

The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice

Review by Carey Glass

The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice is Mark McKergow's magnum opus. Since discovering SF's world-changing paradigm shift in practice and thought, Mark has maintained his steadfast determination, insatiable curiosity and exceptional single-minded focus to explore and unearth understandings of what makes SF so powerful and how that happens so uniquely. His new book brings the fruits of this exploration into print. You can feel the years of thought in its pages.

It is not intended as a book to discuss SF's more recent widespread reach into many sectors. The book's purpose is to explore how SFBT practitioners help create change. Mark illuminates this by bringing in the transforming ideas of the field of enactive cognition, the concept of affordances and the latest practice developments in SFBT, to position the idea that SFBT "stretches the world of the client" through descriptions in conversation and beyond.

Mark has long been concerned about the academic credibility of SF, which operates largely outside mainstream mental health work. The development of the journal *InterAction* was one of his many steps to demonstrate its credibility. In essence, he believes that the lack of headway of SFBT in the "establishment" is precisely because it challenges fundamental assumptions that underpin the decades of wisdom of traditional approaches to mental health. He argues in this regard that Steve de Shazer's choice to eschew the question of how SF works needs revisiting as it denies SF the academic and mainstream gravitas it deserves. This book provides that possible description, enabling more sceptical practitioners and academics to enter SF. Its simple and accessible style is a hallmark of his lucid thinking and determination to spread its use.

Early chapters comprehensively trace the history of SF in detail not found elsewhere. These include the contemporary formations of EBTA, SolWorld, and the debates around defining SF. They are full of fascinating detail. Often when we join the SF world, it is a maze of people and ideas, leaving us with lots of gaps. These fill in the jigsaw. There are lots of potential "aha" moments. For example, he tells us of Bateson's insight when studying indigenous culture in New Guinea that the men danced more when the women were watching their performance, which spurred the men to greater levels of exhibition. This insight led to Bateson's revolutionary realisation that communication is not message transmission, which the Mental Research Institute in Milwaukee (MRI) incorporated into its interactional view of human relations.

As this example shows, this history tracing is not simply archival in purpose. In a therapeutic world that works from theory to practice, therapists see the adherence to a model as relatively immutable. In this framework, the idea of SF as a perpetual work in progress can be judged as leaving it on shaky ground. Mark makes it evident that Steve's and Insoo's idea of progressive development is possible, desirable and essential to the principles of SF. He traces those threads throughout the book and demonstrates how the orientation of the weave has changed from SF's early roots while the fabric of SF remains. Development does not mean that SF is left behind.

The middle chapters, "Building descriptions, stretching worlds", describe this next generation of SF. It is characterised "as helping the client build detailed descriptions of scenes from their lives in the future, present and past which connect with their best hopes or project". He continues to describe how this development has happened. For example, how the use of the miracle question has substantially moved from an exercise in preparing the client for the real work of change to building

potential and actual change right in the session. Interestingly de Shazer and colleagues had already noticed this happening as a “virtual” experience and wrote of it in 2007. Mark explains how BRIEF has moved from using exceptions to the problem to instances of the miracle already happening in the past. The change from asking the client “what has brought you to therapy?” to asking a “best hopes” question facilitated this complete removal of the problem from the picture, allowing exceptions to become instances. The impacts of these shifts led to SF having a different weave. If the focus is on eliciting interactive descriptions in conversations, the therapist is no longer a designer of interventions. This change allows some elements of SF to recede, such as having a team or needing a break.

At this point in the book, Mark introduces the more controversial possible explanation of how SF works. He writes that this is not to explain why clients are where they are. It is to provide “explanations *about* our practice...about what we do and how it might help”. To have validity, it is essential that this explanation stays within the defining elements of SF, focusing on interaction and description rather than mentalism and cause. Mark explains how enactive cognition enables this by putting the person back into play. Rather than separating mind and body, and therefore focusing on theories of mind that are the premise for so many therapeutic frameworks, enactivists centralise the person’s experience in the world - a view far more akin to SF. This development is not random but based on the recognition that the brain is not an actor producing autonomous cognitive processes. It is the tool of a person using it to think and make decisions as they interact with the world. Enactive cognition has brought forward the insights of Wittgenstein that de Shazer so valued; that the “inner” world of experience is not separate from the “outer” and that language and meaning flex in use. From this, we can start to see that an explanation of how SF might work is feasible.

From this paradigm shift, other possibilities flow, leading Mark to the central point of how SFBT might stretch the client's world. He borrows from American psychologist Gibson’s theory of affordances to achieve this. Gibson argues that how we perceive the world is particularly related to how we use it. So humans will perceive a guitar as a musical instrument rather than just a moulded construction of wood and string, but a bird might see it as a place to perch. These uses define our individual world and are based on the opportunities for interaction that we notice and use. They have developed from our unique experience and specify our responses in concrete situations. In this approach, the person's field of affordances corresponds to the particular world of that individual. This is why we are often in awe of someone who can quickly see something outside the box. It also allows us to see how the world of someone with OCD might be dominated by washing their hands. Mark suggests that mental illness is an altered way of being in the world rather than a mental state.

Consequently, what Mark is offering us is an entirely new way of seeing therapy, as a way of stretching and changing the client’s field of affordances - stretching their world. There is a natural affinity between SF and how this description of therapy works. SF is particularly suited to this task through its conversational narrative that focuses on tiny signs of a better world that afford new possibilities for action. This is particularly true as these signs come from the past, present and future that are unique to each individual and originate from them. These new possibilities stretch each client’s world and do so uniquely to that client. In this description of therapy, the practitioner's role is to co-create the gradual accumulation of this detailed description to bring new possibilities for action into the client’s awareness as affordances. Interestingly, Mark indicates that this explanation of how therapy works would expect slower results from frameworks that focus on long past causalities of childhood as they are not offering these possibilities for action so instantly.

From here, the book moves into practice. A large section is devoted to excerpts from conversations between practitioners and clients demonstrating the next generation of SF in action. For those new

to SF, this book also functions as a learning tool, and Mark provides a guide to the elements of SF happening in these conversations.

As *The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice* helps clients develop detailed descriptions of scenes from their lives, Mark incorporates insights from conversational microanalysis. Microanalysis provides evidence of how conversations are co-constructed through patterns of interactions that practitioners have observed in therapy videos slowed to milliseconds of practice. Fundamentally microanalysis affirms that both the therapist and client are intimately involved in the conversation and co-construct meanings. This insight alone requires us to question accepted traditions of practitioner neutrality and client focus. In SF, where eliciting and expanding on small descriptions of a better life is fundamental, the evidence of microanalysis enables practitioners to consider how they can improve their skills, such as using the power of grounding, which microanalysis shows as fundamental to moving conversations forward.

In the next generation, alternative ways to describe SF also open up as the emphasis has moved from questions to growing descriptions in conversation. Chris Iveson has introduced the metaphor of an art gallery to demonstrate this newer emphasis. The art gallery has rooms, which include a ticket office where clients describe best hopes, a future gallery where the client paints a set of pictures or descriptions of a better future, an instances gallery with pictures of the past and present that connect with their preferred future and a gift shop where clients describe signs of progress one step up on the scale. While they seem like simple metaphors, they represent the far more profound development of SF into description and result from a gradual accumulation of BRIEF's experience and research with clients.

The remainder of the book primarily takes us through these rooms describing and demonstrating SF practice within each. The chapters include session transcripts that provide lessons in how, using tiny details, descriptions of better are noticed, developed and expanded. These are illuminating, and it is a delight to spend time on them. There are parts of Mark's elaboration of this metaphor that I suspect I see differently. For example, Mark describes the miracle question as a door to a parallel world to explore for a while. I would prefer to see it as a continuation in the same world, especially if the aim of the miracle question in time and detail is to bring change closer. It is also true that for certain audiences or cultural groups, the metaphor of an art gallery may not work as effectively as it does not refer to recognisable experiences (Sofie Geisler – personal communication). No doubt, it is Mark's sincere hope that this book will inspire many more questions amongst practitioners about its overall principles as well as details of its content. An explanation of how SF practitioners help create change should remain up for discussion in an approach where progressive development based on induction is essential.

The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice is an exciting read. Over the years, we have all benefited from Mark's generous thought-leadership as he has shared his ongoing ideas with us at conferences and in his books and articles. This book brings the threads of those years together and provides us with a masterpiece that ends with a personal touch as Mark introduces the idea of an SF aesthetic based on what he loves and values about SF. This book will reignite your understanding of your practice and your curiosity to progress further. It provides a true innovation in describing how therapy might work to meet an ethical approach of helping others as quickly and easily as possible.