Peer-reviewed Papers

Supporting Clients´ Solution Building Process by Subtly Eliciting Positive Behaviour Descriptions and Expectations of Beneficial Change

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Abstract:

SF co-developer Steve de Shazer wrote, in his classic publications Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy (1985) and Clues: Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy (1988), that SF practitioners should help their clients create an expectation of beneficial change by getting a description of what they would do differently once the problem was solved. Also, he claimed subtle and implicit interventions by the SF practitioner would work best. At the time, de Shazer did not support these claims with empirical evidence. This article provides evidence for each of the assertions made by de Shazer. Only part of the evidence presented here was already available at the time of de Shazer's writing. Evidence is discussed from diverse lines of research like Rosenthal's Pygmalion studies, Dweck's research on self-theories, Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, research on Winograd's prospective memory, Jeannerod's research on the perception-action link, Wilson's research on brief attributional interventions, research on Brehm's reactance theory and Bargh's research on priming. The article closes with some reflections on what these research findings imply for SF theory and practice.

Three assertions by de Shazer

In his book *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy* (1985), de Shazer, co-developer of the SF approach, asserted that SF-

practitioners should create the expectation of beneficial change. By doing this, de Shazer said that, before long, clients and therapists would no longer wonder whether the change would actually happen but would instead begin to believe that it would only be a question of "When will the change happen?" He also explained how this creation of beneficial change should take place: "The most useful way to create the expectation of beneficial change and to decide which door can be opened to get a solution is by getting a description of what the client will be doing differently and/or what sorts of things will be happening that are different when the problem is solved." In his *An Indirect Approach to Brief Therapy* (1986) and in *Clues: Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy* (1988), de Shazer explained that the interventions used in SF to create positive expectations are usually not direct and explicit but rather indirect and implicit. He mentioned two ways in which this could be done. The first way to create positive expectations was to imply that change would happen by using the future perfect tense. According to de Shazer, instead of asking "What do you think would happen if you two would stop fighting?", the SF-practitioner should ask: "What do you think will happen when you two will have stopped fighting?" The second way to create positive expectations was to intervene subtly instead of directly convincing. Instead of saying: "You are a special person and I am convinced you will be able to X!", SF-practitioners should, according to de Shazer, use more subtle strategies like: "Next time you manage to X, could you pay attention to how you did that so that we can talk about it in our next conversation?" In brief, de Shazer claimed 1) that eliciting positive expectations enables the client to find solutions, 2) that positive behaviour descriptions lead to positive expectations and thereby enable the process of solution building and 3) that a subtle, non-convincing approach works best in eliciting the positive expectations and positive behaviour descriptions. We combined these assertions in Figure 1.

de Shazer and Molnar (1984) have described the way the SF-approach was originally developed as follows: "At the
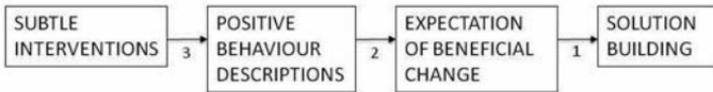
FIGURE 1: de Shazer's assertions (1985, 1988) combined

Brief Family Therapy Center we have developed some interventions that have repeatedly been found useful. Once a generalisable intervention is designed for a particular case and found effective, the team attempts to replicate by using it in other appropriate situations. When a pattern of usefulness emerges, it is time to think about and study what is going on that makes the intervention useful." This inductive approach lends itself well to discovering useful patterns and interventions. However, for any claim to be taken seriously by a broader audience, not only the context of discovery is to be considered but also the context of justification. Claims require evidence in order to be viewed as useful and valid by the larger professional community and by society as a whole. This article discusses empirical evidence from the psychology literature for the three assertions by de Shazer as described above.

Expectations of beneficial change

Probably the best known example of the powerful effect of expectations is the so-called placebo effect. An army nurse during World War II assisted anaesthetist Beecher in taking care of wounded US soldiers. Because the morphine supply ran low, the nurse gave him a shot of salt water while telling him it was morphine. Strangely, the water helped to relieve the pain. Puzzled by this, after the war, Beecher initiated a new method of testing new medicines to find out whether they were truly effective by comparing them to placebo effects. As a side note, research shows that the placebo effect, or *placebo response*, seems to be getting stronger. A dramatic increase in placebo response has been reported

since the 1980s. Also, substantial geographic effects have been demonstrated. One drug may outperform placebos in an experiment done in one part of the world while failing to outperform it when tested in another part of the world (Silberman, 2009). Whatever the causes and consequences of the apparent increase in the placebo response may be, placebos show that expectations can have a strong impact in a medical context. Are expectations equally powerful in the behavioural domain?

A first indication for the role of expectations in the behavioural domain can be found in the common factor model of therapeutic effectiveness (Asay & Lambert, 2000; Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 2000). The common factor perspective was an attempt to describe the general factors underlying therapy success. According to Hubble et al. (2000), four decades of outcome research have shown that these common factors are client factors (contributing 40%), relationship factors (contributing 30%), model and technique (contributing 15%) and hope and expectancy (contributing 15%). These findings show that the clients' hope and expectation that the therapy will be effective roughly explain 15% of the variance of therapy effectiveness. While this provides an indication of the important role expectations play, it clarifies little about how positive expectations are created, whether and how they can be amplified and how they contribute to success. Several lines of social psychology research provide answers to those questions.

It has been a well documented fact in psychology for over half a century that positive expectations have a long term positive impact on performance. In the nineteen sixties, Rosenthal and Jacobson demonstrated how expectations lead to powerful self-fulfilling prophecies in a school setting (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Their studies, popularly dubbed *The Pygmalion Studies*, involved teachers who had been told that some of their students were gifted and others weren't. Based on this information, the teachers developed positive expectations about the first group of students and negative expectations about the second group. What the teachers did not know was

that the children had been assigned randomly to the two groups (gifted/non-gifted). In reality the two groups were equivalent in talents. Surprisingly, big differences in performance started to emerge between the two groups. The supposedly highly gifted students outperformed the supposedly non-gifted students. Longitudinal research showed that these performance differences not only lasted but grew even bigger over the long term (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). These findings have been replicated many times, which provides strong evidence for the long term impact of positive expectations. They also demonstrated how easily the expectations could be manipulated.

More recent relevant research into *self-theories* shows that the belief that beneficial change is under your control is often a prerequisite to achieving it. This even applies to personal attributes which have long been viewed as immutable both by psychologists and laymen, like intelligence and personality. Research by Dweck has shown that people who see intelligence as unchangeable, a view which she calls a *fixed mindset*, develop a tendency to focus on proving that they have that characteristic instead of focusing on the process of learning (Dweck, 1999; 2002; 2006). They tend to avoid challenges and respond defensively to failure. When people view intelligence as a potential that can be developed, a view which Dweck calls a *growth mindset*, this leads to the tendency to put effort into learning and performing and into developing strategies that enhance learning and long term accomplishments. Recent research shows that the growth mindset is not only applicable to intelligence but that it also applies to other domains like personality (Dweck, 2008). Dweck's work shows that the expectation of beneficial change is a prerequisite for the change. Fortunately, a fixed mindset can be very easily transformed into a growth mindset by means of a brief workshop (Heslin, Wanderwalle, & Latham, 2006; Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002). It is interesting to note that this growth mindset workshop made use of some SF techniques. For instance, participants were asked to think of an area in which they once had low ability but now perform well and to explain how they had been able to

make the change. Notice how this relates to the SF focus on positive exceptions and on what works for the client. In sum, the research into self-beliefs shows that, at least in some cases, positive expectations not only enable positive outcomes but are indeed a prerequisite to them.

Another line of research that provides some evidence for the relation between positive expectations and solution building is that of *prospective memory*. There is evidence that a positive expectation focuses the prospective memory on what the client wants to achieve. Prospective memory refers to remembering to perform an intended action (Winograd, 1988). Prospective memory consists of recalling an action or an intention triggered by either a stimulus or 'event' or a time. Research by Einstein and colleagues shows that how people remember to remember can be a deliberate (monitoring) action or it can be a spontaneous process (Einstein, McDaniel, Thomas, Mayfield, Shank, Morrisette, 2005). Experimental findings show that subjects can often do just as well or even better by not thinking about the prospective memory task at all, but by passively waiting for intention-related items to occur (*"When situation x arises I will perform y"*). Implementation intentions allow people to switch from conscious and effortful control to being automatically controlled by the presence of the target events that cue intended actions. Expecting a positive change can be such a cue. The suggestion to the client to observe when things are how he would like them to be functions as a cue, helping the client to respond constructively as soon as the desired situation occurs.

Positive behaviour descriptions

Taken together, research into the placebo response, the common factors perspective, the Pygmalion studies, self-theories research, and prospective memories research support the assertion that positive expectations can be easily elicited and have a strong positive impact on outcomes. Below, some research is discussed which provides support

and gives insight into how the creation of positive images, positive behaviour descriptions, helps to create positive expectations and enhances the process of solution building. We look into two aspects of what positive behaviour descriptions do: eliciting positive emotions and automatically triggering motor responses.

One of the things that is bound to happen when clients talk about how things will be and how they will act once they have solved their problem is that they will start to feel better almost instantly. Is feeling better just a nice side effect or is it actually functional to the solution-building process? Over the last ten years, much research has been done on positive emotions. Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions says that experiencing positive emotions opens your mind and helps you get on a positive trajectory (Fredrickson, 2003; Fredrickson, 2009). Fredrickson's work shows that emotions trigger specific action tendencies. Negative emotions narrow people's ideas about possible actions. Fear, for instance, is linked with the urge to flee, anger with the urge to attack, disgust with the urge to expel, and so on. Negativity and neutrality constrain our experience of the world. Positive emotions do the opposite; they broaden our ideas about possible actions, opening our awareness to a wider range of thoughts and actions than is typical. Positivity draws you out to explore and to "mix it up" with the world in unexpected ways. This is relevant for SF conversations. By helping the client form positive behavioural descriptions, SF professionals trigger positive emotions which in turn help us to become more open minded and creative in finding solutions.

In circles of magicians, the principle of ideomotor movement has long been known. Mentalist Derren Brown explains this principle in his book *Tricks of the mind*: "The principle works like this. If you focus on the idea of making a movement, you will likely end up making a similar tiny movement without realising it. If, undistracted, you concentrate on the idea of your hand becoming light, you'll eventually find that you make tiny unconscious movements to lift it. While you

may be consciously aware that these movements are happening, you are not aware that you are causing them." This principle explains phenomena observed in table tipping sessions in which people are made to believe that spirits of deceased people communicated with the participants of the session by making the table move. What this shows is that positive suggestions increase the likelihood that clients will start causing positive events themselves – consciously or unconsciously. Effects like these have been subject to psychological experiments for decades. Jeannerod has done many experiments which have demonstrated effects of activated positive behaviour representations on motor programs (Jeannerod, 1995; 1999). He compared people imagining a certain action, such as weightlifting, rowing or running, with people actually engaging in these actions and showed that under both conditions the same motor areas became active. This and other work led Jeannerod (1995) to conclude that "simulating a movement is the same as performing it, except that the execution is blocked". Recent research went even further and demonstrated that merely hearing a verb or retrieving a verb from memory activates corresponding motor representations (Jeannerod, 1999; Perani, Cappa, Schnur, Tettamanti, Collina, Rosa, & Fazio, 1999; Grezes & Decety, 2001). What these researchers' work has shown is that activation of a behaviour description, by thinking about it or hearing it, automatically and unconsciously leads to activation of motor programs and to actual behaviour. Thus, when SF-practitioners elicit an image of positive behaviour, this will automatically set in motion a tendency to start performing that behaviour.

Subtle interventions

We have seen that eliciting positive expectations and positive behaviour representations enhances the process of solution-building. Below, research into brief attributional interventions, reactance theory, priming, and prospective memory is briefly discussed.

Research on *brief attributional interventions* shows some examples of interventions which help to establish expectations of beneficial change (Wilson & Linville, 1982; 1985). Wilson and Linville compared different interventions with students experiencing academic setbacks in their first year of college, which are rather common due to the transition from one level of schooling to the next. The researchers designed an intervention that encouraged the students to attribute any academic problems they were having to temporary factors. They did this by conveying the simple message that many beginning college students experience academic difficulties, but that these difficulties tend to improve after the first year. Notice that the first part of this intervention corresponds with the SF intervention of normalising by which people's concerns are presented as normal life difficulties instead of signs of pathology (Corcoran, 2002). The second part of the intervention essentially is to subtly create a positive expectation of the future. This two-part brief attributional intervention encouraged students to attribute problems to temporary factors making it easy for them to believe they could be solved. The effects of this simple intervention were dramatic. Compared with the control condition, students in the treatment condition improved their grades in the following year and were more likely to remain in college. Many replication studies and follow up studies have been carried out since and the results are surprisingly consistent (Wilson, Damiani, & Shelton, 2002).

Studies into persuasion have revealed that it is a paradoxical phenomenon. Experiments by Freedman and Sears show that when people sense that the communicator is trying to persuade them, they respond by marshalling defences against the message (Freedman & Sears, 1970). Apparently people tend to try to protect their sense of freedom. This is in accord with the so-called *reactance theory* (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981), which says that when our sense of freedom is threatened, we attempt to defend and restore it. Perceived trustworthiness is highest if the audience is certain the communicator is not trying to influence them and has nothing

to gain by persuading you. Subtle, implicit interventions minimise the chance of resistance and will have the least chance of threatening the autonomy of the recipient of the communication. This provides support for de Shazer's claim that, in SF, a subtle and implicit approach would work better than a direct convincing and confrontational style.

One such subtle approach may be *priming*. Social psychologists use this term to refer to the activation of certain parts of the brain just before carrying out a task. Though the process of priming often happens briefly and unconsciously, it gets us ready to notice certain things and to feel and act in certain ways. Bargh, a leading researcher in the field of automatic and unconscious mental processes, has done some very creative and interesting priming experiments (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996; Bargh, 2007). In one experiment he gave subjects a brief scrambled sentence test. The test contained 10 five words sets of which the subjects had to compose a four word sentence. There were two conditions. Half of the subjects got a scrambled sentence test containing many words which referred to being old; the other half got a test with many words referring to being young. The experiment showed that the group in the 'old' condition walked significantly slower out of the office than did the group in the 'young' condition. Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg (2005) did a series of four experiments in which participants who were primed with the stereotype of professors or the trait 'intelligent' performed significantly better on a scale measuring general knowledge than a control group. Participants who were primed with the stereotype of soccer hooligans or the trait 'stupid' performed significantly worse. Another priming experiment was done by van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert & van Knippenberg (2003). They did two experiments investigating the idea that mimicry leads to pro-social behaviour. They hypothesised that waitresses mimicking the verbal behaviour of customers would increase the size of their tips. In Experiment 1, a waitress either mimicked half her customers by literally repeating their order or did not mimic her customers. She received significantly larger tips

when she mimicked her customers than when she did not. In Experiment 2, in addition to a mimicry- and non-mimicry condition, a baseline condition was included in which the average tip was assessed prior to the experiment. The results indicated that, compared to the baseline, mimicry leads to larger tips. These examples of priming experiments demonstrate how priming prompts us to think, feel or behave in a certain way without us noticing it. What this implies is that positive priming gets us ready to notice positive things and to feel and to act positively. Note that the mimicry in the experiment by van Baaren et al. (2003) corresponds with the technique of language matching which is used in SF (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974).

Taken together, the studies into brief attributional interventions, reactance theory and priming suggest that a subtle and implicit intervention strategy is indeed effective and the studies regarding reactance and persuasiveness show that a subtle intervention strategy may indeed be more effective than a directly convincing style.

Conclusion

Each of the assertions made by de Shazer is confirmed by evidence from multiple sources, which strengthens the case for the SF approach to coaching and therapy. The evidence presented also sheds some new light on the question of how interventions, images, expectations and solutions are related. Specifically, it asks for an adjustment of the model presented earlier (figure 1.) First, subtle interventions not only lead to positive behaviour descriptions but can also directly evoke positive expectations. Second, positive behaviour descriptions not only lead to positive expectations; there is also a direct pathway between positive behaviour descriptions and the activity of solution building. Third, positive expectations enable the forming of positive behaviour descriptions. Fourth, positive behaviour descriptions strengthen positive expectations. These adjustments can be depicted as shown in figure 2.
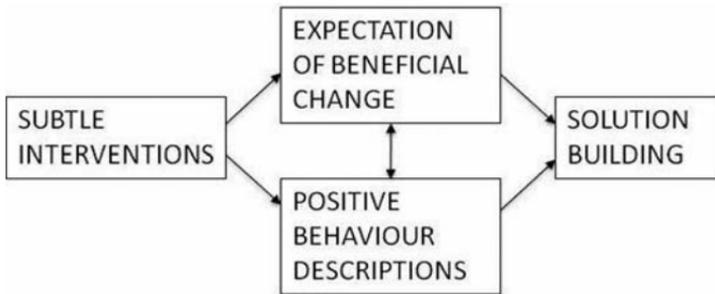
FIGURE 2: Adjusted model: Interventions, expectations, images and
solutions

SF offers an abundance of ways to exploit all the arrows
in the model. Some of them have already been mentioned in
the article. Here are some examples. First, normalising –
presenting people's concerns and behaviours as normal
instead of pathological – is an easy and effective way of
lifting the client's expectation of beneficial change. Second,
using the future perfect tense implies that change will
happen. It conveys a positive expectation which is easily
adopted by the client. Third, using future projection ques-
tions, or desired situation questions, invites the client to
describe how he would like things to become. This is a good
way of eliciting positive behaviour descriptions.

There are several interesting variations on desired situa-
tion questions: a) leapfrogging (Henden, 2003): inviting the
client to make a metaphorical leap over the problem and or
the preferred solution to the desired future, b) the perspec-
tive change technique: inviting the client to describe how
things will be better viewed from the perspective of a signif-
icant other (like a spouse or a customer), c) visualisation
techniques like the fly on the wall technique, d) inviting the
client to describe the implication of emotional states to
visible behaviour ("What will you be able to do when you're
happy again?"), e) the past success question: asking about
earlier successes and exceptions to the problem can be just
as useful as future projections for eliciting positive behaviour

representations and will therefore also make steps forward more likely, consciously or unconsciously, f) observation tasks (de Shazer, 1988): ("Could you, between now and our next conversation, pay attention to when things are a bit better?") are also subtly opening the client up to perceive positive behaviour descriptions, and g) prediction tasks (de Shazer, 1988): ("Each night, before going to bed, predict whether or not you will succeed in . . . . (whatever it is the client wants to accomplish) the next day)") help to envision desired behaviour and thereby increase the likelihood of finding and building solutions.

In more than one sense, SF is not an island. First, however unique the background was that has led to the development of the set of assumptions and techniques that we now call SF, in many ways SF overlaps with many adjacent approaches, such as appreciative inquiry, positive psychology, the positive deviance approach and non-violent communication. Instead of keeping a distance from these approaches, we argue it would be wiser to foster cross links so that cross fertilisation may happen and more useful knowledge and techniques may emerge for more people to use. Second, SF is not an island in the sense that it can not permit itself to refrain from following scientific developments and making scientific contributions. Individual clients, client organisations and society at large rightfully demand that SF professionals not only discover things that work but also justify what they do by scientifically testing their claims. In order to justify what we do, we need not only to do systematic research but also to explore and establish links with research into other approaches and disciplines so that knowledge can be integrated across disciplines and further developed. By reaching out like this more people will be able to benefit from the great discoveries that have been done in the field of SF. Just as importantly, the SF community is bound to learn from other disciplines and approaches.

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