

Classic SF paper

Introduction to David Kiser and Fred Piercy (2001). Creativity and Family Therapy Theory Development: Lessons from the founders of Solution-Focused Therapy

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David Kiser and Fred Piercy's article from 2001 is based on interviews with the founders of the Solution Focused approach: Insoo Kim Berg, Jim Derks, Steve de Shazer, Wallace Gingerich, Marilyn Lacourt, Eve Lipchik, Alex Molnar, Don Norum, Elam Nunnally, John Walter, Michelle Weiner-Davis, Jim Wilk; and on interviews with Bill O'Hanlon, John Weakland and Lyman Wynne. It makes fascinating reading for us today. On the one hand, it offers valuable insights into the foundation of SF (how it happened) and on the other it is uncannily modern and offers us a glimpse into the problems a tightly knit community of outsiders faces when it is starting to become visible and successful (sound familiar?). I want to thank all SFCT members for making it possible for us to buy the rights to this article which would otherwise have slumbered inaccessibly in the vaults of university libraries.

Insights into the foundation of SF

"Why should we care?", you might say, "SF works, we know this from countless studies and metastudies. We also have lots of anecdotal evidence from SFCT members, for example through our review process and other community members, for example from SOLworld, that SF works very well with tricky and not-so-tricky problems in the organizational world". Why, indeed, should we care when SF was developed

and how? In my view, researching the origins of your approach is a matter of intellectual honesty. We should be able to revert to more than the oral history and mythology when we tell other people how SF came about – even if it turned out to be all flimsy and not rigorous (which the current accounts already prevent anyone from saying), we should be telling it like it is. Why? The world of consulting is full of flim-flam and mythology, and when you look at the foundational mythology of other approaches, you find many parallels to what is being taught in workshops for SF practitioners today: a small band of zealots at a prestigious place, a common purpose and enemy, one great idea, more or less rigorous research, a community of practitioners (and in some cases a ring to rule them all). I would much rather be able to say: “In 1982, these people met in these circumstances in order to do this. They conducted research with the following framework, following input / data, following hypotheses and came to the following conclusions as you can see in the following published and peer reviewed articles.” The written basis for this story is already there, but could be stronger. Of course, there is Gale Miller’s book “Becoming Miracle Workers”, which was published in 1997. Coert Visser has a good summary. Brian Cade’s (2007) article in T. S. Nelson (Ed.), *The Haworth handbook series in psychotherapy. Handbook of solution focused brief therapy*, and Eve Lipchik, James Derks, Marilyn Lacourt and Elam Nunnally’s contribution in Franklin, C. et al (2012), *Solution-focused brief therapy: A handbook of evidence-based practice* are other sources. David Kiser and Fred Piercy’s article is a valuable addition.

Here is what I learned from reading the article: The motivation for the foundation of SF was (at least also) ethically motivated. Kiser and Piercy write: “Solution Focused therapies gained favor because of their emphasis on strengths, health, and empowerment, which many saw as a refreshing counterstatement to the increasing use of diagnostic labels (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Solution-focused therapy was also a transparent, egalitarian alternative to what was perceived by some as the manipulativeness of other

contemporary therapies.” (page 56) He quotes Eve Lipchik who said about the BFTC group: “We are all extremely sensitive people who hurt easily and at some level we’re looking for ways to hurt people less” (page 61) There was a dominant model, it seemed to have been perceived as non-transparent, non-egalitarian, manipulative and hurting people, and the BFTC founders seemed to have set out to find an alternative.

Kiser’s article also offers us a glimpse into the theory development at BFTC. With a basis in marriage and family therapy, the group was constantly “observing and discussing each others’ therapeutic interactions”... and this “was an integral part of theory development”. (page 71) The questions BFTC seems to have asked were: “What are we doing?” and “Why are we doing it?” Based on these observations Steve de Shazer seemed to have been seeking out individuals with whom he could discuss his ideas and research questions which, in turn, led to more observations. In the SF community working in organisations, we try to do a similar thing by looking at cases and pieces of work in our review process and keeping an eye out in the theory world by research conferences, our peer-reviewed articles and our research review. However, are we really doing enough connecting these two? I am wondering.

Reading “Creativity and family therapy theory development” also offers interesting snippets of the human story around BFTC. Each member had his or her own very individual connections to the common purpose; Eve states that, as a refugee, she valued being part of a group and belonging. Her strong ethical standpoint comes from her experiences of being ostracised in Germany in the 1940s. Insoo married an American, shocking her Korean family – a rebel and very strong willed person. Steve de Shazer seemed not to have been too comfortable with fast closeness – and developed an approach where this was not necessary. Like these three, everybody seemed to have had a close connection with what they were doing and this helped the group’s cohesion and determination.

The group was very cohesive in the beginning, felt elitist, and there was a lot of room for divergent view-points which seem to have been seen as valuable contributions. However, after a while there seem to have been difficulties over money, recognition of individual contribution and increased competition. Kiser and Piercy quote one of the interviewees: “Then we started talking about things like, ‘How do you divide up the pie?’ And then people sort of splintered off into smaller groups”. Again, I can’t but be reminded of the current situation in the SF in organisations community. Let’s not go there.

Recurring themes still operative today

One question Kiser and Piercy ask is what it took for the group at BFTC to be as creative as they were. In my view, the answers they discovered can also be applied to the question of: “How do we develop our approach further for the application in organisations?” Here are some hints.

Kiser and Piercy discuss the domain, the climate in which the development took place. People were unhappy with the DSM III, did not want to pathologise and generally were looking for alternatives. I think this is also true for the world of organizational consulting today – in our domain, many people are looking for alternatives to traditional deficit-based models. Today, we also have the additional advantage of a knowledge base that can show that what we do is effective. So if Kiser and Piercy are right, this is the right time and the right place to be strengthening the SF influence in the consulting world.

The next prerequisite that they mention is “disposable wealth” – the group at BFTC spent their own money and set up an independent research centre at their own expense. This is one of the most difficult issues for us today. We have some funds as SFCT, we have some university connections, but there is really not enough financing for research, quality development, or building credibility for the SF approach. We need independent funds so that we do not have to adapt to

other models (e.g. say that SF is a form of CBT, when it is not) to achieve more credibility and market access. Does anyone know Richard Branson or Bill Gates?

I'd like to print out Kiser and Piercy's list of what kind of individuals it takes to develop something new, and pin it to my computer screen as something to aspire to:

- (a) a willingness to confront hostility and take intellectual risks
- (b) a willingness to live on the fringe of a field
- (c) perseverance
- (d) a proclivity toward curiosity and inquisitiveness
- (e) an openness to new experiences and growth
- (f) a driving absorption
- (g) discipline and commitment to their work
- (h) a proclivity to being task focused
- (i) a high degree of self-organization such that these individuals set their own rules rather than follow those set by others; and
- (j) a need for competence in meeting optimal challenges.

BFTC, according to Kiser and Piercy's article, worked "in isolation" – which had its advantages. He quotes Lyman Wynne: "I think that isolation is necessary for a while. However, when ideas reach a certain point of definiteness, then you need some input and some critiquing from other people". (page 64) This is a topic well worth pondering in our current situation. Who do we talk to that understands us, is not within our direct circles and can help us grow?

I was very astonished when I read the quote from Eve Lipchik about an experience in 1985, 30 years ago: "I remember going to AFTA, in 1985 or so. A meeting of the elite in the field, let's say 250, 300 of them, and thinking 'Oh my God, there is nobody here except Steve, Insoo and I and John (Weakland) from MRI who talk the same language. Everybody else is talking a different language'." (page 67) It is a description of my experience going to conferences of my colleagues in HR consulting and coaching today, in 2014.

How is that possible? And probably more meaningfully: What can we do to change that? Sitting in our offices and going to our own conferences is not going to cut it, I fear.

As a consequence of my learnings from David Kiser and Fred Piercy's article, I would like to focus more on being creative in my work (as opposed to being formulaic and orthodox), experiment and learn through reflections with other people inside and outside SF and thereby help the SF approach to develop even further. As Kiser and Piercy conclude: "We hope that there will always be creative bands of family therapists like the BFTC founders that can move our field forward. We also see a place for structure and accountability. Perhaps the challenge in our field, and in training programs, is to strive for a balance between structure and accountability on the one hand, and the creative-supportive conditions we have outlined in this article. Both are worthy goals".

References

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