

Classic SF Paper

Introduction to 'Making Numbers Talk: Language in Therapy'

Harvey Ratner

“Here’s something we wrote recently. I think you’ll like it”. And into my eager hands Insoo Kim Berg put a copy of ‘Making Numbers Talk’. It was during the first EBTA conference in Bruges, excellently hosted by Luc Isebaert (the food he prepared was a culinary marvel, much appreciated by fellow cook and enthusiast Steve de Shazer). Insoo was right: the article has remained one of my favourite SFBT writings ever since, and has been a standard fixture on the BRIEF Diploma reading list.

As an article on therapy I think it has everything: meaty theoretical stuff clearly presented; therapeutic practice generously illustrated with excellent transcripts; priceless tips for practice; and the bonus of a Q&A at the end. Regarding the theoretical side, this article is a particularly clear and simple exposition of poststructural thinking as applied to SFBT. After a perusal of ‘four views’ of language, they describe how after ‘20 years our work with clients has led us . . . to a poststructural view’. There is a chapter in *Words Were Originally Magic*, the book which followed this article and in which de Shazer discussed these ideas in greater detail, entitled ‘Getting To The Surface Of The Problem’, and this is an apt description of the view that there is no need to look behind and beneath the surface and that the ‘meanings arrived at in a therapeutic conversation are developed through a process more like negotiation’ and ‘misunderstanding is far more likely than understanding’. This can lead to confusion, of course, and ‘it

is the therapist's job to use this misunderstanding creatively and, together with the client, to develop as useful a misunderstanding as possible'. They then propose a distinction between 'problem talk' and 'solution talk' and show how the idea of the construction of meaning in a conversation can be used to develop solutions: 'As client and therapist talk more and more about the solution they want to construct together, they come to believe in the truth or reality of what they are talking about. This is the way language works, naturally'.

Scales are introduced as one of the "five useful questions" that the Milwaukee team was teaching in the period of this article. 'As is our usual practice, we took a cue from our clients and developed ways to use numbers as a simple therapeutic tool' (I recall somewhere de Shazer's comment that he'd learned the technique from a client in 1970). When one looks at the writings of the team in the 1980s, it seems that while scales were a part of the therapist's toolkit, they weren't paid very much attention. I believe they came to occupy a much more central part of their practice such that in later years de Shazer would refer to 'the Miracle Question's scale'. Wally Gingerich confirmed this to me when he wrote that "after I left Milwaukee in 1990 I know that scaling became more and more important in Steve's work" (personal communication).

In this paper the use of numbers is shown to fit with their view of therapeutic conversation (and indeed all conversation) as subject to greater or lesser misunderstanding. The number obtained on the scale is the 'client's own perception' and 'since neither therapist nor client can be absolutely certain what the other means by the use of a particular word or concept, scaling questions allow them to jointly construct a way of talking about things that are hard to describe, including progress toward the client's goal(s)'. We are treated to an array of examples and practical ideas about using this technique, and the final section of the Q&A, in particular, gives immensely useful ideas about applying scales with different populations including couples, groups and small children.

Most readers will find that the two cases used in the article

are “difficult cases” and useful to read. We are told the first therapist is Kim Berg and, given the three exclamations of ‘wow!’ in the second case, we can assume she’s the second therapist too, which might explain why she has first authorship on this occasion. There are certain features of the work described in the transcripts that will intrigue readers who have come to SFBT more recently. For example, it seems strange that the first example begins with a non-standard scale, namely to do with ‘confidence’. In fact, it is only in the last Q&A that we find a more standardised outlining of the scale procedure, where 10 stands for ‘the day after the miracle’. Furthermore, in this first case Kim Berg asks the client at least 4 times ‘so what do you need to do?’ De Shazer stated in his presentation at BRIEF a few days before his death in 2005 that the intention behind this question was to emphasise the clients’ need to make their own decision about what they are going to do rather than to look to the therapist for advice. I discussed with him the option of asking clients “how will you know you’ve reached +1 on the scale?” which is our preferred question. He agreed this gave clients more options, but felt the “what are you going to do?” version was very useful in many situations and indeed he was still using it in his very last sessions at BRIEF in 2005. This emphasis on *doing* is linked, as I see it, to another feature of the first case example, namely that of suggesting to clients a ‘homework task ... to help Joan increase her chances for success’.

These are just a few of the points that are raised by this endlessly fascinating and endlessly re-readable article.

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