Reviews

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Recursive Frame Analysis – another way to research, improve practice, and train in SF

This research review was built on 7 publications spanning 1997–2013. The topic is Recursive Frame Analysis (RFA), a valuable resource for researchers, practitioners, trainers and supervisors. The 7 articles are less a series on a topic, but rather form an interconnected whole, rather like a set of nested Russian dolls. While much of the research was conducted within the context of therapy, the focus on language makes it relevant – and I hope useful - to those working in consulting, training and supervision.

Introduction – my good reasons

These articles are embedded in and illuminate:

- an interest in language. *Minimal Elegance* – was my first encounter with Steve de Shazer's writings in the 1990s. The Microanalysis research of Janet Bavelas (http://web.uvic.ca/psyc/bavelas/Publications.html) and others opened a whole world of how an SF conversation is co-constructed
- Gregory Bateson's ecology of mind and the co-construction of meaning. This was familiar territory from my doctoral dissertation days
- Maturana and Varela's writings about embodied mind, an understanding of cognition that re-appeared at the SF Research and Academic conference co-hosted by SFCT in September 2013
- a method that supports the development of relational thinking, pattern thinking, and the ability to synthesise –

some of the skills at work when conducting solution-building conversations

- the appealing aesthetics of metaphors of music – the notes and the silences between, all form part of what to pay attention to. Music remains closely connected with SF as seen in Steve de Shazer's saxophone playing that is evoked when browsing through photographs of SOLWorld events. Jazz encourages us to both follow the discipline of structure, as well as the freedom to improvise, and to become attuned to the small signals that alert when to do which
- the coherence of a method with its subject matter that works across research, practice, training and supervision.

What is Recursive Frame Analysis? For whom might RFA be useful?

"When making sense of any object or event, a person must construct a frame or a context for that event. How we derive meaning from our experience is a product of how we construct these contexts and frames through words. Weaving together context and texts creates meaning" (Rudes, Shilts and Berg, 1997, p. 205).

Recursive Frame Analysis (RFA) allows the reader to visualise how discourse in any context can be constructed and organised without engaging in lengthy theoretical discussions. Instead, the reader has immediate visual access to the architecture, anatomy, and structure of the session at hand (Keeney, 1990). It offers practitioners a method for recording progress notes, researchers a qualitative research method that maps the structure of therapeutic conversations, and supervisors a method that is context-sensitive, co-operative and constructed through dialogue.

What do these articles offer?

2013   A practice illustration of the application of RFA. The conversation between practitioner and client is the focus and unit of analysis.

2012   The origins and trajectory of the development of RFA as a qualitative research method.

2012   RFA as a tool for practitioners to map the structure of their conversations and notice their contributions in the co-construction of change.

2011   The use of commonly available software to carry out and display RFA, using case examples from Bill O'Hanlon's (2006) practice. Illustrates data structuring, processing and analysis.

2010   Using RFA as a research method to investigate Insoo's utilisation of SF questions in a therapeutic context.

2009   RFA as a method for practitioners to use when making progress notes. Refers to SF authors and texts.

1997   RFA is used to investigate the talk used in an SF supervision conversation.

Some highlights from each

Chenail, R. J. (2013). Recursive Frame Analysis – a report. Sourced from http://www.nova.edu/

Ron Chenail (2013) provides a short walk through how RFA is built on Gregory Bateon's (1972) notion of ecology of mind, and discusses Bateson's definition of science. He illustrates how Brad Keeney's (1990) development of RFA is an attempt to apply Ockham's razor. The article provides a step by step walk through the application of RFA to an extract from Insoo Kim Berg's work called Irreconcilable Differences: a Solution-focused approach to Marital Therapy. What I appreciated is the use of therapeutic work which is publically available, thus allowing readers direct access to Chenail's

audit trail, and hence to make up their own minds about the legitimacy, credibility and value of RFA.

Keeney, H., Keeney, B., & Chenail, R. J. (2012). Recursive Frame Analysis: a practitioner's tool for mapping therapeutic conversations. *The Qualitative Report***, *17*, T&L Art 5, 1–15. Sourced from http://www.nova.edu/**

Hilary and Brad Keeney focus on the practitioner's role in promoting a therapeutic conversation that goes towards doing something different rather than staying in the same stuckness that the client presents. Both speech and non-verbal expressions are included in the analysis of the "performed communication rather than the non-spoken interpretation" (p. 2). Like with the microanalysis research, RFA limits itself to what is observable and at the surface in the conversation and sees this as sufficient to account for therapeutic change. Not only are the authors keen to notice when change happens in the conversation, but also to note whether the shifts are maintained, and how. Like Gassman and Grawe (2006), they highlight the beginnings of sessions as critical to successful outcomes. They also focus on the role of the middles of sessions in sustaining change as describing them as "a collective midpoint holding the fulcrum that determines whether things move back or project forward" (p. 3). For practitioners, trainers and supervisors the RFA analysis examples offered provide food for thought about our role in conversations which begin to move forward in solution-talk, and then appear to head backwards towards more problem-talk. While reading this article I was reminded of Bill O'Hanlon's (2006) *Change 101,* a useful text for those intrigued by change talk rather that problem- or solution-talk. For practitioners, the article offers a system for recording progress (not process) notes that sticks closely to the metaphors clients use as this "keeps us more literally connected to what actually took place" (p. 5). I particularly appreciated the way this RFA system encourages simplicity while preserving the complexity

and originality of the conversation. Case notes written in this style also make us more likely to begin follow-on sessions with "What's different?" or "What's better?"

The case offered provides an interesting exercise in drawing distinctions with SF – an SF practitioner might have used future-focused questioning like the miracle question together with scaling to develop what is presented in the RFA Act 2 frame. While the authors talk about evoking fantasy, the SF approach to inviting imagination is more grounded into clients' everyday worlds, evident in the time focus of the Tomorrow Question.

After a somewhat scathing critique of evidenced-based therapies' claims about outcomes, the authors propose RFA as an alternative way to evaluate therapists' contributions to the forward movement (or not) constructed in sessions. They provide pages of case material that will be of interest to researchers and academics.

Keeney, H., & Keeney, B. (2012). Recursive Frame Analysis: reflections on the development of a qualitative research model. *The Qualitative Report, 17*, T&L Art 3, 1–11. Sourced from http://www.nova.edu/

This article evolved from Brad Keeney's noticing that practitioners tended to get lost when talking about their sessions, lost into theories, professional jargon and interpretation. They tended towards "theoretical narration rather than action description" (p. 515). I was reminded of the rapidly-becoming common phrase *focus on what's happening between the noses, not what's happening between the ears* (acknowledgment uncertain – perhaps Mark McKergow?). Certainly for researchers interested in the interaction as the unit of analysis, RFA is a research method worth considering.

In reading about the development of RFA since 1987, I was struck by how the many parallels there are with the development of Steve de Shazer's writing about SFBT, in particular his writings in Patterns (1982). Both spent years, not just hours, watching videotapes of sessions as the data from which

their writings emerged. This article offers an interesting possibility for those troubled by the "solution" word proposing that the work has more to do with moving from stuck and impoverished to experiencing enrichment and resourceful engagement. As demonstrated in recent publications from Jackson and Waldman (2012), SF has much to offer those working in organisations around the topics of employee engagement, performance and resilience.

While this focus on enrichment and resourceful engagement may appear to signal a closer affinity with Narrative Therapy than SFBT, Keeney set his work apart from that of Michael White's by arguing that "drama and theatre are more suitable metaphors than narrative and telling stories" (p. 516/7). He goes on to comment "therapists are easily seduced by interpretation and analysis, forgetting that they are inside the action scene of a therapeutic performance. . . . The map is inside the territory, as our ideas about experience are part of the experience" (p. 517).

The body of this article centres around the authors' claim that "RFA is a tool that brings research and practice together as one co-operative activity" (p. 519). They then proceed to demonstrate this through argument-building organised around the concepts of recursion, and frames versus content. Of particular interest to those exploring the border ecologies of mind between the SF Brief Approach and other academic disciplines, as evidenced in the coming together of enactive philosophy, nursing science, narrative practice and SF at the conference co-hosted by SFCT in 2013, the authors signal that RFA provides an exit from theories and models and the territorial and stifling multiple monologues such academic discussions can give rise to. For practitioners they claim it provides a tool to free themselves from being stuck in a model's non-changing or too slowly changing form to keep up with practitioners' explorations of their work. This is a reminder of the discussion at the Malmo Summit of concerns about how to preserve the value of Steve and Insoo's development of SFBT, while also allowing fresh development to emerge and be valued in the years after their passings. Publi-

cations such as *Steve de Shazer and the future of Solution-focused therapy* (Trepper, Dolan, McCollum, and Nelson, 2006) – while published before Insoo's passing in 2007 – are testament to this debate.

Chenail, R. J., & Duffy, M. (2011). Utilizing Microsoft Office to produce and present recursive frame analysis findings. *The Qualitative Report*, *16*(1), No 1, 292-307. **Sourced from http://www.nova.edu/**

It is delightful and refreshing to come across a group of authors who can attend to the conceptual as well as the practical. This article offers a way to side-step the researcher's or graduate student's lament at having to spend money on software packages that promise to speed up the data processing and analysis work, and enable impressive visual displays of data to be created at the click of a mouse or press of a key, only to find themselves spending hours they often don't have, in trying to become familiar with the vagaries of how to use this rich-in-promise, low-in-delivery technology.

The article walks readers through an outline of RFA and then the use of the familiar MS Word and Powerpoint to conduct the "semantic, sequential and pragmatic analysis" of RFA (p. 292). The concept of galleries formed from a collection of frames is illustrated with case material from Bill O'Hanlon's practice. Despite MS Office updates, the step-by-step instructions remain useful and enable a quick decision about whether this system can enhance or replace the system readers are using to process and display conversational data.

Cotton, J. (2010). Question utilization in Solution-focused Brief Therapy: a Recursive Frame Analysis of Insoo Kim Berg's solution talk. *The Qualitative Report*, *15*(1), 18–36. **Sourced from http://www.nova.edu/**

This article is the one that offers direct access to how RFA connects with how SF Brief conversations are conducted. Author Jeff Cotton, who also has explored the microanalysis

approach to researching SFB conversations, presents his study in a recognisably standard academic research format – argument-building around paradigm, research method, analysis and interpretations, and discussion. Again the piece of Insoo's work that forms the data set for this study is publically available (Allyn and Bacon, 2000), enabling easy verification and response from other researchers. The article is rich in a detailed application of RFA to Insoo's practice, thus providing a guide to researchers interested in experimenting with RFA as a qualitative research method. Cotton concludes "It is this type of process research or process change research that SFBT needs in order to build a better set of evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness" (p. 34). While the data is drawn from therapy, this study provides material and a method for those interested in the quality development of SF language, whether in the therapy context or the contexts of consulting, training and organisational work.

Chenail, R., Somers, C., & Benjamin, J. D. (2009). A Recursive Frame qualitative Analysis of MFT progress note tipping points. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *31*, 87–99.

This study is pertinent for trainers involved in the education of note-taking and record-keeping by researchers and practitioners. It also has applicability in supervision. The research team reviewed 206 de-identified progress notes written in relation to 30 cases by the practitioner as part of conducting change-oriented conversations, mostly SF brief conversations. Rich, detailed data is provided to illustrate the application of RFA, making this a useful study for those considering whether and how to experiment with this method. The study also addresses how RFA helps to illuminate the extent to which trainees were composing progress notes "in a style predominantly consistent with the main assumptions and practices articulated within an array of discursive therapy approaches" (p. 97). They also reported that RFA was able to "trace a tipping point (Gladwell, 2000) in the cases where the noted discourse

appeared to tip from a problem to a solution-focus" (p. 97). The presence of such tipping points were particular to cases with outcomes regarded as successful and absent from cases regarded as unsuccessful – either negative or unclear outcomes.

While legislation and professional standards and ethics vary across countries and professions, I found the application of RFA to progress notes particularly useful. I have attended presentations by Prof. Alfred Allan (2011) who illustrates, in often tragic detail, the demise of otherwise competent practitioners who persisted with writing lengthy process rather than recording progress notes. The application of RFA to note-making provides managers and supervisors of practitioners with a method that is professionally credible and research-legitimised.

Rudes, J., Shilts, L., & Berg, I. K. (1997). Focused supervision seen through a Recursive Frame Analysis. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *23*(2), 203–215.

This article has as one of its goals to make the supervision process transparent through a detailed analysis of the conversation between a supervisor and supervisee. RFA is used as the method of analysis and visual displays are provided enabling the reader to experience RFA as applied to a supervision conversation about a practitioner–client conversation. The authors conclude that by using RFA, a supervisor can "move toward more context-sensitive supervision that centres on co-operation and dialogue" (p. 214).

In closing

I hope this short exploration of some of the research conducted in the area of Recursive Frame Analysis may prove useful. I plan to expand my reading further into the territory of peer-reviewed publications and also to the connections with Microanalysis which has been my preferred method for analysing how our purposeful and focused conversations

enable people to cope better with the circumstances they face and to move themselves forward through what begins in the interactional world of language.

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Pernilla Forsberg Tiger

Destination Progress – From satisfying the Swedish-Work Environmental Act to developing systematic work environment management with support of a Solution Focus approach

Pernilla Forsberg Tiger supported the development of systematic work environment management of a Swedish IT Company using an SF approach, including SF principles and tools. Traditionally systematic work environment management in Sweden has been focused on risk assessment and is mainly problem focused. Annual results of surveys of the work environment with a focus on overcoming insufficiencies easily raise feelings of listlessness and are likely to end up as a report on a shelf rather than being part of a continuous development process involving the workforce. As the company prioritised workforce engagement and employees who thrive in the company, the CEO was interested in finding more SF ways to investigate and develop working conditions that better met their ambitions and business culture, but also satisfied the requirements of the Swedish work environmental act.

The assignment included creating and implementing a survey of work conditions, and processing the results during a workshop to support an ongoing development process with the participation of the company's CEO, management team and employees. One of the challenges was to create a survey that shifted focus from analysis of risks, figures and comparisons, and instead focused on the employees' will to make improvements and their resources. This was accomplished by building the survey on a gap analysis where the company's top assets and improvement areas emerged. The result was then used as part of building the platform (what's wanted) during the workshop as a basis for looking to the future and building progress on the company's strengths and resources.

Overall the initial challenges of the project were achieved, with greater involvement and commitment of the employees as well as in a more vibrant development of the work environ-

ment. The project has also further inspired the company to continue their development of business with the support of an SF approach.

Lead Reviewer: Björn Johansson, Second reviewer: Gun-Eva Andersson Långdahl

Mari Juote-Pesonen

HRD-Team development process (2012)

Mari was a consultant to an HRD-team in a public organisation. The aim of the process was to support change process of the team. The process lasted for six months, including five half-day workshops. The goal was to provide a co-creation process in which the HRD-team could co-construct its own desired future and appropriate work procedures. In addition, the team members wanted to learn and develop their individual facilitation skills and create new HRD-products.

The reviewers were impressed by Mari's ability to maintain a fruitful and target-oriented process during a constantly changing situation with the client. That spirit of continuity combined with a broad variety of creative working methods providing possibilities for re-framing obviously helped the team a lot. She made use of every type of contribution and was ready to make agile adaptations leading to both budgeted and unbudgeted results for individual group members and the whole team. This piece of work is a great example of SF facilitation for emerging change.

Lead reviewer: Marika Tammeaid, Second reviewer: Peter Sundman.