

## INTERVIEWS

# Elfie J Czerny and Dominik Godat: Something That Could Change the World

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Dominik Godat and Elfie Czerny have probably met more Solution Focused (SF) practitioners, authors and researchers than anyone else on the planet. Having discovered SF – and each other – in the 2000s, they set out with their young daughter in a motorhome on an odyssey around North America and Europe to spread the SF word, to meet anyone interested, to help people and learn more about how SF is used in different ways by different people, which led to the 109 episodes of the Simply Focus podcast.

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They have each written books and book chapters in German, including Dominik's *Lösungen auf der Spur: Wirkungsvoll führen dank Lösungsfokus* (Tracing Solutions: Effective leadership thanks to Solution Focus) (Godat, 2016), and they both helped edit *Faszination Lösungsfokus: Wie du mit gezieltem Blick die gewünschte Zukunft gestaltest* (Fascination Solution Focus: How to create the future you want with a focused view) (Czerny et al., 2020). Meeting Janet Bavelas got them interested in microanalysis of face-to-face dialogue, and they are now taking this work forward offering courses and starting their new venture [The Interactionalists](#).

## JSFP: How did you get involved in the SF world?

**Dominik:** I was studying economics at the University of Basel in 2001, and we wanted to find out what coaching was. Our professor had the idea of inviting two coaches and analysing their stories to develop an idea of what coaching could be. One of the coaches he invited was Peter Szabó! He arrived with his cards and questions, it was a bit strange with this miracle question and things.

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It didn't really make sense for us. The other one was an ice hockey coach, who knocked on the table and told us to do exactly what he said and we'd be successful. It was all strange! I got interested in what Peter Szabó was doing.

After university I became an HR manager, and supervisors and people were coming to me for advice, wanted to know what to do. I wanted to learn how to have good conversations with them. At just that moment Peter Szabó's flyer arrived for his course, which I did. Peter quickly suggested I come along to the 2005 SOLWorld conference in Interlaken – I didn't have the money but ended up going as a live client for Michael Hjerth's coaching experiment. I felt I belonged there, and that I could come up with ideas too. So I went to the next SOLWorld conference in Vienna 2006, did a random coaching workshop (using question cards) there. Being part of the SOLWorld community was a big boost, so many people to meet. It was encouraging for me as an HR manager to see so many people doing it and to use it in my work.

**Elfie:** I was a research associate at the PEF Private University of Management in Vienna where Günter Lueger was running the master course on SF coaching. Peter Steinkeller, Günter and I worked together on several projects, and Günter invited me to his training. That helped me connect to the Austrian SF community, people like Veronika Jungwirth, Doris Regele and most importantly Susanne Burgstaller. Susanne and I worked on development centres together, we became friends, and she said I should come to a SOLWorld conference. We went to the first SOLWorld CEE (Central & Eastern Europe) conference in Visegrád, Hungary, where I first met Dominik! I was involved for quite a few years in the Austrian Solution Circle as a board member. I really became passionate about my involvement in terms of sharing my work and the approach, how I applied it with Susanne (and later Dominik) at SOLWorld conferences.

**JSFP: You met at SOLWorld CEE Visegrád ... did you start working together then?**

**Elfie:** We had some intriguing conversations about our work and noticed we share a lot of interests - working in organisations and inviting people in organisations to work with SF. Günter Lueger was very interested in helping organisations to use SF without changing everything but by revising their existing tools. Dominik was finishing *Lösungen auf der Spur* (Tracing Solutions), he came to Vienna to the Austrian Solution Circle meeting, we were interested in each other's work – and beyond! We became a couple as well as working together.

**Dominik:** We were surprised we hadn't met before – we were in the same circles and knew a lot of the same people. It was a difficult start – organising our first workshop together was the fiercest fight we ever had! From there on everything went more smoothly.

**Elfie:** SF helped a lot in finding our way of collaborating.

**Dominik:** It was interesting just to find our shared ground, but also our differences, getting to know each other and aligning each other.

**Elfie:** It was one of the most challenging and rewarding things at the same time. We were developing our theory of change, how to explain what we do. That happened from the very beginning and is still happening. We would challenge each other. I loved that and I still love it.

**Dominik:** We had five or six workshops with teams in the same company, so we could get to know each other and try things out. We found out that we wanted to challenge each other by putting the other person into a situation where they had to react, improv-style. So I can start a workshop and say “Elfie will tell you a story about this now” and she will take it away and continue from there, and vice versa. This has been a fun journey with a lot of learning and facilitating together.

**JSFP: How did you start to think about SF On Tour?**

**Elfie:** We started to have written conversations in Facebook and we outlined a preferred future with a journey. We could tour around with a motorhome and meet people, share stories, bring joy and fun and ease to the world. We met in October, and at Christmas I drew a picture of a motorhome – and four years later we had a motorhome looking very like that!

**Dominik:** Marco Matera did a SOLWorld cabaret turn about how Italians hug – with a heart hug. I wasn’t there but at the breakfast table everyone was talking about it. So we met with a heart hug - and we called our motor home Hearty!

**Elfie:** I noticed how much the SF community influenced our work and our lives too. We stand on the shoulders of giants, of SF friends.

**JSFP: When did you actually set off on your journey?**

**Elfie:** We became pregnant and started to search for a house. We looked across Switzerland, Austria and Germany and we thought it wasn’t going to work. So we decided to take the money we’d saved for a house and have the journey instead. I had a day alone at home and thought “What if we just go and drive?” Dominik came home and said yes, and that was the serious starting point. In 2016 we had the motorhome, and in 2017 we set out.

**Dominik:** We knew that to make this come true we had to start with a first little step. The first step was to buy the motorhome because then we couldn’t

go back! We went out to look for a motorhome and found one quickly. So that first step led to many next steps – going to the USA, starting the podcast, interviewing the surviving SF founders, and so on.

**Elfie:** None of that was planned at the start. We knew we wanted to do an SF journey which meant for us to have a preferred future and see what emerges. So our preferred future was to travel, have good experiences, have a coffee machine with us to offer free coffee and meaningful conversations. The initial idea was to go to Lake Baikal in Russia, but the motorhome we bought wasn't up to that, so we looked elsewhere. There were so many people in North America who developed the approach and we had the idea to meet them. There are so many people doing amazing work in different ways in different fields. We were passionate about making this visible to ourselves and to others.

**Dominik:** It was also a reaction to discussions on the SFT email discussion list about what was right and wrong in SF. We wanted to show how people were really doing it. We started in N America, we didn't know how things work there and struggled to get going - we nearly gave up after a few weeks. But the podcast connected us to so many people who started connecting us with others, and we got going,

### **JSFP: When and where did you start?**

**Elfie:** In June 2017. We wanted to go to SF World conference in Frankfurt in September 2017 so we drove around to get sorted out, test everything, discover how the motorhome worked and visit our parents. Then we drove to Italy, organised the paintings on the van, and we knew we wanted to be ready to show everyone at the conference. Then there was a leak in the roof! We went home, my grandmother had a lung attack, and then two days later my cousin died by suicide. It turned out to be a blessing that we could be at home and hold the space. This was an important part of the journey for me, it brought me to this quest of how we can support living in an SF way, and in particular [SF suicide prevention](#). I asked the best hopes question many times and it was never the same, particularly after this experience. So the leak in the roof was a blessing which led to us being at home at this time.



Hearty, Elfie and Dominik's specially decorated motorhome

**Dominik:** It also connects to an event later when it was Elfie's birthday and we drove to Heather Fiske's and made a webinar with Heather Fiske and Brigitte Lavoie on suicide prevention as a birthday project. It produced an [online course](#) which is still available and has been used many times, with hopes and reasons for living. It keeps spreading around the world and people keep using it.

**JSFP: What were some of the standout moments on your journey?**

**Elfie:** That's such a hard question. Meeting Janet Bavelas comes to mind for sure. We were interested in her microanalysis work before we set out and spending time with her, Sara Healing and Jennifer Gerwing was really wonderful.

**Dominik:** We scheduled a meeting with Janet for the next day but couldn't find a place to stay – the police moved us on from a parking lot! We asked Janet if she knew where we might park up and she suggested outside her house. We parked the motorhome outside her beautiful house on Vancouver Island. It was lovely to have coffee with her in the morning and meet her at home. We wanted to spend time with people who wanted to meet us. We had so many encounters where people showed us how they lived and what mattered to them. We met Eve Lipchik who asked where I came from (Basel) – and it turned out that she had been in Basel from 1951-56! We were able to send her a treat from Basel later and she immediately got in touch. I cherish these moments so much. You get a completely different connection through moments like this.

**Elfie:** We visited places and got to see them through the eyes of local people. A big highlight for me was visiting Las Vegas. I had met a teacher from Las Vegas at a campground in Texas (which was a surprise – I thought there were just casinos!). We arrived on our daughter's fifth birthday, met Sara Jordan and went to a children's museum and to the university. And then Sara offered to look after Bibi to let us go and see the tourist things. So getting to know Las Vegas through their eyes, which was very cool, was so different to being just a tourist.

**Dominik:** Another important place... We drove 1500km to Heather Fiske's place near Halifax in Nova Scotia. We had such a lovely time – for us she was the Mary Poppins of the SF world. She was always making things and offering things but we never saw her making them, only producing them for us.

**Elfie:** We had so many great conversations about SF. We could spend an hour talking about one word! The meanings, the alternatives... being geeks and nerds about language this was so exciting.

**Dominik:** Heather became our editor in English which was really fulfilling for both of us.

**Elfie:** I think there are two brilliant editors in English; one is Jenny Clarke and the other is Heather Fiske.



Elfie Czerny (centre) at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) with Sara Jordan (to the right of Elfie) and some of her students.

## **JSFP: How long did the tour last in total?**

**Dominik:** The tour lasted two and a half years – we lived in the motorhome for all that time. We kept the [podcast](#) going, but other podcasts were appearing at that point so we stopped. We are still thinking about how it might restart. Also COVID was arriving, and we'd spent all our money so we had to earn something. And I got fed up with editing podcasts! It's a [beautiful collection of different people and conversations we had](#). They are shared and used in SF trainings too – it's great to see how much they are valued. And it's a counterpoint to anyone saying that SF has to be done like this and we can point to all sorts of examples of different ways to do it.

## **JSFP: It seems that you've picked up on the microanalysis work...**

**Elfie:** There are people doing things in different ways, and that's been a topic in the SF community for many years. Microanalysis offers a way to look at conversations in an interactional way, which is congruent with what SF aims to do. We can look at what we think we do, and also at what we actually do. Then we can see how meaning is co-constructed in a conversation, and seeing what elements influence the conversation – the summaries, the formulations, the questions, what each person is doing in the co-construction. It sounds very abstract but when you look at the details (I love details) you can see that it's not just questions and listening, it's everything all the time. You can see it happening, right there.

**Dominik:** I am always looking for easy ways to spread things in the world. At the beginning I thought the questions were all you needed (and I was selling my question card set). Then we saw microanalysis, we saw how calibration (previously called grounding) happened moment by moment, almost second by second, together. It's not a sender-receiver thing. It became clear that when you describe the world like that then you can't say that one person is responsible for something; we are all part of what we co-construct all the time, we all influence it, we are always part of it. This could change the world if people knew this and understood it. Janet Bavelas said that this was her most important work – and she wasn't sure whether anyone would ever understand it. For us this was the most useful concept in the world. Everybody should know about it. Yes, you can get into calibration and questions and formulations and so on, but I still struck by the idea that we are co-constructing everything together all the time. It keeps my fire for microanalysis alive.

We wanted to do something with microanalysis but didn't know what. Then corona came, and everything stopped! We didn't have to do anything for two months. This was a great relief to me! There was no need to earn money, so we worked on setting up our microanalysis course.

**Elfie:** For us it's about what you can learn for everyday life. We see again and again how difficult it is to make it accessible. This is a quest we are still on – how to make this work more accessible and understandable. Seeing how powerful each conversation partner is, how to have more meaningful conversations, how we can navigate a conversation, how it aligns with (or just IS) an SF approach – it gives us new words and things we can show to participants. We also publish '[Personönlichkeit!](#)', a monthly magazine in German aimed at a wider audience where we aim to offer interactional perspectives on personality and personal development translating the work into everyday life.

**Dominik:** It's also about continuing the SF story. Insoo and Steve were planning to work with Janet and microanalysis and then died. But they had already sent Janet Bavelas their tapes. Janet said that SF was one of the most ethical approaches – you don't go in with one problem and come out with three! You are not making stuff up in your head as a practitioner. It's also about honouring this legacy and continuing to make visible what is there.

**Elfie:** We are running [online microanalysis courses](#), they run in German and in English, and at the leadership course at the University of Applied Science in Lucerne we run a module called leadership interactions – we have people record a conversation and analyse it. They can learn more about navigating their conversations, and they usually find that an SF (hopeful and meaningful) way of navigating a conversation is a useful one!

**Dominik:** It is fun for them to see their tapes and see how they are using words to make things more difficult or more resourceful. We then don't have to sell SF anymore, they can see what's working in their tapes. It's very rewarding, it helps us to teach less and encourage them to explore more.

**Elfie:** We are currently interested in microanalysis of team meetings and conversations. Most of what exists is on one to one conversations - we want to do more about how bigger groups co-construct meaning.

**Dominik:** At the recent [Social Construction Conference](#) (SoCoCon, October 2023) it struck us that everyone was talking about how meaning is co-constructed but nobody seemed to know how. It's one of our quests at the moment.

**JSFP:** Thank you very much.

### InterAction SF interviews

The InterAction journal (2009-2016) ran a series of interviews with SF pioneers, practitioners and researchers. These are available to download free from the [InterAction archive](#).

[Gale Miller: The man behind the mirror behind the mirror at BFTC](#)

[Ben Furman: SF Respects the Not Invented Here Syndrome](#)  
[Chris Iveson: Striving towards minimalism in changing scenery](#)  
[Harry Korman: Making the process of co-construction visible](#)  
[Luc Isabaert: Restoring the client's choice of action](#)  
[Nora Bateson: An ecology of conversation](#)  
[1500 papers a year: An interview with Alasdair Macdonald](#)  
[Rom Harré: The new psychology: discursive practices, not internal forces](#)  
[Beyond the horizon: Meeting Paul Cilliers](#)  
[Fifty years of the Interactional View - an interview with Janet Bavelas](#)  
[SF at the kitchen table - an interview with Alan Kay](#)  
[An African perspective on Solution-Focused Coaching: Interview with Lilliane Iculet](#)  
[Adopting the language of the business: An interview with John Brooker](#)  
[From diagnosis to dialogue in Organisational Development - an interview with Susanne Burgstaller](#)  
[Improving our effectiveness: An interview with Scott D. Miller](#)  
[Enactivism and the future of mind: Interview with Daniel D Hutto](#)

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