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The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice: Stretching the World for New Opportunities and Progress

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BOOK REVIEW**The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice: Stretching the World for New Opportunities and Progress**

Mark McKergow

Routledge, 2021, ISBN 978-0367428839, 212 pages, £24.99 paperback (Kindle edition available)

Review by Alasdair J. Macdonald

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Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) methods have been around for nearly fifty years, and have become used in many fields including coaching, education, social work, healthcare and organisational change. This efficient and effective approach has remained somewhat unappreciated; the pragmatic ‘not-knowing’ stance of practitioners treating every client as an individual can seem odd to those accustomed to conventional diagnosis and treatment. How is one supposed to treat mental illness with an approach that appears to discuss neither ‘mental’ nor ‘illness’? This dilemma has not been resolved by the existence of many treatments for mental disorders using medications, conversations and electricity.

In this very thorough book, Mark McKergow reviews the development of SFBT from its anthropological origins in the 1950s through the landmark work of Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee through to more recent shifts in practice. Having been present himself at many of these changes, the author is able to give detailed and knowledgeable accounts of the processes involved and of the variety of cognitive and emotional concepts which have been called into use. He shows how this tradition has always been changing and continues to change. At the other end of the story, in this book he shows how a newly coherent form of SFBT has appeared in the 21st century based on ‘focused description development’. This offers both clarity to the practitioner and a new picture of how the practice works to build change by ‘stretching the world’ of the client.

This fresh take on SFBT shows how practitioners can bridge the apparent gap between focusing on their clients (to the apparent exclusion of theory) and having a story about how it works. New ideas from enactive cognition show precisely how skilled attention to the client and their words can immediately open new possibilities for attention and action.

There are five Es to be found in good SF practice: Effective, Efficient, Ethical, Energising and Elegant. The work privileges the client’s experience of their current difficulties rather than abstract theories of knowledge. Many practitioners have commented on the similarity with coaching.

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson identified the use of ‘circular communications’ in human transactions (perhaps the start of systems thinking). His contemporary Erickson drew on his own experience of ill-health and disability to advance the benefits of appropriate conversations. The use of language by families became a new topic of interest, as opposed to the dialogue between client and therapist. Workers began to think in terms of Contest versus Co-operation within the social group.

Scandinavian practice with Harry Korman and others became a major force in family work. They recognised the changes being wrought by these new ideas. The European Brief Therapy Association was formed in 1994 and continues to be a strong influence today. Many countries (including the United Kingdom) have also formed their own SF organisations and training regimes.

In 2011 Cynthia Franklin and her colleagues in the United States published a detailed review and summary of the state of SF teaching and research at that time. McKergow’s text explores some of the key concepts in use. The ‘miracle question’ has become almost a signature note for SF work, although as Mark points out it has largely been superseded for many practitioners. His discussion of how to end sessions constructively is a valuable part of this book. Like many European therapists, he spends some time on discussion of the role of the philosopher Wittgenstein in the development

of language and its subsequent relevance to conversations in therapy. He is also informative about enactive cognition as a tool for therapy, and its role in 'stretching the client's world'.

The work of Janet Beavin Bavelas with microanalysis of sessions shows very effectively how every word and every vocalisation lends precision to interaction with clients and colleagues.

Chris Iveson of the influential BRIEF practice in London likes the suggestion that a therapy session is like visiting an Art Gallery. After a pause at the Ticket Office, we buy a ticket for a potential future project; we are guided to enter the room with new views of the Future; we enter a room containing Instances of possible future events; we leave the building, perhaps selecting something for our future project from the Gift Shop. Adam Froerer has added the idea of a Resource room where we can obtain assets for our next steps.

The book includes detailed session transcripts with a commentary to show how these ideas appear in the nitty-gritty of practice. The use of scaling techniques and other skills are described well. Practitioners from all fields will find fresh perspectives on why they do what they do, and how they might do it even better. I know of no clearer record of the history of SF and the consequential events.

The reviewer

Dr Alasdair J Macdonald is a retired consultant psychiatrist and the author of *Solution Focused Therapy: Theory, Research and Practice* (Sage, 2011).

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