

SF Research Digest

Brief descriptions and reflections on recent research articles and books relevant to the development of SF practice and theory

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1. Histed, M. H., Bonin, V. & Reid, R. C. (2009). Direct Activation of Sparse, Distributed Populations of Cortical Neurons by Electrical Microstimulation. *Neuron* 63(4).

The assertion that we can learn something from every failure is often heard. This study by Earl Miller and his colleagues Mark Histed and Anitha Pasupathy of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Picower Institute for Learning and Memory tests that notion by looking at the learning process at the level of neurons. The study shows how brains learn more effectively from success than from failure. The researchers created a unique snapshot of the learning process that shows how single cells change their responses in real time as a result of information about what is the right action and what is the wrong one. Brain cells keep track of whether recent behaviours were successful or not. When a certain behaviour was successful, cells became more finely tuned to what the animal was learning. After a failure, there was little or no change in the brain – nor was there any improvement in behaviour. This research seems to support SF's assumption that analysing why something went wrong is unlikely to lead to ideas about how to create a better situation.

2. Kim, J.S. & Franklin, C. (2009). Solution-focused brief therapy in schools: A review of the outcome literature. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(4), 464–470.

The school setting is one in which the SF approach has been gaining more popularity over the last ten years. The approach has been applied both to behavioural and emotional problems and to academic problems and goals. The SF approach seems particularly promising within this setting because of its positive focus and of the brevity of its interventions. Together with Michael Kelly, Cynthia Franklin and Johnny Kim co-authored the book *Solution Focused Brief Therapy in Schools: A 360 Degree View of Research and Practice* (2008). That book is a thoughtful and practical guide to the many applications of the SF approach in the school setting and is recommended to school counsellors, teachers and educational policy makers. What is a bit surprising about the book is the use of the word ‘therapy’ in its title because many of the SF applications in the school context have little to do with therapy. The review article *Solution-focused brief therapy in schools* by Kim and Franklin is also recommendable. This article reviews the most rigorous outcome studies on the use of SF in a school setting. Effect size estimates were calculated to further examine the effectiveness, thereby providing more quantitative information for each study. The results found were mixed, but they did show some promising applications of SF within the school setting such as working with at-risk students, helping students reduce the intensity of their negative feelings, manage their conduct problems and externalising behavioural problems.

3. Ferraz, H. & Wellman, M. (2009). Fostering a culture of engagement: an evaluation of a 2-day training in solution-focused brief therapy for mental health workers. *Journal of Psychiatric & Mental Health Nursing*, 16 (4), 326–334.

In recent years, a shift has taken place in mental health care from a mainly in-patient care system to care which is increasingly delivered within the community. This shift has contributed to a reduction in the duration of in-patient admissions. This raises the question of what the consequences of this shift are for the practice of nursing. This study tests the effects of a 2-day SF training for staff in terms of knowledge and skill acquisition and self-reported application. The study adopted a repeated measures design where participants' baseline knowledge was measured prior to the 2-day training and then at 3 and 6 months post-training. This study has demonstrated that the 2-day training was effective in increasing participants' reported knowledge and understanding of SF brief therapy and their self-reported use of the techniques in routine clinical practice. In conclusion, this study has established that staff from a variety of professional and non-professional backgrounds can achieve good skill acquisition from a fairly modest training. Additionally, the current study has also highlighted the need for well-conducted large-scale trials of this potentially important technology. The research seems like an interesting first step but more research is needed. New research could focus on more objective measures of SF training effectiveness and utility.

4. Ryan, R.M. & Deci, E.L. (2008). A Self-Determination Theory Approach to Psychotherapy: The Motivational Basis for Effective Change. *Canadian Psychology*, 49 (3), 186–193.

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester are authorities on the subject of self-determination theory, a motivation theory which is concerned with supporting natural and intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy

ways. The authors have written much about favourable effects of stimulating intrinsic motivation of and supporting autonomy in students and employees. The body of research associated with their work is particularly relevant to SF because this seems to be an excellent example of a broadly applicable autonomy-supporting intervention style. The application of self-determination theory (SDT) to psychotherapy is particularly relevant to SF, because a central task of therapy is to support the client to autonomously explore, identify, initiate and sustain a process of change. In this article, the authors discuss the experimental work, field studies, and clinical trials representing the application of SDT to the domain of psychotherapy. Evidence supports the importance of client autonomy for the attainment and maintenance of treatment outcomes. In addition, intervention studies suggest that therapist autonomy support enhances the likelihood that treatment gains will be achieved and maintained. The authors discuss some of the processes involved in enhancing autonomy, including the role of awareness, the importance of exploring and challenging introjects and external regulations, attention to need-related goal contents and therapist attitudes required for a therapy approach that is process- rather than outcome-focused. The focus of the authors differs to some extent from SF in the sense that they include in their approach a focus on inner mental processes. On the whole, however, this research confirms the value of SF as an autonomy supportive facilitation approach.

5. Wiseman, R. (2009). *59 seconds. Think a little. Change a lot.* London: Macmillan.

Richard Wiseman, professor for The Public Understanding of Psychology, University of Hertfordshire in the UK, has written this self help book which is research based, pleasant and easy to read and practical. Wiseman started out as a magician and later became a psychologist. Just like many famous magicians like James Randi and Derren Brown, he has a very sceptical and research based approach and a great skill at involving and entertaining the public. The purpose of this was to expose

popular self-help myths and replace them by practical and brief self-help approaches that have proven effective. The book covers topics like decision making, dealing with stress, happiness, relationships and parenting. The research covered in the book, which balances classical studies well with recent studies, is presented in an accessible and sometimes very funny way. SF is not mentioned in the book but some of the research is relevant for SF. One example is a study by Pham and Taylor (1999) on motivation. These researchers had participants in the experimental condition visualise doing exceptionally well in the exams that were coming up. Students in the control conditions were asked to visualise themselves while doing the exams but doing normally, not exceptionally well. Although the intervention was very brief, the effect was strong. Students in the experimental condition had felt good during the visualisation but studied less hard and achieved lower marks. Wiseman comments that visualising a perfect future may make you feel better, it is a form of mental escapism which has the negative side effect of leaving you unprepared for difficulties that crop up on the 'rocky road' to success. Wiseman concludes: "Fantasising about heaven on earth may put a smile on your face, but is unlikely to help transform your dreams into reality." This research suggests that as SF practitioners we should probably refrain from asking people what their ideal situation looks like, what their 'best' hopes would be, and what their perfect futures would look like. Instead, we'd better ask them to describe situations, futures and hopes that would be 'good enough'. Apart from this example the book contains much interesting material. Although some SF practitioners may object to the traditional psychology approach of this book, many will probably like it if only for its focus on brief interventions and the pleasantness of the writing.

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