

Theory of solution-focused practice

A draft in progress in September 2017

EBTA-Practice Definition Group (Peter Sundman, Matthias Schwab, Ferdinand Wolf, Svea van der Hoorn, John Wheeler, Marie-Christine Cabie)

I. Practice: Being in context.....	3
II. Description: What makes a practice solution-focused?.....	4
Key ingredients in solution-focused practice:.....	5
• description of the desired change.....	5
• respect, engagement and positivity.....	5
• definition of the support.....	6
• exploration of the context for change.....	6
• eliciting use of the client’s competence and resources.....	6
• finding and amplifying progress.....	6
• thinking and doing differently.....	7
• practicing the change.....	7
Solution-focused emphasis of common professional conversational tools.....	7
• questions (open, closed, clarifying etc.).....	8
• comments (minimal, particles, etc.).....	8
• clarifications.....	8
• requests.....	8
• formulations.....	8
• naming, reframing.....	8
• reflections.....	9
• encouragement.....	9
• interpretations.....	9
• conclusions.....	9
• humor and creativity.....	10
• metaphors.....	10
• personal narratives.....	10
• advice (suggestions, examples, conventional wisdom, sharing information).....	10
III. Explanation: Why be solution-focused?.....	11
How clients make sense – What is the meaning of this?.....	11
How clients use their competences and resources – Where may I go from here?.....	13
How clients act to change – What can I do?.....	15
References.....	16

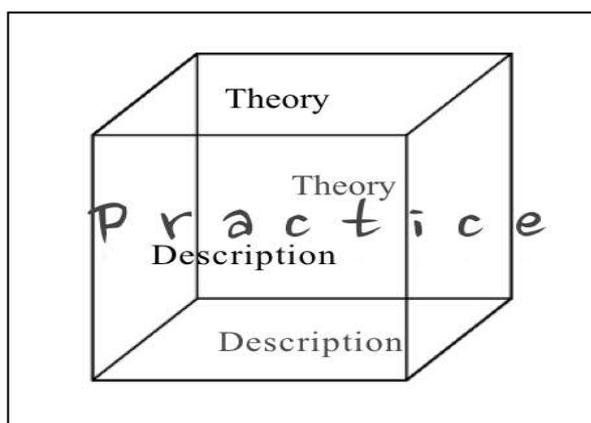
In this document, we wish to acknowledge both the originators and developers of the way of working with clients that we will be referring to as solution-focused practice. Some readers may be familiar with the term “solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT)” - we acknowledge this name as being part of the history of the form of practice that this document explores and expands on. Others in the organizational field use the concept SF Practice when describing what we here call a solution-focused practice.

Our aim is to present a coherent theory of solution-focused practice. The theory is written for those who want to understand the rationale of solution-focused practice. It has three interrelated parts. It starts with describing the context of solution-focused practice. Secondly, the basic model of solution-focused practice is characterized by a description of the change process and typical topics when creating solution-focused conversations. Finally, the reasons for the choices in the model, together with the main ethical choices and assumptions, are given to explain why we think solution-focused practice works.

The parts overlap and relate to each other and all have something unique about them. Practice cannot for instance be fully described or explained, as language doesn't capture everything. Each moment in life is unique and different from what concepts can cover. Thinking is required for intuitions, but on the other hand, "intuitions without concepts are blind"¹.

Like the original solution-focused developers, we want to keep the focus on what is happening in practice and not get distracted by the explanations, which can easily happen among professionals. All the same, we want to make some basic concepts clear in order to explain the reasons for what is done in solution-focused practice. Both explanation and description can be seen as the surfaces of the space that is created by practice.

Metaphorically, practice might be considered as the space inside a Necker cube which can be seen from different sides and angles. However, our acting may, and by means of creativity will, go beyond the cube. This will not be seen in terms of theory or description unless we expand theory or description.



We are aware of the reservations regarding a theory of solution-focused practice². However, we think that there has always implicitly been a profound reasoning, grounding the practice. Making this reasoning explicit, will, we believe, be helpful for the further development of the solution-focused practice. The theory shows itself in the conceptual assumptions, in the notions we ascribe to, and within the descriptions we use.

Solution-focused practice was initially developed in a therapeutic context. From the 1980's, it has spread into different fields of work such as coaching, education, group work, leadership, organizational

¹ Kant (1914, B 75).

² For example, Steve de Shazer wrote in Words where originally magic: „I decided that my only recourse was to follow Wittgenstein's advice (1958) and renounce all Theory“ (p.32) and in the well-known interview with Michael Hoyt he said: „Don't let the theory get in the way. Theories will blind you“.

development and consulting. The theory is meant to be applicable in all the different areas of solution-focused work, though examples and descriptions might show some bias to the therapeutic context, because of the authors' practice background and the original development of solution-focused in this context.

This document is a revision of earlier descriptions.³ Some ideas from recent discussions have been incorporated, especially to the explanatory part of the theory⁴.

I. Practice: Being in context

Practice is something no one can do away with. Humans can stop thinking and reflecting or even be fully unaware of their doings, but they cannot stop »practice« as long as they are alive. Generally speaking, living life and practice are one. All practice happens somewhere, at a particular time, and in direct or imagined relation to someone which is referred to as »being in context«. The context of social interaction is conditional to individual reflections and vice versa.⁵

The context of our actual living is connected with the meaning of our actions and our language. Meaning cannot be separated from the context in which words and actions are used and interpreted. In addition, any word we use refers to other words and actions in other contexts used by other persons with other meanings. Meaning refers to more than what is literally the topic under discussion or claim being made. Meaning also involves a more general orientation to (or a sense of) what is at issue in the interaction and its implications for the past and future⁶. Categorizing someone, for instance as a »mother« or »schizophrenic«, we ascribe meaning. This ascription of meaning goes beyond the logic of giving a thing a name tag.

Briefly, »being in context« defines the meaning of our words and our actions and vice versa.

Here, we are looking at the solution-focused practice, its focus of attention, descriptions and reasons for choosing this practice, instead of other ways of being in context.

The specific context solution-focused work originally evolved in was the psychotherapeutic practice context, which is often defined as »talking cure«⁷. The talk, the conversation, was seen as the mechanism / vehicle for change and hence was a major area of interest, reflection and research.

In this context, someone who feels stuck with personal problems seeks help from a professionally trained practitioner. The someone may be an individual, couples, families or other natural groups. Help is often defined as help to understand something problematic and/or help to deal with it. Problems usually refer to psychological, psychiatric or social events and situations. Help usually means to talk about these issues. The idea being that the talk makes the issues more understandable and manageable for the client. Sometimes the parties draw, use symbolic objects or body movements together with the talking.

Usually the therapeutic practice setting is the practitioner's work room where the practitioner sits with the client(s) as they talk about the client's sense of being stuck. The conversation they have is considered private and other people are not meant to hear or see what is going on.

Therapeutic practice is about peoples' personal world, their experiences and thinking, feelings, intuitions, choices, and actions⁸. Most clients express a need for help but they differ in what they are troubled with, and what help they think they may benefit from⁹. The practitioner will address and build upon these, and the client's personal statements about the outcome of the work that is done together will influence the practice.

³ EBTA Practice Definition 2012 and Solution Focused Therapy Treatment Manual for Working with Individuals (2nd Version), July 1, 2013.

⁴ Open Space discussions at the EBTA conferences 2015 and 2016, Discussion at the SFT-List 2017.

⁵ Lauth (1989).

⁶ Miller (2008).

⁷ McLeod et al. (2009).

⁸ Vogt (2016).

⁹ Solution-focused work with mandated clients differ from ordinary solution-focused work in that the referring person is the de facto 'client', who's difficulties with the mandated person are, if possible, dealt with.

Usually the practitioner operates with what the client describes with her/his own words, voice and gestures. Sometimes there might be third-party agendas like safety or work issues involved as well. Sometimes the practitioner can observe the context where the client wants the change, for instance when she/he meets the whole family or work group. However, what the client and practitioner do together is usually a temporary addition to the client's space of action.¹⁰

As the solution-focused practice spread into different fields of work such as coaching, education, group work, leadership, organizational development and consulting, words, the language and actions of the solution-focused practice may be changing to some degree.

A more general description of these different contexts can be given by saying someone, or a group of people, are seeking some sort of support from a professionally trained practitioner. The issues in question are a specific problem or a need for change or development to improve the interaction within their environment. The focus of the conversation is on the personal experiences and thinking, feelings, intuitions, choices and actions of clients within the context in question.

Practice, as indicated above, also implies more than the interaction described here. Even the most intimate conversations in „talking cures“, involve interaction related to personal, social, legal, political or religious (to name a few) issues that form the context of practice in general.

As said before, no description or explanation can ever do complete justice to life. There is always more to it. As practice creates the open space of life, the context of ascribed meanings, as an ongoing interrelated process, will inevitably change constantly.

II. Description: What makes a practice solution-focused?

The description of a practice is a simplified account of what actually happens, in order to show certain aspects that are considered to be important to further specify the practice: Here, we ask: What makes a practice solution-focused?

Like a map, this description highlights or omits features of the space of action that are specific to solution-focused practice. In this way the descriptive map helps differentiate solution-focused practice from other kinds of „talking cures“, „coaching models“, „educational syllables“, etc..¹¹

The basic activity in solution-focused practice is to support the client to make a desired change in perceptions, feelings, thoughts, intentions, choices and/or actions by facilitating talks that generate detailed descriptions of that desired change.¹²

In this process, the practitioner talks with the client about anything that seems helpful for the client to make the desired change. Likewise, s/he omits and ignores anything that seems to support the opposite.

This is often described as „evaluative responsiveness“¹³, „helping from one step behind“¹⁴, and „envisioning the client's situation in relation to the change s/he hopes for“¹⁵.

During the conversation, the practitioner concentrates on the moment at hand and the client's presence. S/he focuses on the actual interchange of words and actions between them. S/he responds from moment to moment on what the client did and said before. S/he carefully grounds¹⁶ each speech turn to collaborate with the client towards a coherent mutually agreed description of the issue at hand.¹⁷ In her/his own turns, s/he uses what seems to enable a joint turn-by-turn co-construction towards the client's desired change.

¹⁰ Keeping in mind that clients spent the rest of their life's without the practitioner may help practitioners to be aware of their factual agency.

¹¹ Thus, the famous quote „The map is not the territory“ by Alfred Korzybski coined at the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1931 became important for many solution-focused practitioners.

¹² For case examples and a theory related discussion of descriptions in the therapy context see: Iveson & McKergow (2016).

¹³ Kramer & Stiles (2015).

¹⁴ Solution Focused Therapy Treatment Manual for Working with Individuals, 2nd version (2013).

¹⁵ De Shazer et al. (2006).

¹⁶ Clark & Brennan (1991).

¹⁷ Bavelas (2012).

Most of the time s/he will use the client's words and simple language talking about real or imagined differences that may show in ordinary daily activities observable by the client and others.

Questions are asked to evaluate past, present or future differences. The practitioner will encourage talking about how the client did or will perceive, feel, think or intend to do and choose and how this did or will change the meaning and purpose of daily life in a way that is somehow better. There will hardly be any talk about why things went wrong and the practitioner does not apply any theory or model to explain causes for difficulties or problems¹⁸.

Although solution-focused practice may look like an ordinary everyday conversation without any exchange on „deep or hidden causes and complex psychopathological mechanisms at work“, it is a very focused process in which the practitioner deliberately ignores or keeps, elicits, amplifies or adds on what s/he heard from the client to find a simple and brief way to be helpful.¹⁹

Solution-focused conversations do not have any fixed internal structure or manual. There are however (1) several observable key ingredients in solution-focused practice and (2) a specific solution-focused emphasis of common professional conversational tools.

Key ingredients in solution-focused practice:

- **description of the desired change**

The key question in solution-focused practice is what change the client wants. The change can be anything purposeful, meaningful and sensible for the client and possible for the practitioner to support. It is usually constructed and agreed on from the client's description of the current life situation as something that is not yet present, but hopefully soon will be. The client's hopes, expectations, plans, visions and dreams are good starting points for the conversation of what to change. To envision the client's best hopes or a hypothetical day after the miracle of the problem no longer being a problem, is a powerful way to describe the desired change. It is usually constructed by eliciting one or more practical descriptions of desirable differences in the life situation at hand, including significant others' perspectives as part of the description. In subsequent conversations the client might revise what s/he wants to change after considering the description of a better future and maybe after dealing with the consequences of the initial change.

For example: What sort of change are you looking for? – What will be different when you feel better? – How, in the next couple of days or weeks, would you realize that our conversation today has been helpful? – What will be different? – How will you know that the things have changed the way you want?

- **respect, engagement and positivity**

Respect and engagement with the unique characteristics of the client and collaboration are essential parts of solution-focused practice. The practitioner needs to be curious and appreciative for what the client expresses. Clients usually engage in the conversation in a similar fashion, which leads to a collegial relationship in which the practitioner takes the responsibility for leading the process and the client takes responsibility for leading the content.

Respect and engagement show up as validation, encouragement, compliments and being genuine, which usually create a positive atmosphere with hope, sympathy, compassion, caring and humor²⁰.

For example: What are your hopes for our meeting today? – Let me check if I/you understand you/me correctly ... - What else? – I appreciate that ... - Thank you! – Great!

¹⁸ Some clients ask for theories and in some situations a theory is directly or indirectly available as common sense, for instance. In these situations, the theory or the theoretical concepts can be used as viable explanations.

¹⁹ Bavelas (2012)

²⁰ Shick (2017)

- **definition of the support**

Both the client and the practitioner have expectations on what could be helpful and what may not be. Defining the support and its context focuses the conversation and makes it meaningful and sensible for both. solution-focused practice is built on the assumption that clients are capable of making sense for themselves. The practitioner therefore usually agrees with the client's expectations of the support, as long as it is within her/his remit and ethical boundaries. Clients usually want more support in initiating the change and less in finalizing it.

For example:²¹: How can I help you/you help me? – What is helpful for you/me? – What should we do for this to be helpful? – What should we avoid?

- **exploration of the context for change**

As the client is trusted to make good sense and meaning of her/his life, the practice context should support the change the client wants to see happening in her/his life. Usually the client wants to change some part of her/his life, sometimes called a certain situation. That situation is important to explore to make a shared understanding of what the client means and how s/he makes sense of her/his world. It is the baseline for the change, and sometimes already part of the change, as the client's purpose, intentions, competence, successes and choices are clarified. The description usually contains interaction with significant others in specific places together with the client's related interpretations and feelings.

For example: How are things for you now? - Tell me something about the situation you/others want to change? – What does x mean for you? What happens then? What is important for you/others there? How do you feel about it? Who else is involved? What do they say and do? Is it sometimes easier for you?

- **eliciting use of the client's competence and resources**

The change is mostly achieved by drawing on the client's competence and resources, although these may be hidden or dormant at first. The practitioner therefore listens for and initiates talk about them. Useful competences often are connected to words like: strengths, qualities, abilities, skills, knowledge, talent, coping, resilience, knowledge, know-how, expertise, experiences, learning, development, confidence, initiatives and wisdom. Some resources are personal: reasoning, determination, or willpower. Some are social, like significant relationships, family, and other social support. Others can be physical, political, and economical. Talk about supportive emotions, what is going well, or what are healthy and happy parts of the client's life can also elicit useful resources for the change. Reflective talk about resources is often useful to help clients to become more aware of them.

For example: What are you good at? – How have you coped with this? – Is this one of your strengths? – Who supports you? – What has helped before? – Do you need more of x? – I wonder how you stayed healthy in midst of all of this? – How did you manage to do this!

- **finding and amplifying progress**

Client's competence usually shows up in signs of progress. Clients talk, for example, about better times and differences for the better. Surprisingly, clients can give examples of the desired change already happening quite often. The practitioner can make these visible using, for instance, evaluative 'scales' that describe differences that make a difference for the client and then talk about what made this possible. Then, doing more of what works, is the solution-focused way to amplify progress. Some progress is implicit, for instance when something exceptionally²² goes better than usual in the current situation, which can be regarded as potential progress. In very serious situations and where

²¹ Questions, when appropriate, are phrased from both the practitioner's and the client's perspective to illustrate how solution-focused is collaborative and engaging with the client as first-person (McKergow, 2016).

the client's context is one of limited influence over her/his situation, stopping the situation from getting worse and maintaining steadiness can be regarded as progress.

For example: What small signs will tell that you/we are making progress? - What is better since last time we met? – What makes today 10% better? – How can you/I do more of it? – How did you manage to make this exception happen? – What is your contribution to preventing things from getting worse?

- **thinking and doing differently**

The notion of change implies that something needs to be different. Therefore, thinking differently (about meaning or choices) and/or doing something different (acting) are frequent topics in the conversation. New meaning often evolves from de- or recomposing facts and fictions of the conversation in a process of reframing.²³

When clients or practitioners²⁴ find themselves doing more of what doesn't work²⁵, it is useful to talk about other acceptable²⁶ alternatives for the client that might serve the purpose achieving the desired change. The alternatives can be logically derived or creatively generated. Other people, who are able to see alternatives 'out of the box', can be of great help,

For example: Can you see this as something else too? – What would be something completely different? – What can you/I do differently? – How can you/I surprise others in a positive way? – What if...? – How about this...?

- **practicing the change**

Changes become meaningful when the consequences fit the intended purpose. Life is full of surprises and therefore putting the difference into practice in everyday life is an important test of whether or not the change makes sense, and creates the improvements the client hopes for.

Sometimes it is useful to devise experiments or new habits²⁷ together with clients so as to test ideas generated in the reality of the client's world. For clients facing challenging and risky situations, some form of confirmation of the safety, appropriateness, and do-ability of the change is also important.

The conversation about consequences is similar to the exploration of the situation for change and sometimes is a start for a new change process.

For example: What is your/my next step? – How did it go? – Happy with the result? – How will you continue? – How confident are you that you/we will succeed? - What does this mean? – Is there enough safety now? – Suppose you really do this, how might your colleagues react?

Solution-focused emphasis of common professional conversational tools

Conversation analysis shows that all professionals use specific conversational elements in their interaction with clients²⁸. Some of them are mostly used contextually. Others depend on personal style and some are more theory related²⁹. Their use from a solution-focused theory perspective are described here:

²² Exceptions in problematic situations have been major ingredients in solution-focused practice. Exceptions are here reformulated, in keeping with the trend to focus on the desired future from the onset without starting from the problems clients (in therapeutic contexts) usually experience when seeking support.

²³ Mattila (2001).

²⁴ For instance, Beyebach (2008).

²⁵ Weakland et al. (1974).

²⁶ Any alternative needs to fit the client's purpose and intentions. What other approaches often call »resistance«, from a solution-focused point of view, is a useful contribution of clients to indicate that there are better alternatives around that are worth to be explored or discovered.

²⁷ Isebaert (2015)

²⁸ Detailed descriptions of these elements are given by conversation analysts for instance in Peräkylä et al. (2008).

- **questions (open, closed, clarifying etc.)**

Questions are the most frequently used ingredient in solution-focused practice. Solution-focused practice is even sometimes defined as more or less a question tool box³⁰. Open questions about meaning, focusing questions about intentions, choices and future, and clarifying questions about competences, resources and the preferred future are typical in solution-focused practice. All basic solution-focused questions presuppose possibilities, change, client resources and /or the client's making sense.

Closed and rhetorical questions are usually avoided.

For example: What do you mean? – What will you and others notice? – What else? – What will you do? – How come things are better? – When and where will you...?

- **comments (minimal, particles, etc.)**

Comments that ground what the client means and want, as well as encouraging comments about the client's competence and agency, are used deliberately, and with care, to make the mutual understanding or misunderstanding clear and to support the client.

For example: Good! – Yes – Well done! – Wau! – You actually did it! – And ... – Despite ... – Because ... –Then ... – Also ... – If ... –Therefore ...

- **clarifications**

Client's clarifications of what is important are carefully noted and used as well as possible. The practitioner clarifies her/his own perspective, intentions and suggestions, too, especially in conflicts where the practitioner clarifies the values that are involved.

For example: I mean... – I really want ... – Not exactly, more like ... – Yes, but ... – Let me explain a bit ... – I mean... – My intention was...

- **requests**

Solution-focused practitioners seldom use requests, as they easily promote an expert stance.

Requests might be used in high risk situations and ethical conflicts. Client requests are on the other hand, if possible, met, as they support client competence, empowerment, and agency.

For example: Can you please tell your family about...? – You need to stop! – Can you recommend me a good specialist?

- **formulations**

Solution-focused practitioners use formulations (paraphrases, restatements, summaries) with care to preserve and build on as much of the client's words as possible and to limit the influence of other ideas. Also, what is omitted is chosen with the client's perspective in mind. New words are introduced mainly as supplements and answers to requests from the client. They are usually phrased as possibilities or questions. The practitioner is ready to modify the formulation to fit the client's view.

For example: I'm impressed by ... and agree with ... therefore I wonder if ... – Do I understand you correctly, that you ...?

- **naming, reframing**

Naming and reframing, using the client's words, are powerful elements for change and are used extensively by solution-focused practitioners in all stages of the change process. The guiding

²⁹ DeJong et al. (2013).

³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solution_focused_brief_therapy, read 24.6.2017.

principle is to create new possibilities and strengthen the client's competence.³¹ Some reframing is less logical and more creative and can for example involve sensory experiences such as 'listening to the body'.

The conversation for change as a whole can also be regarded as reframing.

For example: What word describes that? - What is this for you? - Is this like...? – So, this is the 'new you'! – What is his good intention? – What will happen when things go well?

- **reflections**

Reflections by everyone involved in the conversation are used to ground all conclusions in the client's experience. Reflective conversations also prevent 'solution forced' attempts to decide on the change too early or rush into acting before the meaning of the change appears sufficiently clear. Solution-focused practitioners usually reflect on competence, resources, and possibilities. The client's reflections at the end of the conversation show her/ his understanding at that point and can be a good conclusion.

For example: I wonder if ... – Can this be connected with ... – What do you/I make of ... – This reminds me of ... – My impression is ... – What was useful today? – How was our conversation today?

- **encouragement**

The solution-focused practitioner takes every opportunity to encourage the client with acts (gestures and prosody) and talk. When discouragement is an option s/he chooses encouragement, for instance when the client partly succeeds in something. Talking about positive change when clients experience impossible situations, and envisioning best possible hopes, are examples of indirect encouragement. Complimenting is one form of encouragement that plays a key role in solution-focused conversations; however, compliments are offered in tentative language. Encouragement in solution-focused is not a technique of reinforcement, but a self-expression in interaction.³²

For example: You did very well in ... – Better, despite all, right? – How did you know that would help? – Good question! – Maybe you/I should try!?

- **interpretations**

Interpretations that do not fit the client's world are avoided in solution-focused practice. Solution-focused practitioners tend to use the client's interpretations. Practitioners can however suggest that the client's handling of difficult situations, or their achievements, are evidence of competence. The before mentioned naming and reframing are tentative ways of including small scale interpretations, that are used more often. Importantly, neither interpretation nor reframing is given as expert knowledge, but as one possible way of making sense.

For example: Does this mean that ...? – Why was that important for you? – How do those things go together? – What came before and after?

- **conclusions**

Client's interpretations and conclusions have a primary role in solution-focused practice. They show how the client makes sense and constructs her/his world. New conclusions are often signs of change and vice versa. Solution-focused practitioners usually make conclusions related to the client's map of the world and avoid conclusions based on other theories and ideas, something which sets solution-focused practice apart from practitioner as expert approaches.

For example: What do you make of that? – What changed after doing that? – So, all in all ... – Finally... – So doing this it will fit into your idea of ...

³¹ A famous example is Steve de Shazer's case of describing „nymphomania,“ as „sleeping problem“ and thus helping the couple to come up with very unexpected solutions. (de Shazer, 1991)

³² Thomas (2016).

- **humor and creativity**

Solution-focused conversations often include humor and creativity. Both play with ambiguity, chance and contradictions, seeing things from different perspectives. The solution-focused practitioner mirrors the client's humor and initiates creativity as a way to open up for new meaning and possibilities for the client. They show how change doesn't need to be logical and can come from 'outside of the box'.³³

For example: Have you ever tried...? – How can we fail most successfully?³⁴ – What if...? – What would your wise grandmother have done? – What does the cat think about this? – What would be a perfect surprise?

- **metaphors**

Metaphors are useful conversational tools for transforming meaning. Clients frequently use metaphors to talk about experiences they find difficult to describe with plain words and find difficult to grasp. Solution-focused practitioners can join the metaphor and direct the conversation towards change within the metaphor. This can result in expressions of change translatable to the client's everyday language and thus support the change. Of course, metaphors are a great start for creative expansions.

For example: How will you survive this storm? – What plants will grow in your beautiful garden? – How will you feel and do when the sun shines for you?

- **personal narratives**

A person usually talks about their life as a personal and coherent narrative to make sense of it and their place in it.³⁵ A solution-focused practitioner can listen to this narrative and point to the purpose, agency, competences, resources, exceptions, success and other facts that indicate possibilities for the client's desired change. The narrative also locates the change in the context of the client's life, which can be useful to address if a more limited change for some reason turns out to be insufficient.³⁶

The practitioner should stay neutral to the future of the client's narrative³⁷. However, sometimes telling personal narratives expands and transforms them, giving the client new meaning, choices or impulse for actions.

For example: What are you doing with your life? – Tell me a little more about you? – How is your life? – What is this situation related to? – With whom are you connected? – How do you like your life to be in the future?

- **advice (suggestions, examples, conventional wisdom, sharing information)**

Most of the solution-focused practice operates within the realm of the client's world. The practitioner should avoid advice and suggestions from outside, except when clients ask for it. Sometimes advice, fitting examples, conventional wisdom, sharing information about new actions (doing something different) and how to deal with risky situations are appropriate. The advice is given as a question, possibility or suggestion instead of a prescription from an expert position of knowing that this information is helpful for this particular person³⁸.

³³ Remember the Necker cube metaphor from the beginning, that allows one to see different aspects and indicates that creative practice expands and transcends „boxed spaces“.

³⁴ Watzlawick (1988).

³⁵ Iveson & McKergow (2016).

³⁶ Sometimes the client re-evaluates the change during the conversation.

³⁷ Iveson & McKergow (2016).

³⁸ Flatt, Steve & Curtis, Suzi (2013).

For example: In reply to your question, I would recommend ... – Have you already considered ...? – Should we look for some advice? – Maybe you/I should ... – A wise client once said ... – What do people usually do in this situation?

III. Explanation: Why be solution-focused?

Some say that descriptions of solution-focused practice, together with the growing empirical evidence that solution-focused treatments are efficient³⁹, are reason enough to use the practice⁴⁰.

However, solution-focused practice is actually not grounded on descriptions alone, social acceptance or personal style, but on grounded reasoning. This section will explore this evidence and reasoning through three aspects that echo the description of solution-focused practice as an activity of helping clients to change the meaning and purpose of perceptions, feelings, thoughts, intentions, and choices and take meaningful actions accordingly.

The reasoning within these three aspects is concerned with (1) creating meaning, (2) the concept of man⁴¹, and (3) the nature of change.

How clients make sense – What is the meaning of this?

The solution-focused practice is partly a philosophical endeavor of talking about what makes sense for the client to conceptualize her/his experience and how this may help to promote experiences of 'feeling better' or 'understanding'.

The solution-focused stance argues that language philosophy⁴² makes a strong case for the practice of being helpful to other people, because the use of language is a fundamental element of conversation. Understanding and explaining the meaning of meaning, therefore, is of major importance.

Ludwig Wittgenstein is an important source of inspiration in conceptualizing the relation of language and what we call „reality“. Wittgenstein claimed that the limits of our language determine the limits of our world, and that world and life are one.⁴³ Language is thus not just a collection of words, but it is the expression of a form of life.⁴⁴

Facts are not things, but they are verbal expressions of meaningful sentences. These facts show a picture of reality and together are a model of the world. Words and sentences do not however have a fixed sense or meaning. They get their meaning from the context of life events and they are used in relation to other persons. So, what one says makes sense because of one's daily acting.

Thus, – as Wittgenstein put it – the world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy⁴⁵.

Human experience is not simply given, but more like a conceptual network where sense and meaning varies according to when, where, and how one relates to others. Words, sentences, thoughts, and actions have varying references, denotations, connotations, implications, ambiguities, and contradictions⁴⁶.

³⁹ MacDonald (2017).

⁴⁰ De Shazer (2006)

⁴¹ Concept of man is in German 'menschenbild'.

⁴² This term here is meant to include a variety of philosophical endeavours (i.e. transcendental philosophy (for example: Lütterfelds: Fichte and Wittgenstein, 1989), social constructivism (for example: Hacking: The Social Construction of What?, 1999.) or enactivism (for example: Hutto & Myin: Radicalizing Enactivism, 2012.) that are connected with core arguments of Wittgenstein's thinking, without going into details. In this sense we take fundamental arguments from „language philosophy“ that explain some theoretical implications of the solution-focused stand.

⁴³ Wittgenstein: Tractatus logico-philosophicus, 5.6 and 5.621.

⁴⁴ Wittgenstein: Philosophical Investigations.

⁴⁵ Wittgenstein: Tractatus logico-philosophicus, 6.43.

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein: On Certainty, § 229.

In this sense, the partly philosophical endeavor of solution-focused practice can be understood as a joint activity of world changing.

When a person experiences a problem, or wants to change, and does not find a way to go about creating this change, she/he usually expresses the problematic experience as being stuck, uncertain, in discomfort, troubled and confused with her/himself, others and/or the current life situation. Feeling hopeless and out of control is common.

The focus of the conversation is on the interaction between persons. First, in between the practitioner and the client, second, in between the client and significant other persons in her/his life, that will experience future behavior. Quite often significant others and changes in the environment significantly contribute to the change, because the meaning in between persons is necessarily a joint venture.

Two implications of this understanding of meaning as a result of social interaction are to be mentioned. They point to the next sections as well.

The first implication is about how social interactions define rules. Because there are infinite ways to build sentences or even invent new words, thoughts and actions, it looks as if there were no possible foundations of language games and meaning⁴⁷. Radical constructivists do indeed claim this to be the case, while others point to the inherent self-contradiction of such claims.⁴⁸ However, if there were no foundation of meaning, how would there be meaning at all?

This question touches on the fundamental question of certainty and truth and we humble ourselves to an observation in line with Wittgenstein. The picture of reality people have, varies in extremes across cultures and times and one has to be very careful with judging and comparing the incomparable. But, any form of life with all possible differences rests upon judgements that can be imagined as hinges around which the variable system of meaning rotates. We do not explicitly learn these sentences, but we may discover them like an axis of rotation that is defined by the movement around it.⁴⁹ Our life shows for example our certainty that there is no plug at the bottom of the sea, although no one ever bothered to find any empirical evidence for it. These hinges of our meaningful view of life seem to show up, just like life itself.⁵⁰

This takes us to the second implication. When people seek help, it implies that they experience some kind of hindrance in pursuing a purpose. Something that *should* be or could be is not. The purpose of actions, hopes and intentions are called values. The values at stake in any conversation are the backbone of the conversation. They are not necessarily talked about, but solution-focused practitioners should be aware of them and respect people's choice of them.

This line of reasoning has some important theoretical consequences. In the wake of Wittgenstein's thinking, solution-focused practitioners make the claim that there is no reasonable scientific way of explaining meaning by causal chains. It is not that the causal nexus is taken for a random fantasy, but it just cannot explain semantic relations. Thus, solution-focused practitioners do not understand the interacting persons and the exchange of meaning as determined by causal forces, be it the physical law, social or economic power structures, brains, genes, things. There is no doubt that it makes sense to speak of them, but they do not determine the meaning of the words and any meaningful conversation either.

The second argument from language philosophy that solution-focused practitioners take seriously is that inner mental states of mind also cannot determine the meaning of words. Therefore, mechanisms of internal determination of a meaningful use of words by perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, motives, values, scripts or anything which we think of as a private mental entity, just as the causal nexus, will fall into oblivion when we are interested in understanding the meaning of words. However, most of us are still used to constructing our world *as if* mental states would determine our actions. Because of the elaborated reasons of language philosophy, solution-focused does not believe in the controlling quality of mental states, but rather relies on what might be called „creative inter-action“.

This of course, again, does not mean that mental states are considered irrelevant, non-existent or fake, but they do not have the controlling quality sometimes ascribed to them and are not seen as something one has to address in order to support personal change.

⁴⁷ Wittgenstein: Philosophical Investigations.

⁴⁸ von Foerster & Pörksen (2002)

⁴⁹ Wittgenstein: On Certainty, §152.

⁵⁰ Wittgenstein: On Certainty, § 559.

Meaning, in line of this argument, shows simply in the way people live their lives, how they connect to other people and handle things. Therefore, solution-focused practitioners pay attention to the detailed descriptions of peoples' daily life to discover and create meaningful sentences and actions that allow the person to go about with whatever made them seek professional help.⁵¹

Talking about forgotten, hidden and not yet considered utilizations of the words we use sets in motion a process of co-construction between persons in which altered or new meanings are generated.⁵²

How clients use their competences and resources – Where may I go from here?

Another aspect of solution-focused practice is to address clients' requests to orient themselves in their life, often expressed as: 'I'm stuck!' – 'I can't decide' – 'What should I do?'

From this perspective, solution-focused is a social practice of helping the client to become more satisfied with themselves and with their responses to their life situation. solution-focused practice is a client centered activity that takes clients' experiences, world view and values as the base for the help.

The solution-focused assumption is, as shown above, that everyone is *per se* capable of constructing a meaningful way of life, and has done so already, even if they think or feel stuck at some point.⁵³ People have also overcome past difficulties. Furthermore, they can adapt to their life circumstances and will manage to get along. They have a purpose in life, even if they may not be able to describe it in a coherent narrative.⁵⁴ Therefore, they are resourceful, competent and resilient. In other words, people have agency, and in this sense, they are the experts of their own life. Regarding clients' agency and life, practitioners cannot know where clients will choose to go and, therefore, they do not claim to know. Helping clients to see their agency, competence, and resources in the light of their purpose of life, is considered to be a respectful, empowering, and effective way to enable them to go on with their lives and overcome whatever made them seek support. This is the solution-focused concept of man.⁵⁵

Given that people have already constructed their world and even though it might not be with sense and meaningfulness all the time, it is still meaningful to some extent and in some contexts. Therefore, there is always something to build on, and even in seemingly desperate situations people can come up with amazing coping skills, resources and resilience. Thus, the practitioner calls the client to look for her/his agency and power in life by inviting descriptions of these particular nominalizations (skills, resources, etc.) in fluid, verbal forms. Consequently, solution-focused practitioners will usually not ask questions on how and why the situation became that desperate, nor collect detail of all the hardships.⁵⁶

In order to talk about how the client can go on with her/his sense and meaning, it is not necessary to fully understand or analyze her/his view of the world (all sentences and hinges), but it is enough to establish a workable fit that allows the client to go on with „useful misunderstandings“⁵⁷. This implies that whatever the client wants to share is enough to work with. Solution-focused practitioners do not think that there has to be an agreed upon and unified way of life and they value the diversity of unique solutions by each client. Respect and support of the client's purpose and view of the world has been chosen as the bottom line of the solution-focused practice⁵⁸. Clients are trusted to know what changes they want and trusted to collaborate as well as possible in making the change happen. This means that the solution-focused practitioner bases her/his relation with the client on the premise of respect for the client's beliefs, autonomy, safety, and needs. It also means that the practitioner strives to minimize her/his involvement in the client's life.⁵⁹ This is done to empower people to live a meaningful life according to their own values.

⁵¹ Some elaboration and case examples can be found in: McKergow & Korman (2008) and Iveson & McKergow (2016).

⁵² McGee, Del Vento, & Bavelas (2005).

⁵³ Erickson (1980).

⁵⁴ Re-establishing the purpose can be challenging in some life situations, like in loss of loved ones.

⁵⁵ In German 'Menschenbild'.

⁵⁶ McKergow & Korman (2008).

⁵⁷ Nunnally et al. (1986).

⁵⁸ for instance, the Solution-focused treatment manual (2013).

⁵⁹ These ethical choices are described in more detail in the EBTA code of ethics (2015).

Empowerment is understood as helping the client to become aware of her/his power and agency in taking control of the meaningful change s/he seeks. It is mostly personal empowerment, to some extent interpersonal empowerment in relation to significant others, and sometimes sociopolitical empowerment, to access resources and questioning commonly held truths.⁶⁰

From this choice follows that solution-focused practice is not defining a norm according to a numeric normal of statistical descriptions. Normality in mental health and life is a cultural, ideological and political choice.⁶¹ This choice should not be mistaken for a normative value of how life or persons should be.

Strengthening the client's competences requires that the practitioner creates a safe and comfortable interactional space, where the client can express her/his thoughts well and in which the practitioner is open, curious, respectful, appreciative and genuine towards the client. This also requires that the practitioner builds on hope, positive emotions, virtues, caring, love, compassion, gratitude, and sympathy for the client and her/his environment. It is assumed that this all helps clients to cope with current hardships, broadens the scope of attention, recognize signs of change and inspires them to generate change: creating more positive emotions that further evoke skills for change.⁶²

solution-focused practitioners use the client's capacity to construct and build on their and others' useful experiences, coping strategies, problem solving abilities, learning experiences, resilience, resources, strengths, skills, talents and successes. The practitioner listens carefully to elicit and amplify what might be helpful in all phases of the conversation and change process.

Some resources are implicit. Solutions are, for instance, often implied in problem descriptions. Problems can be described as unfulfilled hopes. Talking about best hopes implies that they can be achieved. Talking about past changes implies that more of them are possible.

Once the client is aware of her/his power to influence, the meaning of actions and agency, there can be less emphasis on failings, inabilities, motives, conflicts, obstacles and problems. In some situations, clients need alternatives to counterproductive or harmful behavior, interaction, cognitions and feelings. In these situations, clients are helped to do something different within their repertoire and their values and frame of reference. The reasoning behind such interactions seems strikingly simple: if you are unhappy with what you did so far, try something else. Yet, to deliberately refrain from giving advice and taking an expert position of where the client could or should be, is not self-evident.

To support clients' competence even further, solution-focused practice introduces the idea of the best possible change. A best possible change can be the client's vision, a miracle scenario, best hopes for the conversation, succeeding perfectly or another of her/his ideals. Describing the best possible change helps the clients to make sense, strengthens their competences and helps them to find the meaningfulness for themselves.⁶³ Sometimes the miracles even happen and clients' lives change drastically for the better.

The conversation is an intersubjective endeavor.⁶⁴ Both parties collaborate together and contribute to the result. Inevitably the practitioner influences the client in many ways, particularly through the assumptions s/he uses in his conversational tools. It is important that the practitioner is aware of the personal agenda s/he implicitly or directly contributes to the conversation.

Solution-focused practitioners are aware of the fact that being helpful in a solution-focused spirit is a specific kind of agenda as well. Yet, it differs in many respects from other agendas in professional healthcare, education, coaching, amongst others. Most obvious is that there is no theory on how a person should be here and now, and there is no theory on causal or mental or social roots and reasons of problems, and no expert knowledge on what will be helpful for this client in this particular moment.

solution-focused practitioners, on the one hand, intentionally influence the general direction of the conversation in promoting solution talk. In doing this, solution-focused practitioners take responsibility for their intents and choices during the conversation. The emphasis to build on existing meaning and competency, and looking for hopes and the best possible future, is already an important choice in respect to the client's agency, as it usually leads to relatively few conversations and therefore arguably limits

⁶⁰ Rappaport et al. (1984).

⁶¹ Berger, Luckmann, Zifonum (2002).

⁶² Fredrickson (2013), Shick (2017).

⁶³ De Shazer et al. (2006).

⁶⁴ Peräkylä et al. (2008).

dependency on practitioners.⁶⁵ By using the key solution-focused assumptions, and the specific solution-focused emphasis on conversational tools, they offer their view of the world as a possible way for the client to choose to look. On the other hand, practitioners stay as much as possible within the world of the client to limit their influence. In a way, they visit the client's world and use their observations for the client to make more sense, promote change, create meaning and meaningfulness and act towards what is meaningful to her/him, to be able to proceed in life and end the conversation with the professional practitioner.

These ethical choices do not prohibit practitioners from reflecting, interpreting or giving advice, if the client asks for it and if the situation calls for it; to do otherwise could be dangerous for the client, and a dereliction of duty of care on the part of the practitioner. Interpretations and advice are given in a way that fit the client's view of the world and as one possibility of many.

Practitioners are aware that conflicting values are common amongst people. The practitioner helps the clients to consider and solve such conflicts. For example, helping clients to balance between their perspective and the need for them to respect the law, social norms and the well-being of others.

How clients act to change – What can I do?

Finally, because of the trust in the capability of the client to pursue a meaningful life, solution-focused practice is future oriented and offers practical support that helps the client to act and achieve her/his ends. This also exposes the extent to which the client's sense is sensible, i.e. contributes to a more meaningful life.

Therefore, everything in the conversation aims at supporting the client's meaningful acting to make their values happen in the future. Changes become meaningful when the consequences are as intended and can be observed in the future. The solution-focused practice builds upon the future aspect of the client's intention to achieve something of value. The better and the more detailed the descriptions of how one will do this in the future are, the better one knows what to do, and the easier it will be to do it⁶⁶. Thus, the solution-focused practice supports and strengthens people's agency.⁶⁷

Again, there is a very simple reason for this hope or value driven future orientation: only what has not yet happened can be changed, therefore any change is yet to come. Of course, one can always change the way one thinks about the *meaning* of what has already happened. Such changes can change life dramatically. Still, this change will only happen from now on towards the future.

The future orientation connects with the two previous solution-focused aspects of change. First, the practitioner helps the client to define the change and then to decide the meaningfulness of the consequences and anything that might be different, when the intended change would be realized. This relates the change to the client's values and meaning of life.

The practitioner therefore talks with the client about whether the change related actions in the client's view have meaningful consequences. If not, then the practitioner repeats the change process with the client to modify some aspect of it.

Drawing upon over 30 years of solution-focused practice has shown that clients can and do make these sorts of changes when offered co-created, conducive conversational contexts.

⁶⁵ MacDonald, A., (2017).

⁶⁶ Positive psychology research on meaningfulness, well-being, prosperity and happiness indicate that meaningfulness is associated with purpose and eudaimonia, being part of something more than oneself. (Seligman, 2011).

⁶⁷ Walter & Peller (1992).

References

- Bavelas, Janet, Beavin, (2012), Connecting the Lab to the Therapy Room, in Franklin C., Trepper, T.,S., Gingerich W.,J., McCollum E.,E., (eds), Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, a Handbook of Evidence-Based Practice. Oxford Press.
- Bavelas , J. B., Korman, H., DeJong, P., Smock Jordan, S., (2014), Does SFBT Have a Theory? Plenary at the EBTA conference in Leuwaarden.
- Berger, P., L., Luckmann, T., Zifonum, D., (2002), The social construction of reality. Penguin Books.
- Beyebach, M. (2008), 'Nothing is better': constructing improvements in solution-focused sessions. Workshop at the EBTA conference in Lyon.
- DeJong P., Bavelas, J. B., Korman, H., (2013), An introduction to using microanalysis to observe co-construction in psychotherapy. Journal of Systemic Therapies, Vol. 32, No.3, 2013, pp.17-30.
- de Shazer, S. (1991) Putting difference to work. New York: Norton.
- de Shazer, S., Dolan, Y.M., Korman, H., Trepper, T.S., McCollum, E.E., & Berg, I.K. (2006), More than miracles: The state of the art of solution focused therapy. New York: Haworth Press.
- Clark, H.H.; Brennan, S. E. (1991): Grounding in communication.
- EBTA Practice Definition 2012 and Solution Focused Therapy Treatment Manual for Working with Individuals (2nd Version), July 1, 2013.
- Erickson, M (1980). The collected papers of Milton H. Erickson: Vol. II. Hypnotic alteration of sensory, perceptual and psychophysiological processes. Irvington.
- Flatt, S. and Curtis, S. (2013): Offering expert knowledge within a not-knowing solution-focused paradigm: A contradiction in terms or a helpful response to (some) real life conundrums? International Journal of Solution-Focused Practices, Vol 1, No 1, p28-30.
- Fredrickson, B. (2013), Love 2.0. Penguin Books.
- Hacking, I. (1999), The social construction of what? Harvard University Press.
- Hutto, D.D., & Myin, E. (2012): Radicalizing enactivism. The MIT Press.
- Isebaert, L. (2015), Solution-Focused cognitive and systemic therapy: The Bruges Model. Routledge.
- Iveson, C. and McKergow, M. (2016): Brief Therapy: Focused description development. Journal of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, Vol 2, No 1, p1-17.
- Kant, I. (1914), Critique of pure reason, translated with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard (2nd ed. revised) (London: Macmillan, 1914). 6/24/2017. <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1217>>
- Korzybski, A. (1933), Science and Sanity. Institute for General Semantics.
- Kramer, U., & Stiles, W. B. (2015). The responsiveness problem in psychotherapy: A review of proposed solutions. Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 22, 277-295.
- Lauth, R. (1989), Die transzendente Konstitution der gesellschaftlichen Erfahrung. In „Transzendente Entwicklungslinien von Descartes bis zu Marx und Dostojewski“, Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Lütterfelds, W. (1989), Fichte und Wittgenstein der thetische satz, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart.
- MacDonald, A. (2017), Solution-focused Brief Therapy evaluation list – 06/0617, <http://www.solutionsdoc.co.uk/sft.html>, read 24.6.2017.
- Mattila, A/ (2001), Seeing things in a new light. Reframing in therapeutic conversation. University of Helsinki, Faculty of Medicine, Institute of Clinical Medicine.

- McGee, Del Vento, & Bavelas, J.B. (2005), An interactional model of questions as therapeutic interventions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, October 2005, Vol31, No 4, p 371-384.
- McKergow, M., & Korman, H. (2009). Inbetween - neither inside nor outside: The radical simplicity of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 34–49.
- McKergow, M. (2016), Solution-Focused practice: Engaging with the client as a first-person , rather than a third person. *InterAction*, Volume 8, number 1: p31-44.
- McLeod, J., McLeod, J., Shoemark, Al., and Cooper, M. (2009), User constructed outcomes: Therapeutic practice and everyday life. Paper presented at the Psychotherapeutic Practice Research Conference, University of Jyväskylä, February 2009.
- Miller, G. (2008), Loughborough Group (Discursive Psychology) and Ethnomethodology, Karlstad Group, 2nd Meeting, Vienna: March 25-26, 2008.
- Nunnally, E., de Shazer, S., Lipchik, E., Berg, I., (1986) A Study of change: Therapeutic theory in process, in *Journeys: Expansion of the Strategic-Systemic Therapies*, by Efron D., E., (ed.). Brunner/Mazel.
- Peräkylä, A., Antaki, C., Vehviläinen s., Leudar, I., (2008), *Conversation analysis and psychotherapy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rappaport, J., Swift, C. F., and Hess, R. (1984), *Studies in empowerment: Steps toward understanding and action*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Seligman, M. (2011), *Flourish, A new understanding of happiness and well-being and how to achieve them*. Nicholas Brealy.
- Shick, R. (2017) *Solution-Focused Brief Therapy from the client’s perspective: A Descriptive phenomenological analysis*. Athabasca Univesrsity.
- Solution Focused Therapy Treatment Manual for Working with Individuals*, 2nd version, (2013), Research Committee of the Solution Focused Brief Therapy Association.
- Thomas, F.(2016) *Complimenting in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*. *Journal of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*, Vol 2, No1.
- Walter, J., L., and Peller, J., E., (1992), *Becoming Solution-Focused in Brief Therapy*, Routledge.
- Watzlawick, P. (1988). *Ultra Solutions. How to fail most succesfully*, New York: Norton.
- Weakland, J., Watzlawick, P., Fisch, R. (1974), *Change: Principles of problem rormation and problem resolution*, WW Norton.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1922), *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953), *Philosophical investigations*, Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969), *On certainty*, Basil Blackwell.
- Vogt, Manfred. (2016) *Personal inquiry*.
- von Foerster, H. & Pörksen, B. (2002), *Understanding systems, conversations on epistemology and ethics*. Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag, Heidelberg.