

Peer-reviewed papers

Solution-Focused approach in a team working with social welfare benefits in social service

The staff's experiences of implementation, solution-focused practice and effects

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Abstract

The article summarises a qualitative Grounded Theory analysis of interviews with a team working with social welfare benefits within the social service department in a Swedish town. Social workers had completed a five-day training and monthly supervision in Solution-Focused coaching. As a result, the team changed their daily work noticeably in practical aspects, from a more problem-focused to an SF approach.

The core categories derived from the data are about two things: dignity raising and value-focused meetings. When the client is approached in an SF way, he/she experiences greater respect and therefore also increased dignity. Value-focused meetings are about how the SF approach is helpful in clarifying the preferred outcome of the meeting by the client and administrative officials at a very early stage.

The result suggests four key elements which contribute to a successful implementation of SF: support from management, professional training and supervision, the immediately visible results and the strong will to develop within the team. There is a change in attitude towards tasks among administrative officials and leaders. In shared responsibility they have begun to build solutions with their clients and colleagues, using the SF tools. Benefits of working in an SF way are described as improved work efficiency and enhanced team spirit. The meetings and conversations have become more comfortable.

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The results affirm the power of asking and reflecting with an SF perspective. The administrative officials and the client co-construct a new image of reality in which the client is considered competent and an expert on his/her own life. Future research on SF connected to self-efficacy may interest the social and public health practices, who are concerned with how to make interventions more empowering for the clients.

Introduction

Intervention, purpose and results

The article summarises a qualitative analysis of video-recorded individual interviews with management and staff in a team working with social welfare benefits within social services in a small Swedish town in 2012. Before the interviews, social workers had completed a five-day training in using SF and received SF supervision each month. The trainers and supervisors were Björn Johansson and Eva Persson, from CLUES, Karlstad, Sweden.

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the staff's perceptions of the introduction of an SF approach.

The result shows that SF has helped various types of meetings to become more dignity-raising and focused on value. The reason for this is that the meetings have become more respectful and the focus is on what is desirable to achieve.

Overview of the sections and content of the article

This article is a short version of a longer (9000 words) report in Swedish. It is written in a narrative style divided into short sections, separately describing each category that emerged from the data from the five interviews.

First, the method and the different steps in the analysis inspired by Grounded Theory (Glaser, 2010) are described. The data was systematically analysed through 350 codes into three main categories and one core category.

Secondly, the results are described in a summary, and under the headings of the core category “dignity raising and value focused meetings”, and the subcategories “an enabler for the implementation of the SF approach”, “the team practise solution focus” and “values and benefits of working in an SF way”.

The article ends with a conclusion regarding the results, and a discussion of the implications of the results for further SF practice, training and research.

Method and analysis

The interviews, with two leaders and three administrative officials, randomly selected from the team of 12, were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews duration ranged from 32 to 63 minutes. The interviews were audio-video recorded and later transcribed. The meaningful answers in the interview that were given in response to the different question themes were gathered into a mind map during the interview and used to ask follow-up questions in the next interview.

The analysis is based on Grounded Theory and therefore describes the main concern, core categories and subcategories with their properties and their relationship to each other. The Grounded Theory method is a systematic generation of theory from data that contains both inductive and deductive thinking. One goal of a Grounded Theory study is to discover the participants’ main concern and how they are continually trying to resolve it. Grounded Theory method does not aim for the “truth”, but rather aims to conceptualise what is going on by using empirical research.

Key words or meaningful units up to a whole sentence became 350 codes. They were cut out and set in a first draft of categories. The encoding of the first two interviews resulted in a draft of 35 categories. Data from the third interview gave rise to six additional categories and the next two elicited three more. Some of these could be seen as overlapping. They were sorted, visually, close to each other, but were allowed to

remain as a separate category until the open coding was completed. The gradual decreasing of the number of new categories and the fact that more and more subcategories “said the same things” was perceived as a certain saturation of the material.

The overlapping categories were merged and renamed, in some cases at a higher conceptual level. The 350 codes were reduced and enrolled in the newly formulated categories and sub categories and above all one core category.

A decision was made in the selective phase that all categories except one were related to the core category. It was, therefore, removed. New readings of the codes / incidents in each category were made and the categories’ properties were determined and described clearly.

In the last theoretical phase a Grounded Theory may be generated. In this follow-up study, it is not appropriate to create a theory mainly because the data were not collected continuously, and because the issue was not fully open because of the semi-structured interview guide.

Results

Summary of the results

The core category that emerged from the data was “dignity-raising and value-focused meetings” (as shown in figure 1). The interviewees expressed improvement in different types of meetings, with clients as well as in the working group and between managers and employees. Dignity-raising means that the SF approach results in the clients being treated with greater respect. They therefore experience increased dignity. The core category “value-focused meetings” is about how the SF approach is helpful throughout the conversation in making clear to both client and administrative officials what the outcome, and thus the value of the meeting, can and should be. Here both the client’s own hopes and the authorities’ framework are considered.

The subcategory “enablers for the implementation of the SF

approach” suggests that the SF implementation is due to support from management combined with the professional SF training and supervision delivered. Also, the direct positive results and a strong will to develop enabled the continuation of SF work.

The next subcategory “the team practises solution focus” is about both the attitude of administrative officials and leaders towards their task and how to build on solutions and share responsibility with the client in using the SF tools, as well as how to increase collaboration.

The last subcategory “values and benefits of working in a SF way” describes improved work efficiency through enhanced team spirit, comfortable meetings and conversations where the client is considered competent and an expert on his/her own life.

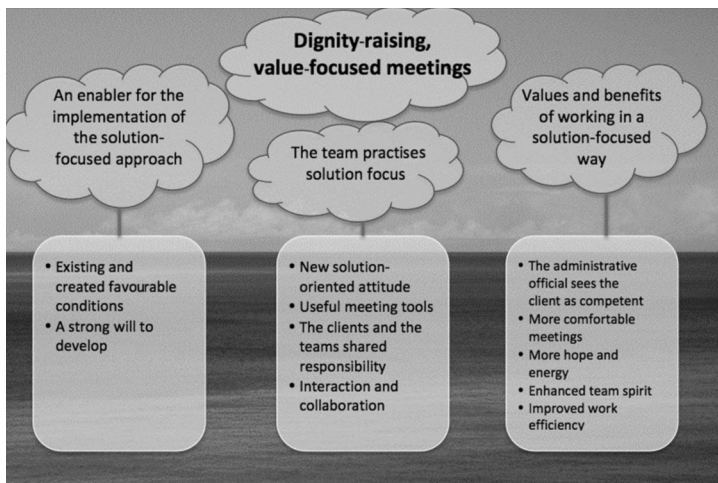


Figure 1: Core category and subcategories

Enablers for implementation of the SF approach

Existing and created favourable conditions

The reasons that the SF approach is implemented to such a high degree by the team are:

- The great *support and clarity from management* as well as *curious and open* employees and the timing of the introduction of SF while the reorganisation was implemented.
- The popular *5-day training* with a kick-off feeling, good structure and direct learning of methodology and tools and the fact that it provided a common language and approach.
- The practically useful *supervision* (it is implemented in a manner so that the administrative officials can methodologically use it in client meetings) with SF feedback.
- The *direct positive results* were supporting the further implementation.

IP 3: "... getting better all the time, really amazing courses, we would never have been here without them and the supervision gives us new energy and makes us stay on track and we're told all the time that we are getting better. It feels completely natural."

Strong will to develop

The team is driven by a strong will to develop and use existing meetings and peer supervision to further develop their skills. SF gives ideas for and is used in the development of working methods such as meeting planning in general, where the initial question might be: what needs to happen in this meeting for it to be useful? Other useful areas are in consultations: how to present a case and decide to do it more as a question rather than a difficulty in assessments in accordance with guidelines.

At least 8 times a year all administrative officials meet in pairs for reflection, sometimes only for 5 minutes in the middle

of the day. The reflection from colleagues in client meetings created an opportunity to put extra effort into using the SF approach and giving personal feedback on the method use.

Constant feedback is used as a tool to pursue a desirable development towards successful job performance. A strong focus is also placed on what each and everyone shares about what has worked well in their own work and also what they can do differently to make it better. One result of all this is that the administrative officials are all working in a similar manner and do not create their own routines.

Positive feedback and resource gossip in meeting with colleagues create an enhanced sense of community. Team spirit is reinforced by the work of reflective pairs. Social workers see and appreciate each other's differences.

IP 5: "... a lot of humour and modesty ... which the SF approach contributes to."

The administrative officials indicate a desire to continue their own development in order to increase confidence around the use of SF in their own way in client meetings. There are expectations that the management should provide continued guidance, set aside time for continued work in reflective pairs and an opportunity for further SF training. Two administrative officials attended the training programme Brief Coaching PURE with Björn Johansson, CLUES, at the time when the interviews were held.

The team practises SF

New solution-oriented attitude

A new fundamental solution-based approach has been created in the team. It affects the client perception and the client meeting set-up. Nowadays, the social workers take the decision to view the person they meet as competent in various areas and they give their conversation partners greater recognition of their resources.

IP 5: “Much fundamental social psychology; it’s all about meetings and SF fits in here.”

The administrative officials have high expectations of clients’ willingness and competence. They talk positively and respectfully about the clients. In their meetings, both the administrative officials and the clients now speak with greater faith in each other’s ability and existing resources and strengths. A starting point in the conversation is that the client has reasons for his or her choices. The responsibility for the result is shared between the client and the incumbent authority. The focus of the communication in the meeting is based on how it is right now and how the client wants to have it in the future.

The tools around the SF approach that were learned during the training days and under guidance are used continuously. The people interviewed indicate that, in their daily work, 80% use the SF approach. The corresponding percentage before basic training in SF approaches was reported to be about 30%.

The barriers are not neglected — they are seen as alongside the solutions. However, the administrative officials avoid digging into problems because they want to avoid clients finding that they have more problems than they thought they had before they came to the meeting.

IP 5: “What do you start by talking about problems, compared with looking at what works?”

The administrative officials believe that SF is a good aid for clients to be seen, respected and listened to. The administrators build on what the person is saying. This results in good meetings based on what the client has done in the past and what he wants now and what actually works in life right now. In this way the client is reminded of his resources and strengths and can get ideas for possible solutions.

The meeting is about curiously learning about the client through communication. The administrating officials say that by using the new SF approach, they get more information

about the client. This is because the method has a focus that is humble and inquisitive, which helps us see the (sometimes small) capacity to make it work.

IP 5: “When we look for resources and raise them to consciousness it becomes completely different. You have to dare to be quiet and wait and not be too quick to give advice and to give advice only when it is requested.”

IP 5: “Offering help is like indirectly saying that they can’t do it themselves.”

The administrative officials are working for the client to be able to see and think about small steps and differences, and are doing this by asking questions such as “what is different now? What can you do more of and what would be a small step?” They emphasise that the small differences are the most important. For example, they do not hastily push for entering full employment. They provide examples of clients who have taken very small steps, such as starting a course on “Swedish for immigrants” for two hours a day, which has been crucial for their continued development.

A concrete example of the changed approach in writing is the adjustment of letters, client forms, and change in the order of the first client meeting. Instead of starting to ask the client to fill out a form that will be the basis for possible payment of subsistence allowance, they focus on *meeting the client* and ask questions about his or her life.

IP 1: “Previously the applications were only on papers through the assistant . . . it was more about if the person had filled out the right documents . . . now the meeting is the most important.”

The team management has brought up questions about benefit, positive examples from work, desirable development etc. in documents and summonses. Implementation plans have been modified by the client; he sets his goals and steps on the road.

The plans are more individual and it states in the meeting what is “good enough” for that particular client. The feeling among the staff is that the constraint on the client is reduced and that the individual chooses his own planning.

IP 4: “I have learned very much as a professional during basic training, it’s things like: I, as a person, am very active and want to take the work forward, but things like reducing the speed, getting down on the client’s level, you can never want more than what the client wants. . . . The work is so much easier if you choose to focus on what this person can do, instead of focusing on all the failures and the problems that exist . . . maybe that is what you need to do, strengthen the things that do work to be able to make the other parts work.”

The administrative officials provide examples of clients with cases where the team with the previous approach could have chosen to label the client too ill and therefore would have “helped” them to receive permanent sickness compensation. When instead they worked with small steps forward, this resulted in the client’s working part time and in some cases even full time.

IP 5: “We have many good examples, so-called hopeless cases that have both got jobs and made other choices in their lives, which I think is a direct result of the fact that we have not talked about diseases and diagnoses, but rather talked about what works in life, what you can do more of, what would be a small step . . .”

Useful meeting tool

The administrative officials state in detail what tools they use, which they prefer, which are “personal favourites”, and through which ones they experience good effects / turning points in the conversations. SF tools are great to get clients started, but also for one’s own thought process and that makes a difference. They mention that the tools they had in their basic training in SF are directly usable in client discussions and

meetings with colleagues. At first, they used question cards, literature from the book “Interviewing for solutions” (de Jong & Berg, 2013), or specific questions according to Steve de Shazer before and during client meetings. Now, they take out these supports just to see that they “stick to the method”. Explicitly mentioned: platform construction, scales, miracle question, follow-up question and positive gossip.

The client and the team’s shared responsibility

The question of responsibility is central in the SF meetings with clients. The team has gone from feeling a very heavy burden of responsibility for development that needs to take place, to putting back much of that responsibility on the client and pointing out that the meetings will be based on the client’s objectives in the framework of the welfare team’s mission. This prevents the administrative official from “running” the client and determining what type of development should take place in the client’s life. The tools for this are the SF questions and active listening. It is emphasised that some clients are in a very difficult situation and it is important that it should be enough with very small steps for the client to feel that it is going in the right direction.

The administrative officials speak about their official duties and say that they constitute the framework of client contacts, but that the main responsibility for development lies in the clients themselves. They think it is easy as an official person to assume all the responsibility, but now they describe their role and then ask the client what they think they can do together. Sometimes the person needs to be strengthened to take responsibility.

It has happened that clients have become frustrated at first and tried to put the responsibility back on the administrative official, but that has gone away by the time the client has grown. Earlier they started the meeting by collecting forms to establish possible payment of subsistence allowance. The social workers perceived this step as a control function. Now they have turned the order around and begin with a conversation with the new clients. This indicates a direction to begin a

desirable change instead of starting with control. It also gives the responsibility back to the client.

Interaction and collaboration through SF

The SF approach is perceived to have a broad utility that can also contribute to good interactions with other businesses and cooperation in meetings with other officials. Other participants have shown curiosity and become inspired by the team's way of working.

IP 2: "A family doctor said: I really like the way you work."

Values and benefits of working in an SF way

The benefits of using SF were listed on average as a nine on a scale of zero to ten, where ten is equivalent to maximum advantage. The value of the business is that the clients achieve improvements in their lives as a result of the team's work. Based on the SF work the pre-supposition is that the client is competent in his life and has a wealth of resources. The meetings are more comfortable and more uplifting for the clients.

The administrative officials work becomes easier and more fun when they let go of a problems focus. The way of asking the clients questions creates a hopeful feeling that also provides good energy feedback. The relief that the team has experienced is based on the fact that it is easier to work with the client's strengths than with the client's weaknesses. The work becomes more relaxed. It gets a little more laid-back and more fun.

The administrators say that it is important that their work contributes to the proper maintenance support for the right individuals. For the municipality, the team also believes that there is a fundamental value to local residents who come into contact with the social service and they hope that they feel great respect and positive behaviour towards them. SF

helps individuals toward self-sufficiency, which benefits both the individual and society.

IP 4: "Someone wants to see me for what I can do and not for how I failed."

Discussion

Implementation of scientific knowledge alongside new methods and approaches is seen as a response to growing demands for enhanced quality of professional practice in several fields. It would be of great interest to see more research on success factors in implementing SF.

The results from this study show that the basic skills can be learned in a short time and then supervision and practice is helpful to integrate the approach. This is affirmed by Dr Harry Korman, MD, certified family therapist and SF educator: "A solution-focused approach is easy to understand but hard to really embrace, much training is required" (personal communication H Korman, 2013.09.05).

The results show an improved relationship between the team and their clients. The results also show that SF is about shared responsibility for positive effects and more trust in the client's own capacity. O'Byrne (2012) and Green (2011) explain SF as follows: "The emphasis is on getting a 'constructive' egalitarian worker-client relationship, where it is assumed that the constructs of both parties are equally valid and that cooperation and competence are present". Roeden et al. (2012) found improved quality in relationships after implementing SF and that an SF approach can be useful to build relationships both with clients and within the team.

The interviews show that work has been more comfortable and that the team have changed their mindsets about clients' capacities. SF is sometimes connected to social constructionism, in which we co-construct reality. The results affirm the power of what to ask and reflect on in client meetings and also of making the letters of invitation more SF. This creates a new image of reality. The SF conversation results in

co-constructing and enhancing the client's awareness of his/her own competence and increasing the feeling of hope is described by Berg and de Jong (1996) . The differences and simplicity of SF brief therapy in this co-constructing compared to other therapeutic approaches has been delineated by McKergow and Korman (2009).

SF training with nursing staff (McGilton et al. 2006) made nurses feel closer to their patients and reported a higher level of job satisfaction. Medina and Beyebach (2014) report the impact of SF training on professionals' beliefs, practices and burnout among child protection workers. The team seems to have become more resilient (Baeijaert & Stellamans, 2011) and able to cope and deal with difficulties.

Self-efficacy may affect a client's ability to move towards self-sufficiency. Kvarme et al. (2010) have shown increased self-efficacy after SF intervention for socially withdrawn school children. Grant (2012) conducted a randomised study comparing solution-focused vs. problem-focused coaching questions. He found SF questions to have a significantly positive impact on goal approach and increased self-efficacy compared to the problem-focused questions. Future research on SF connected to self-efficacy may interest the social and public health practices, who are concerned with how to make interventions more empowering for the clients.

Results on increased effectiveness after integrating SF are supported by the results from Hoffman and Luisser (2007).

The five day training combined with monthly supervision and reflection has been helpful for the team in getting the approach implemented in daily work. Ferraz and Wellman (2009) demonstrate a two-day training to be effective in understanding the SF approach and using techniques in routine clinical practice. The resource-oriented approach from SF-training seems to be enhanced by adding SF-supervision after training (Thomas, 2013).

Suggestions for future research may be: How much basic SF training is needed to implement an SF approach and tools to make it sustainable over time? To what extent do SF training and supervision affect achievements and positive

effects on the client relationship and client outcome? How important is raising dignity for the result of the meetings in the social services sector? What are the main components in an SF conversation which create value for the client in social services?

The SF training in combination with organisational change has been beneficial for the team working with social welfare benefits. One of the basic SF assumptions is that change is happening all the time and that the SF coach's role is to amplify the useful change.

Conclusions

The team have changed their daily work noticeably in practical aspects, from a more problem-focused to an SF approach as a result of SF training and supervision. The change is in client meetings as well as between professionals.

The change is about "dignity-raising and value-focused meetings". When the client is approached in an SF way, he/she experiences greater respect and therefore also increased dignity. Value-focused meetings are about how the SF approach is helpful in clarifying the preferred outcome of the meeting by client and administrative officials together at an early stage.

The result suggests four key elements which are necessary for success in implementing SF: support from management, professional training and supervision, immediately visible results and the strong will to develop within the team.

There is a change in attitude towards tasks among administrative officials and leaders. In shared responsibility they have begun to build solutions with their clients and colleagues, using the SF tools. Previously information and the responsibility of the administrative officials was the main focus.

The values and benefits of working in an SF way are described as improved work efficiency and enhanced team spirit. The meetings and conversations have become more comfortable. The client is considered competent and an expert on his/her own life.

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A more comprehensive report with appendices is available, in Swedish, from the author.