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Forum - Words

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Words

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BRIEF, London

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Words are weasely, they are like snakes. They slither about and we hardly notice them. They sneak around barely visible and yet as they go they can change everything in their wake. Let's take the little word 'get'. It's a small word, an everyday sort of word, not the sort of word to which we would pay much attention. It is a workaday word that pops out of our mouths, a word whose definition we would never look up, a taken-for-granted word, an unshowy sort of word that lives in the shadows doing its work quietly, never attracting attention to itself. It is, to all intents and purposes, a modest word.

But the word 'get' is also a trouble-maker, a stirrer, a rascal, a veritable rascal of a word. It is a Trojan Horse carrying within those three letters a much larger set of assumptions, assumptions which can derail our attempts to work in a Solution-Focused way with our clients. Let's consider the following apparently entirely inoffensive statements "I was trying to get him to describe his preferred future" or "I wanted to get her to be aware of her strengths". So what's the problem with these statements? Both seem like good ideas. Describing preferred futures and 'noticing and naming' strengths are both processes that lie at the heart of the Solution-Focused approach — aren't they? Shouldn't we try to get people to do these things? And the answer of course is no we should not. We should never try to get people to do things. As soon as we are in the getting business we are using force. And as soon as we use force then we create the likelihood that the client will respond with what we could describe as 'counter-force' or, more commonly 'resistance'.

But what alternative words do we have? It is not easy. The language becomes clunky and awkward. It is less than perfect. However, I would choose to say that we 'invite' people. Every question is an 'invitation'. We are asking questions that 'invite' people to describe things. When we use force and the force is resisted the logic of the language suggests to us that we should use

more force. That's how force operates. I do it to you. However if an invitation is turned down the word suggests that I may need to have another look at the invitation. Is the invitation attractive enough, is it timely, is it interesting to the recipient? How could I change the invitation such that the chances of acceptance are increased? After all I cannot make anyone accept an invitation. That is not what the word means.

Many thanks to the participants on this week's Solution Focused Supervision and Consultation programme at BRIEF in London for triggering this reflection.

Comment from Don Coles

Thank you, Evan, for these helpful reflections on our use of language, and implications in therapy of the difference between 'getting' and 'inviting' something from someone. I agree an approach of invitation is clearly more consistent with the collaborative, meaning emergent, process of Solution-Focused practice.

Your comments got me wondering about the possible effects of power differentials as these words are used. I'm picturing an employee who has been 'invited' by a manager to consider a particular course of action — it may be couched in collaborative terms, but it could be a direction in disguise. It may not be helpful for the employee to 'decline' the invitation and it would at least be reasonable to have a clarifying discussion about what the invitation means, if there is some ambiguity. At its worst, an invitation can be a threat. Parents become masters of framing directions in the form of invitations. In therapy, there is a different sort of power differential, but how do we take care that our 'invitations' are not read or received in way that is not too far from 'getting'? We could have the same discussion about the use of the terms 'request' or 'ask' — close relatives of 'invite'.

This discussion does help us to reflect on influence. Say a client does something that I ask them — for example I might invite (ask? request?) them to think about what resource or ability they utilised to manage a problem and they come back to the next session having done that. What's the connection between me having asked them that, and them having taken it up? Whether I think I 'invited' them to consider this, or I 'got' them to consider it, what actually was or is the mechanism? Perhaps more importantly, did their consideration of that question actually assist them in the work towards the goals they are expressing in the therapy? We may be able to come to some sense of how the invitation process (or the getting process) actually works, but did it lead to something useful for the client?

Anyway, I hope I have been able to get ... oops, invite ... people to think about this issue a bit more!

Don is a social worker and counsellor, with experience in working with children, teenagers, adult, couples and families, together with training and supervision, in a variety of settings. He is currently with the counselling team at the (Australian) Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

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Comment from Thorana Nelson

I so totally agree with Evan's ideas here that it's like trying to describe air. Of course! Of course not! Why would one? Why not? On and on. The notion of 'inviting' has so totally taken over my way of thinking that I surprise myself when I must step outside of my cozy world and look at it from a different angle, or catch myself by thinking I know what the client's air is like.

A client once said to me, "he was in the living room" with great emotion. "He was in the living room!!!" What does that mean? — That one is easy. However, another client once said to me, "I had to take out the garbage" and I didn't even blink. A student challenged me on this: What was my assumption? The garbage needed to go out? Someone else should take out the garbage? Oh!

Back to inviting. When I remember that clients invite me to cooperate in different ways (de Shazer, 1984), and I don't take offense or assume I know what they mean, it's easier for me to invite them to ... describe further, explain meaning, scale their position, ask about exceptions, ask relationship questions, etc. The context, including the client's words, helps me decide which questions to ask, but I don't pretend to know the answers until I hear the client's reply. I don't even know for certain what question the client heard! However, if I take offense at the invitation, or allow my assumptions to kick me in the a\$\$, I'm more likely to attempt to 'get' something. As if I have more than the barest (and perhaps mistaken) clue what's going on in the client's world.

So, here's to invitations — the ones we get from clients and the ones we give them.

de Shazer, S. (1984). The death of resistance. *Family Process*, 23, 79–93.

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member and recently-retired secretary/treasurer of the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Association, and is a trainer and supervisor of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy.

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Comment from Ian Johnsen

Evan's blog post reminds me of the discussions my colleagues and I have had over many years — conversations about the difference between manipulation and influence, understanding how expert versus local knowledge is important, thinking about unilateral versus mutual processes and how we, as human beings, think, feel, act, (respond) to these things (manipulation, expert knowledge, unilateral power).

Evan invites us to look at what we as solution-focused actors actually do in counselling or therapy conversations — including what words we use. “Modest” words are often the most powerful because they work in the “shadows”, unseen. Do we “get” or “invite” clients to talk about their hopes? Do we work “with” or “for” clients?

I'm reminded of a quote from Steve de Shazer, now dimly remembered, something about how each word is like a locomotive engine, pulling along freight loads of meaning. We might talk about what a particular word means and try to fix it in place for a moment, for the duration of our conversation, but it is difficult to “fix” and “foreclose” meaning in a “once and for all” kind of way. It is not only everyday words like ‘get’ that work like Trojan Horses, indeed professional discourse maintains a mask of authority and a claim to legitimacy by ‘fixing’ what words can be said to represent or mean. For some of the implications of this see for example, Coates and Wade (2007). Wittgenstein, who Steve talked about often, used to say that the meaning of a word is in how it is used.

This fixing of meaning is problematic even in some of the discourses we identify as ‘progressive’. For example in the ‘strengths based movement’ and in the various discourses about resiliency, professional discourse works to reify and nominalise what is fluid and active. So, we come to talk of people as ‘being resilient’ rather than understanding that resilience is something people do, a social fact, not an individual trait but a community achievement. And we come to measure strengths as if people have them or not, as if they exist as an entity, in themselves, something to be normatively quantified.

The word “get” can reveal a kind of posture that amounts to using “force”, as Evan points out. But with the word “invite”, we can also conceal that we do

indeed use influence and “power”. The therapist, like the doctor or teacher or lawyer, is usually the person who assumes the right — or position — to ask most of the questions. This in itself means that we do more than “invite”.

Every question works like a flashlight in a dark room, no matter how collaborative it seems to be. It “asks” a person to look here, not so much there, and talk in this way, not so much that way. Conversation analysts talk about “sequential constraints”. A question imposes “constraints”, useful and socially just constrains ideally, but constraints nonetheless. If I ask, “What is your name?”, and you reply, “Manchester United”, we have a small social problem. The asking of a question “constrains” a person to provide a “relevant” response — that is, a response that is relevant to the content of the question. To use Steve’s analogy, questions are the locomotives that pull the freight.

It is precisely because conversation works in this way that Evan’s caution about the word “get”, and by extension other similar terms, is so important. Because as therapists we do exercise influence and power, it is up us to be vigilant about our intentions and how we represent our actions.

As Evan suggests, in Solution-Focused work we are always guided by our client’s hopes. In dialogue with our clients we seek to build as detailed a description as possible of these hopes. A description of all the things, past, present and future that have been, are, or could be in the clients life that are signs that what the client hopes for is, either to some extent already happening, or possible. As this therapy is not about our expert understanding of the individual mind, or our clever interventions or other special knowledge we can impart, in Solution-Focused work we hope our conversations will “leave no footprints”. We trust in the process and we trust in the pre-existing competence of our clients.

A quick story — I attended the BRIEF summer school some years back with Evan, Harvey and Chris and I was particularly struck by the ‘rotating interviewer’ exercise. This was a group exercise with pairs of role-playing ‘interviewers and interviewee’s — an exercise based on an original exercise from Peter Szabo. I think that understanding how this exercise works is a big part of understanding how Solution-Focused therapy works. The exercise involves asking a few key questions about 1. Hopes (or miracles), 2. What’s working already? 3. The sense of how far toward realising hopes a person is (scaling), and 4. What the next small signs of realising hopes will be? Okay, pretty standard stuff in the Solution-Focused canon; however, in this exercise at every new question the interviewer changes and the interviewee is asked the next question by a new interviewer. What is important here is that the ‘client’/interviewee is able to continue to build detailed description around their hopes and of course any ‘agenda’, ‘footprint’, ‘force’ or ‘expert knowledge’ of

the interviewer is shown to be, at the very least, unnecessary.

This exercise highlights that counselling requires expertise but only a particular type of expertise, that of understanding the process that brings description alive for the interviewee. Thus, of course, any other interviewer with the same expertise of this conversational process will be, for the purposes of detailed description around client's best hopes, equally useful.

Of course, this is an exercise tailored to just some elements of what happens in a Solution-Focused counselling conversation. One key element that we are missing in this exercise is that of 'Solution-Focused listening'. It is after all the listening for specific words and turns of phrase used by the interviewee that must determine what is reiterated and woven into the conversational process.

Finally, after reading Evan's post, I was prompted to reflect on the difficulties I sometimes face when in family work and I am required to respond to the competing agendas of multiple people in the one room. Sometimes I feel less like a partner in constructing a useful dialogue and more like a police officer directing traffic. I like to think that I only invite description but what about when others in the conversation really do want a son or daughter or partner to 'get' something or when there are multiple descriptions to be teased out. At those times I'm aware, usually post session of having shared one story too many, pushed one barrow too many, or aligned myself with one person's hope more than another's. Well that's a theme to keep returning to in supervision!

Coates, L. & Wade, A. (2007). Language and violence: Analysis of four discursive operations. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22, 511–522.

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