

A training tutorial on solution focused therapy: *A forum of voices sharing their reflections*

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The training context

This article gives an account of a two-hour group tutorial on solution-focused therapy with thirteen students training on the London Institute of Family Therapy's certificate in systemic practice: child-focused stream, 2010-2011.

Although the article is written from the tutor's perspective, I asked all students to share their thoughts and reflections with me following the tutorial. In response to this, three students offered their feedback, which they agreed to share in this article. Therefore, the article will be written using a dialogical approach, i.e. as a forum of different voices to allow multiple perspectives.

My own voice

I have been a tutor for two years and I believe tutorials are an essential component of the course in that they allow students to engage in experiential learning in a smaller and, hopefully, safe environment. This does present its challenges, as students (and tutors!) bring their own experiences and views about being part of a group and engaging in group activities, as well as diverse professional backgrounds and skills.

Discussions within the small staff-group (two tutors and the chair of the course) highlighted students' stated struggles with understanding and engaging at a deeper level of self-reflexivity and developing critical analysis skills. In my tutorials, I was therefore aiming to create a safe space for students to explore their personal and unique relationship to different systemic models and ideas in relation to their practice and professional contexts.

The tutorial activity

Is solution-focused therapy systemic?

This tutorial was halfway through the course (March 2011) and I felt able to take more risks and "secure enough to improvise" (Byng-Hall, 1995, p. 3). In fact, the activity was not planned in advance in its details but developed out of a spontaneous discussion in relation to the solution-focused model.

In the morning, during the lecture, students watched the video of Insoo Kim Berg, "I'd Hear Laughter" (1994) in which she was using the solution-focused model of therapy with a family. In the afternoon, during the tutorial, an interesting discussion developed out of my question to students about their views regarding the position of a solution-focused therapist along the continuum of directive-collaborative. The group conversation evolved into a debate around whether or not the solution-focused model is indeed systemic. I therefore asked all students

to express their views regarding this, making a note on a flipchart.

How would you describe the solution-focused therapy model?

Systemic _____ Unsystemic

It was interesting to notice how diversified the students' positions were both from a personal and professional point of view. At this point, I decided to use a handout (which I had earlier prepared!) to help students identify some personal and professional connections to the model (see below).

Personal and professional connections to the solution-focused model

Solution-focused brief therapy: Key principles

Key principles	Personal domain	Professional domain
Looking for exceptions to the problem: positives		
Exception-seeking questions: e.g. what has been different/better?		
Solution focused		
Future oriented		
From general to specific		
Explore + expand on alternative ways of coping, e.g. doing more of		
People have their own solutions		
Belief that people are resourceful		
Finding motivation e.g. need to change		
Change as inevitable		
People naturally bound to change to respond to life events, lifecycle, life circumstances		
Time-limited & brief		
Staying focused on specific goal & progress		

Key techniques

Key techniques	Personal domain	Professional domain
Goal setting Focus on behaviour Whatever goal is valid Choice=control Small steps		
Scaling Scale questions Potential to find & develop exceptions & signs of moving up the scale e.g. where are things now? How would you know? What would tell you that you have gone higher?		
Miracle question Focus on signs that the miracle is happening/has happened e.g. how would you know? How would other people know? Who would be the first to notice?		

After 15-20 minutes, students freely shared some new connections being identified or some other connections confirmed and validated, drawing from their personal and professional experiences.

In order to promote further reflections on personal and professional connections to the solution-focused model, I then asked students to scale their fit or non fit with the model by positioning themselves physically in the room along an imaginary scale (from 1 to 10). I asked,

How does the solution focused model fit with you personally and professionally?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 No fit _____ Total fit

One person found no fit at all with the model, others a good fit at around 7-8, wanting to develop this more. Most people in the middle would use the model as part of their "tool box".

Reflecting on own practice now and in the future

Most students were more familiar with solution-focused ideas (as they had received some previous training) than other systemic models e.g. structural or strategic. I therefore asked students to think about a family they were working with and imagine the next session with them. I asked students to think about three things which related to the model they wanted to use with the family. I then asked each one of them to share briefly some details about the family they were thinking of and the three things they could try and do.

I then asked them whether, after applying the model to their practice and specific context, there was any difference in their position of fit or no fit. Some of them had moved. I asked the reason for their position in relation to the model before and after thinking about their case example to further reflect on their connection to the model in practice.

I then asked students to imagine being at the end of their systemic training using future-oriented questions.

Where would you position yourself in relation to the model at the end of your training?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 No fit _____ Total fit

Some students moved to a higher score, saying they wanted to develop it more in their practice.

Following this, by adapting the miracle question, I asked students to imagine themselves in their dream job and re-position themselves. I asked:

In your dream job, would you be using any of the solution-focused ideas and techniques? Where would you position yourself, then?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 No fit _____ Total fit

Again, there was a considerable spread of positions in the group; some people holding the same position and some people moving, suggesting that the fit with the model may vary across time and contexts.

The tutorial ended with the sharing of some overall reflections on the activity, which most students regarded as "useful and powerful".

My reflections on the activity: A dialogical perspective

As a tutor, I thought the tutorial was effective in promoting self-reflexivity, as it allowed students to take a personal position in relation to the model, own their position and reflect on it. They were invited to engage with their dialogical self as different inner voices were at play (Rober, 2008) and reflected on changing positions as they entered in dialogue with themselves and each other.

The activity seemed to create a context for a much more flexible and rich tapestry of perspectives and views in relation to the model and each student's own practice and work context, by taking a multiplicity of "I"-positions; as Hermans states, "...self as being composed of a variety of spatial positions and as related to positions of other selves" (Hermans, 2004, p. 18). It made apparent differences in positioning possible both at an individual and group level to show how multiple perspectives can co-exist and change, a typically systemic both/and approach.

A both/and approach was also reflected in the apparent contradiction between my directive style i.e. giving instructions to students about the activity, and a collaborative stance. As a tutor and group facilitator, I had taken a "directive stance";

at the same time, I was “making it up” along the way, trying to hold a collaborative stance towards my students’ learning by using their positive feedback and high energy in the room as the activity progressed. Furthermore, I was mindful of my underlying intention, which aimed at promoting self-reflexivity as typical of a second-order position. An interesting ongoing dilemma to wrestle with in training, supervision and therapy is, in fact, how to hold on to our own expertise and authority without losing a collaborative stance (Mason, 2011).

The “directive” mode I adopted could have been a reflection of students’ preference to be led by the tutor rather than taking more risks and responsibility for their own learning. This might suggest a possible mismatch of expectations, values and approaches between students and tutor (Scaife, 1993, writing within the context of supervision). During this tutorial, I was aware of a variety of learning styles and expectations present in the group, yet I decided to take risks, trying to act upon my inner self-instructing voice to “go for it!” and making decisions along the way about how to best manage the group-learning process.

Furthermore, creating an imaginary scale in the room where students were taking different positions looked like a form of sculpting (Kantor & Dahl, 1973; Papp, 1973) which reflected not only students’ individual views and positions but also a physical and emotional representation of the student group, and their relationship with each other; e.g. by talking to their neighbours and negotiating their position with one another. I also reflected on some group processes, suggesting that it is possible some students might have chosen a “middle position” in order to avoid feeling exposed or singled out and having to give account of their views and position.

Students’ voices

After a few days, I asked all students for some feedback about the tutorial and three students replied as follows:

Kristin Dockar wrote:

I thought the exercises for solution-focused brief therapy, where we moved along an imaginary line in relation to how we thought solution focused fits with us, were very effective. The physical placement and then subsequent movement enabled self-reflection both in the personal and professional sense.

Initially, I placed myself around 6/7 on the line but subsequent reflection on how effective sfbt could be for me in my work moved me up to a 7/8 rating.

I enjoyed the debate on whether solution-focused therapy is systemic or not. To my mind, yes it is. It uses approaches and techniques that can be found in strategic, narrative and attachment theories: all aim to find solutions; all work collaboratively to engage children and families to share, interact and explore their emotions and feelings around a problematic area in their lives. Questions, both rating and circular, are asked; exceptions or unique outcomes are investigated.

Chris Evans wrote:

Regarding the session on solution-focused brief therapy, I think that it was very effective. I first came across the idea of getting people to move around the room to consider a question some years ago, when helping to develop a children’s-rights training pack. We found that exercise very good to get participants to really think about key questions.

The point which was made by someone was interesting as well i.e. that unconscious responses can move the body in certain ways and to unexpected positions – which in turn gives another facet to reflection.

A suggestion might be to have questions that are easy; for example, in the children’s-rights context we stated. “All children have rights”. Everyone headed in one direction but then we would throw in a more controversial question, which made people spread out a bit. I think with solution-focused brief therapy this would be possible because there are more people with very strong views about it.

More recently Chris added:

I think it worth saying something about the complexity of the group whose experience varied immensely and I think this impacted on how individuals related to SFBT. This is because SFBT is very widely used but often in a selective way. In other words, practitioners use bits of it alongside other methods and approaches. For example, with experienced social workers, they will often make use of it but, in a discussion, have difficulty

in deconstructing their own personal approaches in order to identify a particular theoretical approach.

Elizabeth Baldwin wrote:

I found it helpful to use the scale in a physical way, i.e. on the floor, as this reflects the way I often use it with children, and it gave me an experience of being asked to use it in that way for myself. I think it is always helpful to have experienced the things we ask clients to engage in as it highlights some of the emotions that may be going on within the client in respect to participating in the exercises. In the same way, I always encourage potential parent-group leaders to experience a group as a parent before training.

I had naively thought there wouldn’t be much divergence of opinion about whether solution-focused therapy was a systemic approach/tool. My own feeling is that it can be systemic and I feel that, when I use the solution-focused ideas, I do so in a systemic way by eliciting different perspectives from the people involved and comparing them.

In the light of the above, I was not surprised at the spread of perceived fit with personal and professional practice.

Considering the future use of solution-focused ideas was more difficult as I have no clear idea where I am going with this training and also my own professional pathway. However, as this is something I am mulling over at present, it was an interesting experience.

Overall, I found it a positive useful way of considering solution-focused practice.

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Conclusion

In spite of the group tendency to adopt a more comfortable and less risky position in the group, which might have been reflected in the “middle position”, the tutorial activity seemed to have allowed students to take some risks, as some people expressed quite strong connections either of fit or misfit with the model, which was immediately shared amongst students in a visually powerful way. Through this immediacy, I have learnt a lot about my students’ views and practice in a very short space of time.

I tend to use some of the solution-focused techniques as and when it seems to “fit” with clients, rather than using the approach in its entirety. Therefore, my own relationship with the model can be described as “flexible”. I wonder whether this was reflected in the group process in that most students were also positioned in the middle and stated they were using solution-focused ideas as “tools”. I also encourage students to be “flexible” in their positioning. In this respect, there might have been a parallel process and “fit” between myself and the student group which may account for its effectiveness. It can also be connected to Burnham’s idea (2005) about relational reflexivity, in that we were able to coordinate our resources, attending to process and what was happening in the room.

As in therapy, the outcome of an intervention can reflect the fit between the players at that particular time in a specific context; e.g. tutor and their students, supervisor and supervisee, therapist and clients, as well as a variety of other inner voices emerging in the process of working together.

Nevertheless, I believe this format can be used or adapted in training contexts to explore students’ relationship to other systemic models, to promote risk-taking, to make links between theory and practice and to reflect on their personal and professional connections to theoretical ideas, all of which can enhance self-reflexivity.

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Space Matters or I am left simmering in a reflexive broth of a new work soup

What is this Tomm foolery?
using questions to explore
and not statements to close.....
our conversations.

Does any Tomm, Greg and Chloe
shake up my bag of experience,
adding spice to a work-a-day-life?
yes,
and more than that,
the tang of de-constructionism gives a kick to the senses
leaving me to reflect
off my well trodden path.

This was written in my second year of systemic theory and practice at Derby University. It was a metaphor that turned into verse. I loved the words but also the new position I found myself in through the reading.

Bridget Marston