaborative and emancipatory framework.

The main focus of the chapter is the use of a coaching model within a design thinking/action research frame. The coaching model here is Brown's GROUP coaching process; Goal, Reality, Options, Understanding others and Performance, which our readers will probably recognise as being built on the GROW model.

The value of the chapter, however, is that not only does it provide excellent descriptions of the design thinking process, the action research process and the group coaching process, it also provides a fantastic template for writing a theoretical article. Beginning with a critique of strategic problem-solving approaches it proposes and justifies design thinking as an alternative method for solving 'wicked' problems (those which resist simple solutions – just the kind with which SF works well). I particularly liked Brown's 3 'spaces' of the design process; inspiration, ideation and implementation and he

points out that these are not linear but there is movement backwards and forwards between the stages. The link to SF is immediately obvious. In trying to categorise the kind of thinking as distinct from inductive or deductive the term 'abductive' is used, which I thought was less successful and mirrors some of the difficulty our community has had in trying to describe what makes SF different. I enjoyed the insight into how these methods highlight the way 'problems and solutions co-evolve' (p.132). As with SF, Brown points out the requirement for practitioners to be reflective and tolerant of uncertainty.

There is a similarly interesting section by Sankaran on the value of action research, which in some ways stands apart from both traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods. There is an empirical process at work but it is within the method itself, empowering participants to develop, test and refine locally negotiated solutions to locally understood problems. For the SF practitioner aligning our practice to an action research paradigm could strengthen and enhance research and publication opportunities in a wider context.

As previously mentioned, the group coaching model (GROUP) is then introduced as developing from the need not only for innovation, but also cooperation to realise and develop ideas. Within this, there is the mention of 'SF thinking' and 'SF' but these are not referenced to any of the SF literature. The whole chapter is extremely scholarly and all sources attributed so I suspect this is simply because the term is also used generically these days. Unlike in the therapy world where 'SF' has more clearly been appropriated from SF brief therapy by other modalities, I do not feel aggrieved at this omission. Rather, I feel it offers an opportunity for us to wave and say 'come on over, we've been exploring this stuff in another language and culture. It looks like we have a lot in common, wanna play?'

Cable, DM, Gino, F & Staats, BR (2013)
Breaking Them in or Eliciting Their Best? Reframing
Socialization around Newcomers' Authentic Self-
expression. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 58(1) pp1-36

This is an article from human resource management focusing on employee effectiveness and retention and investigates the role of different forms of induction process in those outcomes.

The study consists of two randomised control trials, one situated within an organisation in India and the other as a psychological laboratory experiment in an American university. The researchers were testing the hypothesis that an initial socialisation process based on boosting the employee's 'authentic best-self' (Roberts et al 2006) would be more effective than one based on either one which celebrated the organisation or one which simply introduced its structures and delivered skills training.

Roberts et. al. (2006) theoretical article, on which this study is based, presents the concept of the 'reflected best-self' through a thorough analysis of the psychological evidence of the "microdynamics through which strategic human resources are built and maintained" (p. 24). Reflected best-self is defined by the authors as "a changing knowledge structure about who one is at one's best". Drawing on theories of personal change and human resource development, the authors build up a rich description of the different ways that a person might interact with situations, others and work environments to produce new portraits of their best-self, in this sense 'reflected' back to them. There are echoes here of Gergen's Relational Being (2009) in this interactive perspective. The fluidity of this process is highlighted by discussion of 'jolts', or moments (both positive and negative) when a person experiences clarity and can change the content of the best-self portrait. The positive use of jolts can be facilitated through personal qualities, such as positive affect and personal agency as well as positive relationships.

If readers are not familiar with this article it is well worth reading as it provides many possible reasons why specific

SF questions might work. Aside from the obvious ‘how are you when you are at your best?’ generally attributed to Chris Iveson (2013), it illuminates ‘how did you do that?’, ‘what would other people say were your greatest strengths?’, ‘how did you cope with that challenging situation?’ and the ‘sparkling moment’ exercise.

Returning to the article under review here, Cable, Gino and Staats discuss the tension between an employee’s need for self-expression and an organisation’s desire for enculturation into its values and norms and highlight that most efforts focus on the latter in terms of research and practices. Drawing on the work of Roberts et. al. they hypothesise that starting a new job is an opportunity to renegotiate one’s identity and therefore can act as a ‘jolt’ moment as described in the previous article. Thus, focusing induction specifically on their personal qualities “newcomers should be able to frame their new role and its necessary tasks as opportunities to use their signature strengths and unique perspectives at work, thereby bringing more of their authentic best selves to the job”. (p. 3)

There is a helpful theoretical discussion of positive psychology sources providing a rationale for the hypothesis before the presentation of methodology and results. The field study took place in an Indian call centre with 96 and 101 agents receiving individual and organisational identity ‘treatment’ respectively with another 408 receiving the standard induction process. The individual stream were asked to answer questions such as “What is unique about you which leads to your happiest times and best performance at work?”, “Your Personal Highlights Reel: Reflect on a specific time – perhaps on a job, perhaps at home – when you were acting the way you were ‘born to act’” and “How can you repeat that behaviour on this job?” In contrast, the organisational identity group were asked “What did you hear about Wipro today that you would be proud to tell your family about?” and “What did you hear that made you proud to be part of this organisation?”. Answers to these questions formed the basis for further induction activities. The laboratory study featured a pretend research assistant opportunity for students with an optional extra day and 175 students

split into three groups were inducted using similar types of questions and processes.

While the laboratory study only took place over two days, the Indian field study spanned 6 months. In the latter, agents who undertook the individual-identity socialisation were less likely to leave the firm and more likely to produce greater customer satisfaction. In the laboratory study, the results were mirrored and additional tests of reported self-expression and job satisfaction showed that individual socialisation processes were superior to organisation or skills training. All results were subjected to rigorous statistical testing.

As the authors point out, organisations invest considerable resources in recruitment and induction processes in order to find good matches and form organisational identities in the belief that this will promote good employee relations and retention. This study is somewhat counterintuitive in that it shows that drawing out a person's individual strengths and resources and celebrating them from the outset is more effective. SF methods such as exception-finding are clearly linked to the practices described and this study should provide excellent evidence for the development of SF induction and socialisation processes.

References

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Meyer, DD & Cottone, RR (2013)

Solution-Focused Therapy as a Culturally Acknowledging Approach with American Indians. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* Vol 41 (January) pp47–55

This is a single case study exploring the use of SF therapy with a Choctaw individual given the pseudonym, Anna. I thought this provided an interesting contrast with the previous articles on reflected best-self. As the authors point out, the amplification of client strengths and beneficial behaviours often forms an important part of the SF processes of exception-finding and solution-building. While Anna had found this helpful for addressing her personal negative feelings, her cultural background meant that when moving on to working on her future goals a clash occurred.

Anna was the first person in her family to go away to college, which had caused her family to question how much she valued their worth and their lifestyle. Now she wanted to take up the opportunity of an excellent job in a city far away. For the Choctaw, interdependence and close family relationships are essential to an individual's wellbeing. Anna felt that she was having to choose between her family and her career. In addition, there is a cultural taboo against boasting and much value placed on humility, hence the impasse in utilising client strengths to move towards the future.

Counselling therefore focuses on harmony and the therapist utilised a 'both-and' style of questioning rather than 'either-or' so Anna explored times and ways when she could express her individual choices and still live in harmony with herself and her family. Anna was also able to incorporate ceremonial practices in her progression towards resolution of her problem.

The authors provide a detailed description of the ways that the SF process was adapted with this cultural group and the reasons given demonstrate thoughtfulness and care. For example the focus on the future may be contrary to the present-time orientation of many American Indians so the authors suggest a rewording to 'a time when the client

experienced harmony with all people and things'. Resources were found to be more useful to focus on than personal strengths.

Although this study is limited as it only reports on one case, it does provide a reminder that it is not necessarily the exact questions in SF which gives it power, but the principle of valuing clients' expertise and resourcefulness in creating their own steps forward and thereby teaching us how to ask better (more useful) questions, especially when working in cross-cultural contexts.