

Classic SF paper

Introduction to “Special Techniques of Brief Hypnotherapy” by Milton Erickson

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“Special Techniques of Brief Hypnotherapy” by Milton Erickson was published in 1954, 20 years before Steve de Shazer’s first paper “On Getting Unstuck”. The differences and similarities are fascinating. Both papers describe therapy processes which were conducted by a clever therapist who designed interventions which helped the client to have a happier life. Both consciously ignore possible explanations for the problem the client is experiencing that might be generated by looking into the client’s past.

Eleven years later de Shazer uses a quote from this paper (as quoted in Haley, 1967): “the purpose of psychotherapy should be the helping of the patient in that fashion most adequate, available and acceptable. In rendering the patient aid, there should be full of respect for and utilization of whatever the patient presents. Emphasis should be placed more on what the patient does in the present and will do in the future than upon a mere understanding of why some long past event occurred. The sine qua non of psychotherapy should be the present and future adjustment of the patient with only that amount of attention to the past necessary to prevent a continuance or a recurrence of past maladjustments”, in *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy* (de Shazer, 1985, p. 78) to argue for a stance of cooperation between therapist and client.

When you look at de Shazer’s 1974 paper and Erickson’s paper below, you see that the interventions chosen might both be called paradoxical. Steve de Shazer asked the wife of a couple who suffered from her lack of interest in sex to deny any pleasure in it (de Shazer, 1974, p. 25). Milton Erickson transformed a client’s fear of a wet bed into the fear of a dry

bed (Erickson, 1954, p. 113). Erickson and de Shazer's interventions seem very unconventional and creative, which de Shazer also comments on in his final paragraph, "In addition, designing 'far out' interventions is a challenge to the ingenuity and creativity of the therapist: a rewarding activity when the maneuver works as planned." Both seem modest in the assessment of their successes and credit their clients for utilisation of whatever happens. De Shazer includes the possibility of a maneuver not working as planned and Erickson frankly admits failure, "The procedure employed in the first interview was obviously wrong, but fortunately it was beautifully utilized by the patient to continue her neurotic behavior and to punish and to frustrate the writer for his incompetence" (Erickson, 1954, p. 127).

While de Shazer and Erickson operate with very different languages and in front of very different theoretical backdrops – almost psychoanalytical in Erickson's case and clearly systemic in de Shazer's – their focus is on the interactions of the client in the present and helping the client move forward. Erickson and de Shazer seem to have a positive view of the client's attempts to cope with the world. The difficulties of the client are seen as a way to cope with his need for a neurosis (Erickson) or a need of the family system (de Shazer) and not as an illness or deficiency.

"Special Techniques of Brief Hypnotherapy" is a fascinating paper because it clearly stands in a psychotherapeutic tradition that SFBT (and SF organisational consulting) no longer follows, yet already points to the developments more than 20 years later and beyond. It is almost unbelievable that this paper is now 60 years old. It has been known for 60 years that exploration of the past for root causes of current problems is irrelevant for helping clients lead a better life.

I have shortened the paper by summarising the case study descriptions as they might not be relevant to our readers' practice. These summaries appear in italics.

References:

- Haley, J. (1967). *Advanced Techniques of Hypnosis and Therapy: Selected Papers of Milton H. Erickson, MD*. Grune & Stratton, 1967.
- Shazer, S. de. (1974). On getting unstuck: Some change initiating tactics. *Family Therapy, 1*(1), 19-26.
- Shazer, S. de. (1985). *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy*. New York: W.W. Norton.