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Positive Psychology and Solution Focus –
looking at similarities and differences

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Abstract

This article provides a short introduction of PP and SF and compares the two approaches, looking at similarities and at differences. Although Positive Psychology (PP) and Solution Focus (SF) are different enterprises, the conclusion is that both are aiming to help clients to have a better future and that their fields could benefit from each other: SF from the PP research and practice and PP from the SF research and using 'SF language'. SF may be more art than science, and PP more science than art, but they overlap fruitfully in any practical quest for human flourishing.

Keywords

Positive Psychology, Solution Focus, Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), coaching, psychotherapy, comparison of Positive Psychology and Solution Focus, similarities and differences between Positive Psychology and Solution Focus.

Introduction

Practitioners and academics of Positive Psychology (PP) and Solution Focus (SF) ultimately are aiming to help clients to have a better future. In this the nature of PP might best be described as scientific or scholarly, the pursuit of understanding: 'Psychology is not just the study of disease,

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weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is wrong; it is also building what is right. Psychology is not just about illness or health; it is also about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play.’ (Seligman, 2005, p. 4)

PP is an umbrella term that includes a basic academic discipline principally concerned with understanding positive human thought, feeling and behaviour; an empirical pursuit of systematically understanding psychological phenomena; and finally an applied discipline in which certain interventions are created and employed.

SF is about the pragmatic application of a set of principles and tools, probably best described as finding the direct route to what works. The nature of SF is in this sense non-academic; the pursuit is finding what works for this client at this moment in this context. The emphasis is on constructing solutions as counterweight to a traditional emphasis on the analysis of problems (in psychotherapy, counselling and organisational change). ‘Interventions can initiate change without the therapist’s first understanding, in any detail, what has been going on’ (De Shazer, 1985, p. 119).

SF as currently practised builds on the pioneering work of psychotherapists Bateson (1979), Erickson (1980) and De Shazer (1985; 1991). SF has spread from psychotherapy to coaching and a wide variety of applications in organisations, including strategic planning, team communications, performance management (Jackson & McKergow, 2007) and conflict management (Bannink, 2010a). It is an approach to change, which invites conversations about what’s wanted, what’s working and what might constitute progress.

Similarities

Positive focus

While a pure view may highlight a difference in disciplines, there is a great vista of common ground – particularly when you look at academics and practitioners who label themselves

as within the PP and SF fields. Many of each are professional coaches or psychotherapists, which makes it possible to compare the approaches within those specific fields. We can observe how each group is taught and how each practises, for example.

In addition to this common ground of coaching and psychotherapy practice there is a more conceptual connection: both can be reasonably seen and described as part of a wave of positive approaches to change. In medical contexts this manifests as a 'health focus' instead of an 'illness focus'. The focus is not to get away from what the client does not want but towards what the client does want.

Along with Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Deviance, Positive Leadership, Future Search and other techniques and strategies, PP and SF are interested in describing and utilising strengths, resources, exceptions to problems, finding what works rather than focusing on what's not working and focusing on what is right rather than what is wrong. Both tend to investigate people's resources. Both involve a change of focus from dwelling on what is unwanted in life to creating what is preferred. A common goal of PP and of SF, we might say, is to learn and promote how individuals, families, organisations and communities thrive.

Finding solutions in the past

Another way in which PP and SF are connected is in their dealings with a client's past. Instead of focusing on causes of problems and why things went wrong, both PP and SF look at the past to find workable solutions and previous successes. Neither PP nor SF seek or create pathology. They unearth successes and wonder how they may be enjoyed again.

No extensive diagnosis

Yet another way in which PP and SF are connected is in their view of the role of diagnosis ('What is wrong?'). SF does not require extensive diagnosis. In SF therapy one may choose to

commence treatment immediately and, if necessary, pay attention to diagnosis at a later stage. Analogous to stepped care, one could think of ‘stepped diagnosis’ (Bakker et al, 2010).

PP practitioners have also shifted their attention from the diagnosis of what is wrong with people, replacing for example the diagnostic criteria of psychiatric disorders (DSM IVR) by the classification of 24 character strengths (Seligman, 2005).

SF unmentioned by PP and vice versa

Despite these similarities, there has been so far a surprising lack of interplay between the two fields. PP’s view of SF until now has been almost non-existent. So far there is almost no mention of SF in any PP literature. The body of SF research and practice is overlooked, discounted or dismissed. SF does not talk about PP much either.

Differences

Theory or practice

As mentioned above, PP aims to be scientific. The founder of PP, Seligman, says that a new psychology of positive human functioning will produce a scientific understanding of effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families and communities.

PP has consistent methods for investigating and understanding psychological variables and is only secondarily about intervention. SF, by contrast, may occasionally employ the scientific method but practitioners typically do not take a scientific approach (that is, creating research design and statistical analyses) when arriving at conclusions about what works with their individual clients.

The practice of SF is about finding useful change in a specific context and then amplifying it. In the writings about SF, you will typically find a framework of what practitioners

do, but no overarching theory about clients, therapists, coaching or change.

PP practitioners are currently seeking more manualised approaches to applying interventions. Application is a more nascent undertaking in PP than in SF. SF at this stage has more experience at application.

Stams et al. (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of 21 international studies to achieve quantitative evidence for the efficacy of SF psychotherapy. They found that although SF does not have a larger effect than traditional problem-focused therapy, it does have a positive effect in less time and satisfies the client's need for autonomy.

Strengths or what works

There are differences in how each approach conceptualises the world. PP talks of 'strengths', 'character traits' and 'virtues' – as you would expect from a psychological discipline. People can fill in questionnaires that reveal which of, say, 24 character strengths they have. There is an interest in the constructs of 'personality', whereby individuals have personal characteristics that tend to be universal – meaning both that other people have the same characteristics, perhaps in a different mix, and that individuals somehow 'have' them and keep them over time.

An SF view is more likely to pick out salient aspects of a particular situation – finding resources or exceptions within contexts: a resource for meeting a particular challenge, an exception to a particular problem. One might say that a client exhibited various strengths, but these are not defined by or limited to the character strengths from PP. Talk of strengths would be simply natural conversational usage.

In a quest for simplicity, if a concept of 'universal strengths' adds no practical value for coaching, psychotherapy or explanation of what's going on, then this is not added to the repertoire: Occam's Razor applies (don't add what is not needed). SF focuses on what works (i.e. if it works, do more of it; if it doesn't, do something else). SF assumes as

little as possible and introduces as few concepts, theories and words as possible.

While Peterson and Seligman (2004) wrote about the necessity to construe strengths as morally admirable and energising, stating that virtues have moral implications beyond the individual, practitioners might note that clients are often very good at things or have natural ‘strengths’ that don’t always work well for them (lying, judging other people, coming up with great excuses). They may also be poor at doing the things that they tell you do work (e.g. communicating clearly, thinking before acting). SF builds upon what the client (or system) says works or what they say they will be doing when the problem is resolved. What a client is technically good at or what comes naturally is irrelevant. Visser, an SF coach, writes in his blog (2008): ‘PP relies on standardization by developing taxonomies and questionnaires. SF relies on an idiosyncratic approach in which there is no need for standard labels and constructs, each case is viewed as unique’.

‘Knowing’ or ‘not-knowing’

PP wants to find out what’s generally true and produce theories that can be tested. The possibility that the generally-true theory does not apply in this or that singular case is a price worth paying. The trouble for an SF practitioner taking such a view is that you’d start looking for confirmation of the theory, rather than applying a ‘not-knowing’ stance or the ‘Every Case Is Different’ principle, which appear to be useful attitudes for a coach or psychotherapist to take with a client.

On another level SF practitioners are ‘knowing’, otherwise they would not focus on the preferred future with clients, ask about exceptions or use scaling questions. On this view, the ‘not-knowing’ applies to not knowing about the desires and resources of clients (until perhaps we find out) and about not knowing as well as they do about the circumstances of their world and thus about what might work better for them in

their world. That is, it does not mean coaches and psychotherapists don't know how to ask and respond to questions, listen carefully and identify resources. A more useful phrase, perhaps, is 'beginner's mind'.

Individual or interactional view

Another distinction that often comes up when SF and PP people gather in a conference bar is that PP – being psychology – takes a great interest in what happens in the head. It speculates about what is going on mentally, and plays with 'in-the-head' concepts such as drives, motivations, beliefs and values. SF by contrast is interactional; it seeks the action in the interaction – that is, between people. This observable surface of what's going on is contrary to delving or speculating about what is happening in people's heads.

The more sophisticated and forward-thinking positive psychologists, such as Biswas-Diener, are now taking a more interactional view. Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) state that many practitioners working with clients from a strengths perspective largely rely on ad hoc interventions and employ a simplistic 'identify and use' approach. They suggest that clients can extract greater benefits when practitioners adopt more sophisticated approaches to strengths intervention and introduce an alternative approach called 'strengths development'. This approach is distinguished by the view that strengths are not fixed traits across settings and time (the dominant, contemporary approach to personality). They adopt a dynamic, within-person approach from personality science research, assessment, and interventions on strengths. Therefore the view of PP and SF about strengths might begin to converge.

Finally, with respect to 'not knowing', some SF practitioners are of course also qualified professionals in other fields, and may find occasion to apply their skills and knowledge from these fields. For example, a medically-qualified psychotherapist may conclude that a client is suffering from a major depressive illness and choose to

prescribe antidepressants. In becoming SF you don't abandon all you already know.

Philosophical roots

There is an aim in SF for the philosophical rigour expressed by Wittgenstein scholar Moyal-Sharrock's phrase (2007): 'Don't excavate, speculate or complicate'. The mental is manifest in our way of acting.

One might locate SF in the post-structuralist, constructivist tradition: there is only the surface ('don't excavate'). PP practitioners, rooted elsewhere, adhere (in their thinking and language) to deeper 'real' structures that can be uncovered.

An alternative view (Mahoney, 2005) suggests that PP shares a rich legacy with humanism, health psychology, constructivism and spiritual studies. This would place PP in a similar tradition to SF.

Attitude of the professional

How do these differences show up if we watch, say, a coach or psychotherapist of each stamp work with their clients?

We might reasonably expect an SF coach or psychotherapist to take a minimal, not-knowing view of what will work for the client, and to structure the conversation to find out what might be useful for that client, based on the client's specific desires, resources and willingness to take some action. SF calls this the attitude of 'leading from one step behind': the professional asks SF questions, which can be seen as a 'tap on the shoulder' of the client, directing his or her focus towards their preferred future (Bannink, 2010b). The client is seen as the expert in his/her life. It is also the client who decides whether to do any 'homework' between sessions (which may well be the same kind of 'homework' that PP coaches or psychotherapists give to their clients) and determines the end of the meetings. The SF client is seen as the (co-)expert and ideally (co-)creates a range of possibilities from which to select personal choices.

A PP coach or psychotherapist might have a few more ready-made interventions and recommendations up his or her sleeve. ‘Try this gratitude practice’ or ‘Learn to be optimistic – research shows that optimistic people live up to 10 years longer’. In PP the professional is seen as the expert and it is also the professional who usually determines the type of homework and the end of the meetings. Visser (2009): ‘PP seems to rely on first measuring, analyzing and diagnosing and then following certain predesigned steps forward, a rather linear process relying on explicit knowledge. SF can be characterized as a try and learn approach, it involves taking one step at a time and responding to the consequences of the actions taken. This is a circular and iterative process relying on implicit knowledge’.

Present or future

In PP the focus on what clients want is rooted in a perspective of where they are now. There is a sense that you can make an inventory of what is already there. Common questions in PP are: ‘What are your character strengths and or virtues? How can you use them in overcoming the problems ahead?’ We might call this, ‘From A to B’.

SF asks first, ‘Where do you want to go?’, then uses this direction-setting to articulate what’s useful about where the client is now (‘from B to A’). In that sense, in SF the focus is distinctively on the preferred future of the client. Common SF questions in are: ‘What would you like to have instead of the problem? What would your preferred future look like? How do we know we can stop meeting like this?’ SF begins with the end in mind and then works backwards to salient aspects of the present and past. The present is connected to the future (ignoring the past, except past successes), then the clients are complimented on what they are already doing that is useful and/or good for them and then – once they know the coach or psychotherapist is on their side – the clients are invited to come up with suggestions for something (old or new) that they might do which is, or at least might be,

progressive. More recent SF practitioners would tend to avoid mentioning ‘problems’ at all, unless prompted by a client. In SF offering suggestions or assigning homework tasks are nowadays generally no longer considered useful or necessary.

How PP and SF can benefit from each other

How SF could benefit from PP

SF practitioners may see PP as a wonderful body of published research, whose findings (academic and rigorous) support all the thrusts of typical SF interventions. Further, the PP research can help explain why cherishable aspects of SF work – in the accounts of Snyder’s ‘hope theory’ (1994) and Fredrickson’s ‘broaden-and-build-theory of positive emotions’ (2009), for example. Glass (2009, p. 39) explored whether SF is the best way of making an impact consistent with the findings of positive psychology in the workplace. ‘It has been hypothesized that the implicitly open and positive questioning of SF as well as its use of resources, memory and imagination, facilitates positive emotions and broadened thought-action repertoires for individuals. These repertoires not only enable individuals to come up with a broader range of solutions for themselves, but of equal importance, also enable them to be more curious, open and accepting of the thoughts of others to foster better team interactions and more productive outcomes for organisations’.

Bannink (2009) states that an explicit focus on character strengths and virtues can also work within an SF approach, asking for specific details: ‘What is it you do exactly when you are applying this strength or virtue? Tell me about some ways in which you showed this strength lately. And how can you still keep doing these things, even in bad times when this strength is (temporarily) not available?’ SF practitioners might also consider focusing more explicitly on positive emotions and positive cognitions – not only on behaviour: ‘What would you be doing differently?’, but also, ‘How

would you be thinking differently?’ ‘How would you be feeling differently?’

How PP could benefit from SF

SF practitioners have over the past 30+ years developed many real-world applications, which PP researchers and practitioners are most likely interested in. There is a complete ‘SF-language’ to use with clients in psychotherapy, coaching, and applications in organisations and conflict management, creating protocols for first and subsequent sessions. PP practitioners could benefit from this ‘ready-to-use language’ for formulating goals, finding exceptions, finding competences and using scaling questions for refining conversations with their clients.

Conclusion

Both PP and SF have a positive focus and share a goal of promoting progress towards the articulated desires of individuals, families, organisations and communities. Such work ventures beyond the pure scientific, but may be founded on solid research – particularly on the ‘gold standard’ of double-blind, controlled and repeatable experimentation. Equally, coaching and psychotherapeutic interventions can be viewed as experiments, to find out what works or to prove/disprove a theory.

Both fields could benefit from each other: SF from the PP research and practice and PP from the SF research and using ‘SF language’.

SF may be more art than science, and PP more science than art, but they overlap fruitfully in any practical quest for human flourishing.

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