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Book Review - Brief coaching with children and young people

Jeff Chang
Athabasca University, jeffc@athabascau.ca

Brief coaching with children and young people

Harvey Ratner & Denise Yusuf
2015. New York: Routledge.
Paperback. 146 pages. £24.99 ($A47.95)

Review by Jeff Chang

Athabasca University, Canada

Harvey Ratner and Denise Yusuf have written an eminently practical book for helping professionals who work with children and youth. Their book is full of informative tips on how to engage with children, youth, parents and schools; how to structure one's work and relate with the systems in which children are embedded and what to expect when things sometimes do not go as expected. Moreover, it is based on a sound theoretical foundation.

Ratner and Yusuf open the book with a description of the Solution-Focused (SF) approach and its development. They "hit the high points" by highlighting the three shifts in thought the Milwaukee BFTC team initiated and which the readership of this journal will take for granted today: the importance of eliciting a detailed future description (usually embodied in the Miracle Question), the assumption that there are exceptions to almost every problem, and the value of using scaling questions to help clients make distinctions. They then describe the innovations from BRIEF in London (the team of which they are part) — inquiring about best hopes, the Tomorrow Question, signs of change, identity questions and a shift away from detailed end of session interventions.

In the first chapter, the authors go on to describe the conduct of the first and subsequent sessions. In their section on using "best hopes" questions to develop a contract for coaching, the authors demonstrate their practical

experience by dealing with the common situation of the client's best hopes being outside of one's control. They describe SF questions and, more importantly, they tell the reader about how they actually work. They give about the most succinct and clear explication of social constructionism I've ever read. In fact, the first chapter addresses some of the most common questions Solution-Focused trainers encounter — SF as a "positive" approach (it's not, it's "constructive"), using SF with other approaches (it can stand alone), using SF in different contexts, effectiveness, when SF appears to be "stuck", "assessment", and what to do when encountering safety issues like self-harm and harm to others. They provide solid answers to these common questions/concerns about SF.

Finally in the first chapter, they tackle the definitions of "therapy" or "counselling" vs. "coaching." Eroding the usual idea that "coaching" is focused on behaviour and performance while counselling or therapy is "deeper," they state there is "no difference between what an SF coach and an SF counsellor actually do" (p. 17). In my view, they continue to elevate the definition of coaching from something practiced by "wannabe" counsellors to a worthy endeavour. The first chapter lays a solid SF foundation for the rest of the book.

Subsequent chapters, each by one of the authors, focus on children, adolescents, parents, groups, schools, different settings and materials. In discussing work with children (Chapter 2), Yusuf points out the importance of starting the conversation with talk about their strengths and capabilities. She provides specifics about how to tailor the SF approach to children — developing best hopes, scaling, preferred futures, etc. She also deals with practical issues such as how to deal with pauses and lulls in a coaching session, the pace of a session, using lists and drawing a session to an end. Case examples illustrate these principles.

Ratner opens the chapter on adolescents (Chapter 3) with adolescents' well-known tendency to answer, "I don't know." He uses this to model how to skilfully engage youth in the coaching process and have them articulate their best hopes. Again, case examples are used to illustrate real life situations, including cases that do not proceed as expected due to external circumstances, how to manage situations with youth in care, how to deal with situations that do not seem to improve, and bereavement. He also focuses on the key issue of how to keep the attention of teens. He concludes the chapter, "Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned is in talking to young people is to listen and to look for signs of their creativity at work …"

Chapter 4, on working with parents, accomplishes what is so characteristic about this book. The chapter starts with a brief accessible conceptual explanation — in this case on "taking an interactional view" — and illustrat-

ing it throughout the chapter. Throughout the book, both authors embed snippets of theory, which are well-integrated into the practical content. As a theory "wonk", I appreciate their strong grasp of the thinking behind the SF approach. And, as an SF trainer and professor in a generalist counsellor education program, I appreciate the clarity and brevity of their theoretical explications — the embedded bite-sized pieces will help practitioners who "just want to learn the skills" deepen their understanding of SF ideas. Following de Shazer, Yusuf remarks, "… in my experience, doing the talk rather than explaining the talk is a more effective way to increase everyone's understanding" (p. 88). In this book, the authors show how they apply theory rather than discussing theory in a way that causes eyes to glaze over. In the chapter on parents, Ratner highlights the importance of focusing on the positive effects of changes, rather than the changes themselves.

In the Chapter 5 (*Groupwork*), Ratner offers practical tips about how to structure groups. Groups require some extra effort to keep order and not simply "go with the flow," and he deals with practical issues such as how to arrange a group, organize a first session to get the work started in the right foot and how to keep the interest of youth, ending sessions and the group itself, confidentiality and location. His wise words give a "heads-up" to those who are thinking of conducting groups. In all of this, he remains true to the SF perspective.

In Chapter 6 (*In the School*), Yusuf asserts that school-based coaching programs are cost-effective, efficient and supportive of students. Noting that school personnel may find it counter-intuitive that the SF approach does not delve into problems, she takes the opportunity to remind readers to "stay on the surface."

Chapter 7 (*In Different Settings*) highlights the use of SF coaching in social services agencies that serve children and youth, while Chapter 8 (*Materials*), provides examples of print resources such as "coaching cards" that provide reminders to encourage solutions, visual means of scaling, lists, and forms.

I suppose if I have one tiny disappointment in this book, it's that — aside from the chapter on children — there is only one case example of preteens, which involved a group of 7-year-olds. I would have preferred that there be more case examples involving younger children. Otherwise, this excellent book emphasizes practicality, built on a foundation of clear theoretical thinking. It is accessible to those who might not be inclined to pick up a "therapy" book, while substantial enough to avoid being written off as conceptually "lightweight." This book will make an excellent addition to the libraries of therapists, counsellors, teachers, foster parents, health care professionals, teachers, residential and community-based youth workers, youth ministers

and anyone else who works with children and youth.

About the reviewer

Dr Jeff Chang lives and works in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He is Associate Professor of counselling at Athabasca University, Director of the Family Psychology Centre, Editor of the *Canadian School Counselling Review* and clinical supervisor at Calgary Family Therapy Centre. Jeff was first exposed to SF ideas when he read *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy* in 1985 and subsequently attended several trainings at BFTC. He is co-author of *Basic Family Therapy* (6th ed.; 2013) and editor of *Creative Interventions for Children: A Transtheoretical Approach* (2013).

Email: jeffc@athabascau.ca