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*RESPONSE ARTICLE***We Don't Want to Blur the Boundaries: A Response to Guy Shennan and the Solution Focused Collective**

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We Don't Want to Blur the Boundaries

First, we want to thank Guy for commenting on our paper and the thoughtful process he put into it.

Guy would have liked our paper to be more about how solution focused brief therapy theory is connected to and similar to other approaches and less about how it is different. He says that our paper could have been written with a “narrative of similarity and connection” instead of how we wrote it, which was writing a “narrative of differences”.

In 2006 one of the authors (Harry Korman) took a long walk with Insoo Kim Berg in Vancouver. We had spent a day with Janet Bavelas and her colleagues in Victoria on Vancouver Island, and we were both fascinated by the microanalysis research that Bavelas had been doing for many years.

We talked about the fact that if we looked at a therapy session together we knew within just a few minutes if this was a solution focused session or not. We would know this even if the therapist hadn't asked any typical solution focused questions during those few minutes. We were both fascinated by this but even more fascinated by the fact that we had absolutely no idea how we knew. What was it that we saw and heard that clearly distinguished a solution focused session from everything else that we had seen live or on video. What was IT? What we had learnt during that visit with Janet Bavelas was that since we could see IT – even if we didn't have words or concepts to describe what it was we saw, it had to be something visible and/or audible. This led to 10 years of microanalysis research by the three authors together with Janet Bavelas.

After having discovered/described what IT was (IT is what is distinctive about solution focused brief therapy compared to other therapies) we moved on to other things that interested us. Among other things - writing the article about de Shazer's theory development.

We think that Guy is absolutely right when he says that we wrote a “narrative of differences” and yes - we could have emphasized similarity and connection with other therapy models. We wrote in good faith though, as we tried to condense de Shazer's writing, continuing to do what we think de Shazer did – which was emphasizing the uniqueness of the work at BFTC. Doing the opposite – emphasizing similarity to other therapy approaches – would have been altering what de Shazer did in ways that we would have felt very uncomfortable with.

We have to be honest though. We do believe that SFBT is different from most (if not all) other therapies. How solution focused brief therapists carefully choose what they listen, select and build on from what the client said. The lexical choices they make and the presuppositions of their questions. These are the visible and audible things that we see that distinguishes SFBT from everything else. With this in mind it is of course possible that we read de Shazer's work selectively, cherry-picking what he wrote about how SFBT is different and unique (confirmation bias) - and thus perhaps missing what he might have written about how SFBT is similar to, and connected to other approaches. Someone would have to re-read everything he wrote with this in mind to check for papers, articles or phrases where de Shazer perhaps emphasized similarity and connectedness with other approaches.

Then again we have to decide and if possible agree on what kind of similarities and connectedness that we are talking about. When therapists of different persuasions meet with someone for the first time they all say “hi” and everybody would probably agree that this is a banal similarity. In the same vein; the fact that two authors describe their therapies using the same positively laden words, doesn’t mean that the therapy models are similar or connected. We have to look at actual practice (or recordings of it) to be able to claim similarities and differences. De Shazer always refused to say anything about therapies that he had not actually seen (see *Vive la difference*).

Shennan suggests that we could have constructed a similarity narrative and makes an argument for why that is possible and gives an example of how it can be done:

.... De Shazer “begins to clearly distinguish his theoretical focus from that of therapies that focus on what is happening inside the client which is not observable and not focused on client-therapist interaction” (p. 50, emphasis added). However, the same point about what it is that de Shazer is doing here could also be made within a connection narrative, which might include the following: “he begins to clearly ally his theoretical focus with those therapies that are focused on client-therapist interactions, rather than on what is happening inside the client which is not observable”.

He is right of course. One can create narratives of similarity or distinctiveness or both and our question is “Why would one want to do that?” Blurring the distinctions and differences to what purpose? As we search Shennan’s comments for why he wants us to do it, we find towards the end the part where Shennan identifies what led him to respond to what he terms, the “distinctiveness narrative aspects” of our article. He refers to “the solution-focused manifesto for social change (Solution-Focused Collective, 2019). The manifesto is based upon a belief in the potential of the solution-focused approach to ‘be harnessed in the pursuit of social justice.’” He continues that this initiative involves “... build(ing) links with movements for social justice and equality, and with practitioners of other approaches committed to these aims, so that we learn from and enhance each other’s work.” The last phrase of Shennan’s comments is “.... perhaps the construction of some similarity and connection narratives, or at least some both-similar-and-different narratives, will aid in the creation of the links and alliances across approaches to change that are needed for the construction of a better world.”

So – Shennan implies that our emphasis on differences and uniqueness might hinder the creation of the links and alliances across approaches to change that are needed for the work on social justice that Shennan and the solution focused collective has committed themselves to and branded as solution focused. Branding by simply naming their aims as A Solution Focused Manifesto for Social Change.

While we applaud Shennan’s wish to promote social justice in a troubled world, we believe this is a goal he wants to add to SFBT practice. We encountered nothing in our study of de Shazer’s writings that suggested de Shazer favored “harness(ing)” the SF approach in any practitioner-driven agenda, no matter how worthy. We resent being put in the position of being against doing political work for social justice to create a better world, because we agree only with half the title of the manifesto. We think that using solution focus “in the pursuit of social justice” with clients, is doing something that is not solution focused brief therapy. We have a fundamental disagreement with for instance (picking from the manifesto for social change:

TO REALISE OUR HOPES, WE AIM TO DEVELOP OUR PRACTICE SO THAT...

- it acknowledges the social, structural and environmental causes of people’s distress and difficulties
- its application with individuals pays attention to the social context

Our Axiom 5 of de Shazer’s thinking indicates, solutions are developed “in the direction of the more positive future the client wants.” And, as our Axiom 6 states, de Shazer emphasized these client-driven definitions of a more positive future are developed in dialogue with the practitioner around the client’s meanings and in the client’s language—not the practitioner’s. We don’t understand how any social justice agenda of the practitioner might fit with doing SFBT as de Shazer and his colleagues theorized about and practiced it.

Simply said: When you do social justice work you have an agenda – a preferred outcome – and regardless of how good and worthwhile that outcome is – it breaks a fundamental or core solution focused way of being in the relationship. In our view when the therapist has an agenda for the client he is no longer doing solution focused brief therapy.

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