

Editorial

Small next steps for SF theory

Held in September, the topic of the European Brief Therapy Association (EBTA) conference was “Frames”. It explored the personal, social and political frames that surround SF. One question that came up at the conference was the legitimacy of a theoretical frame for SF; a question that has occupied us for a while now. Steve de Shazer himself wrote on the SFT mailing list in October 1998 that “theories are, at best, useless”.

But what do we mean by theory? Gale Miller has written that “people use the word theory in many different ways and unless a person is willing to say that he or she knows what it really means or what it should mean, then we need to be open to a variety of different formulations” (personal communication). Some require prediction, some don’t. Some are explanatory, some are looser. So in discussing this ongoing topic a foray into our more useful and less useful misunderstandings of each other’s definition of theory might be helpful. This plethora of meanings reflects Wittgenstein’s view that the meaning of a word is in its use, a view that Steve took seriously. So how did Steve de Shazer use the word “theory”?

SF has not been developed out of a theory but pragmatically developed out of the observation of what works in therapy. At the conference, Michael Durrant explained that it is not accurate to say that Steve was not interested in theory, but that it was critical for him that SF move from practice to theory rather than from theory to practice. If you are about making real change with people, this makes perfect sense. So through practice Steve, Insoo, Eve Lipchik, Elam Nunnally and others discovered an overarching “theory” or principle that you can build solutions without assuming that you must explore problems and worked on solution-building techniques to achieve this.

Understanding this has led to a revolutionary way of thinking that soundly rejects the idea of theories that are explanatory and predictive of human behaviour. They sit outside the realm of SF. Explanations are not connected to solutions. For example, explanatory theories about problems or theories that allow the therapist/consultant to uncover the true meaning of what the client is saying are out.

But this does not mean that theoretical frames have not influenced the practice of SF. One could wonder if we would be able to observe without a theoretical frame. References to the theories of the Mental Research Institute, social constructivism, Milton H. Erickson, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Derrida and Buddhism abound in Steve's and Insoo's work. These theories helped them to develop and describe what they were doing at BFTC. And effective practice made it clear that facts should change theories, not the other way around.

After Steve's and Insoo's deaths, many of us are still wondering "what is going on when we do SF?" The issue is not whether we theorise about SF, but how. We need to be vigilant about our theorising, ensuring the areas we explore are based on the premises of SF. Gale Miller and Mark McKergow will soon publish a book chapter aiming to look at what SF is and describing what happens in the interactional space between people, which they term *narrative emergence*. This is based on SF's interactional view and rejection of mentalistic theories and as such fits within the scope of how we might legitimately theorise about SF. Of course if as a result we say: "if we do this then that should happen", we will have fallen into the trap of causality and missed the SF boat entirely.

While we are thinking about these issues maybe we should take into account the philosophical tradition of Pragmatism which focuses on linking practice and theory. In Pragmatism theory and practice are not separate spheres. John Dewey argues that there is no theory versus practice but intelligent practice and uninformed practice. Pragmatism describes the process in which theory is taken from practice and applied

back to practice to form what is called intelligent practice.

In this issue of *InterAction* you will find peer reviewed articles by Coert Visser on the association between SF coaching and client perceived coaching outcomes and David Hawkes on the relevance of the work of Martin Heidegger and phenomenology to SF theory. We also feature our first discussion paper, where Christine Kuch and Susanne Burgstaller offer their views on ways of working with organisations as systems. We actively seek comments about this paper; a selection will be published in the next issue.

This edition also features an intimate interview with film director Nora Bateson. She talks about the legacy of her father's work and how she enjoyed this year's International SOLWorld conference in Hungary.

Our classic paper this time is Steve de Shazer's less known *Resistance Revisited*, published in 1989, 10 years after his famous *Death of Resistance*. It offers an account of the way they dealt with the concept of resistance at BFTC. The author also provides a recipe of how theories should be constructed and what their theory was all about: "a theory of how change develops within the therapeutic context."

We have two case studies this time. The first, by Annette Gray, presents a detailed account of a team-coaching workshop. The second, written by Loraine Kennedy and Colin Coombs, offers an insight into their "Art of Influencing" workshops. If there is a piece of work that you are particularly proud of, why don't you consider writing a case study and contact the editorial team? It is a great way to spark other people's creativity.

Our research review has been compiled by Dave Hawkes, who has chosen to compare two of the pieces on training programmes in SF. From this research he has drawn the conclusion that SF training must include its philosophical and theoretical context as well as techniques and on-going supervision if trainees are to be more confident in using it in sometimes hostile environments.

In order to become full members of SFCT, candidates present a piece of SF work for review. New in this edition of

InterAction is that we present a ‘Review review’ where you can find brief descriptions of these submitted pieces of work. We have cases from Japan, Finland and Canada. The longer reports are available at: <http://www.asfct.org/memberslist.php>