

11-2021

Solution-Focused Collective Action: A Response to Harry Korman, Peter De Jong, and Sara Smock Jordan

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Recommended Citation

Collective, Solution-Focused (2021) "Solution-Focused Collective Action: A Response to Harry Korman, Peter De Jong, and Sara Smock Jordan," *Journal of Solution Focused Practices*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 8. Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/journalsfp/vol5/iss2/8>

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RESPONSE**Solution-Focused Collective Action: A Response to Harry Korman, Peter De Jong, and Sara Smock Jordan**The Solution-Focused Collective

A Response to Harry Korman, Peter De Jong, and Sara Smock Jordan

The July 2021 edition of this journal carried both a response (Shennan, 2021) to the article *Steve de Shazer's Theory Development* (Korman et al., 2020), and a reply to that response by the article's authors (Korman et al., 2021). These authors gave their reply the subtitle: "A Response to Guy Shennan and the Solution Focused Collective", though Guy's response was an individual one, and the Collective played no part in its writing (and from our reading of his article, it does not appear to us that Guy suggested otherwise). However, given that Korman et al. have made some critical comments in their reply in relation to our manifesto (Solution-Focused Collective, 2019/2021), we would like to enter the conversation.

The title of Korman et al.'s response is "We Don't Want to Blur the Boundaries", and boundaries are a concern of ours too, albeit different ones, those between practitioner and client, which we believe do need to be blurred if not eradicated altogether, at least in the case of social change, as we shall argue below. The boundaries Korman et al. are referring to are those between solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) and other forms of therapy, which they believe should be firmly demarcated. It is not our intention here to focus on these particular boundaries, other than to say that while it is important to be clear about what distinguishes solution-focused practice from other approaches, we also see value in looking for connections between ourselves and practitioners of other approaches, which is one reason to look for connections between our approaches.

We want to focus here on our manifesto, not only because Korman et al. have subjected it to critical scrutiny, but also as they have expressed resentment about the position they believe the manifesto puts them in. We were sorry to learn that this resentment has arisen, and initially we were puzzled too. We believe this reaction has come about from a misunderstanding of the manifesto's intentions, and we appreciate the opportunity to provide some clarification of these. We hope that we might be able to shed sufficient light for an alternative position to be taken.

The manifesto arrived in its current form after being in development for more than a year, from the time an initial draft was unveiled at the 2018 UK Association for Solution Focused Practice conference, where one of the workshop streams was on social change. It continued to be developed by people attending meetings of the newly formed Solution-Focused Collective, who also consulted with the wider solution-focused community, via email discussion forums and European (EBTA) and American (SFBTA) conferences. The manifesto can be found on the Collective's website, in both its original English and - so far - in seven other languages (Solution-Focused Collective, 2019/2021).

We have called it a solution-focused manifesto for social change, and want to explain why we have given it the label, "solution-focused". First, it is a document that has been created by a group of solution-focused practitioners, who share the belief that a solution-focused approach can be used in the pursuit of social change. We want to share this belief with our fellow solution-focused practitioners, to make it public within the solution-focused community, and the manifesto ends with an invitation to our fellow solution-focused practitioners to join us. In addition to this, it is a future-focused manifesto, in which we set out our hopes for social justice, and outline a preferred future "of communities characterized by equality, reciprocity and interdependence, which enable people to lead fulfilled lives on their own terms". We also share our belief that there are instances of such a future and progress towards it, and that we are inspired by others who have taken action for social justice. In short, we believe the manifesto has taken a solution-focused approach in how it has framed our beliefs and intentions.

Yet in their response article, Korman et al. challenge our use of the term "solution-focused" to describe the manifesto. They are right in saying that the practitioners who wrote the manifesto have an agenda - we want to see social justice

and we believe that a solution-focused approach can be used in working towards this aim - and their concern is that “when the therapist has an agenda for the client he is no longer doing solution focused brief therapy” (Korman et al., 2021, p. 69). We believe that their concerns are mis-placed and arise from confusing collective action with therapy.

We did not write the manifesto as a group of professionals, to declare that we wished to do solution-focused brief therapy with another group of people - our clients - with the agenda of this therapy being to work towards social justice - an agenda driven by us, the professionals. These are the boundaries that we want to blur, or to break down. No, we wrote as solution-focused practitioners about our own hopes for social justice, our own preferred futures of equality, reciprocity and interdependence, our own ideas of progress towards these futures. And we believe we share these hopes with many other people, with whom we can take action together, to which endeavors we hope we can bring our experience and skills in solution-focused practice. We believe in collective action and that as solution-focused practitioners we can work collectively, “with groups, organizations and communities, and join in collective actions led by others, including those who are experts by experience” (Solution-Focused Collective, 2019/2021).

In taking collective action, there is no separation between helper and helped. A similarity may be noted with self-help, and there have been a number of books describing solution-focused forms of self-help (see, for example, Ghul, 2015). The shift here is from helping ourselves to changing the world. As collective actors, we are all simply fellow humans, concerned about the state of the world, who are all in this together. There is no therapist, somehow positioned somewhere outside of these concerns, to ask the people with the concerns what their best hopes are from some therapy - because there is no therapy taking place. We would agree with Korman et al. that “using solution focus ‘in the pursuit of social justice’ with clients, is doing something that is not solution focused brief therapy” - except that there are no clients. We wish to take collective action with whoever wishes to do this, and our solution-focused offering to this will include the question, “What are our best hopes from taking action together?”

We are sorry that reading our manifesto led to resentment on the part of Korman et al., who felt they had been “put in the position of being against doing political work for social justice to create a better world”, because they did not agree with the manifesto being called “solution-focused”. We have no desire to put anyone in such a position, and we hope that our account here of the ways in which we see the manifesto as solution-focused might assist in this respect. In sharing our idea that a solution-focused approach can be used to help create a better world, we are not saying that this is the only way that people who happen to be solution-focused practitioners can do political work for social justice.

Finally, as the manifesto does not concern the doing of SFBT, we are not so worried about departing from Steve de Shazer’s theory, which has been so well set out and elucidated by Korman et al. Steve was writing about doing therapy with clients and we are talking about taking collective action as fellow humans. We believe that a solution-focused approach can be taken with both. We invite our fellow solution-focused practitioners and human beings who believe the same to join us.

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