Reviews

RESEARCH REVIEW

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Towards a Living Library of Useful Misunderstandings

The article 'Solution-Focused Therapy and Subject-Scientific Research into the Personal Conduct of Everyday Living' by Teemu Suorsa appeared last year in a special issue of *Outlines. Critical Practice Studies on Studying the Fabric of Everyday Life*. Suorsa is a Finnish psychotherapist working as a teacher and researcher at the University of Ouly (Research Unit of Psychology, Faculty of Education).

In his article Suorsa looks at how an SF approach can help subject-scientific researchers to "enable an expanding knowledge of the prevalence of certain types of FOGs [fabric of grounds, HC] that belong, for example, to violent incidents in schools" (Suorsa, p. 134).

And perhaps this, in turn, can help subject-scientific researchers create an "open library of process maps for potential users of therapy that gathers different kinds of ways of moving on in difficult life situations". This kind of public library of FOGs would also be one way of challenging the widespread "kontrollwissenschaftliche" psychologization of Western lives (. . .) by promoting an alternative psychological

way of conceptualizing human condition as grounded participation in common projects" (Suorsa, p. 134).

I have to admit that, at first, I was rather confused by Suorsa's intentions. First af all, what are subject-scientific researchers? And secondly, what are these FOGs or fabrics of grounds? And thirdly, how is all of this related to SF therapy?

Fabric of grounds

A fabric of grounds, according to Suorsa, "is a theoretical claim on the relationship between the premises (i.e. societally produced meaning structures as the subject experiences them) and subjective grounds for action. (. . .) This theoretical claim seeks to conceptualize the subjective functionality of a given action and experience (. . .)" (Suorsa, p. 129).

I guess that he means that society is organised in such a way that what people do and experience becomes meaningful. And that every individual has good reasons for doing what they do, as well as for experiencing what they experience. A fabric of grounds then is a theoretical description of how a person's perception of the former (the way society gives meaning to actions and experiences) informs the latter (the way a person gives meaning to actions and experiences) and vice versa.

If so, then subject-scientific researchers are apparently interested in gaining knowledge about the relationship between (a) "How do we perceive how society gives meaning to our actions and experiences?", and (b) "How does this perception affect the way we give meaning to our actions and experiences?"

It is important to emphasise that according to Suorsa, subject-scientific researchers are interested in knowledge that is useful beyond the scope of an individual case (Suorsa, p. 128). Translated to the world of SF practitioners: knowing that every case is different, what can we still learn from our individual cases that informs in general our practice of how we deal with the reality that every case is different?

Subject-scientific research

I had to draw on another paper by Josef Held to learn a bit more about the background of this field of subject-scientific research. According to Held, subject-scientific research was developed in Berlin after the 1960s as an attempt to develop a scientifically sounder way to study psychology. The emergence of subject-scientific research was driven by "criticism of the leading experimental psychological approach and criticism of the societal relations that can cause mental difficulties for those to which they are exposed". Neither did the subject-scientific researchers believe that the best way to say something scientifically relevant about psychology was to gather data from psychological experiments on people the way you do experiments on rats in a lab. Nor did they believe in the hyper-relativistic idea that all knowledge was contextual. As such they basically challenged the opposition between the person and the context as the main locus of information for explaining people's behaviour. Instead, they tried "to form a connection between the German tradition's strong emphasis on the subject and the Marxist tradition's reliance on societal context" (Held 2006).

Subject-scientific researchers rather work from the assumption that "[t]he narrowness and narrow-mindedness of direct experience can be overcome through reflection of one's connectedness to the social and societal context. In this way, a practical and scientific accumulation of knowledge can be achieved in research" (Held, 2006). To me, this sounds like an interactional-constructivist view on how we relate to our world and how our world relates to us.

Rediscovering life through a solution-focused looking glass

Now that we have some kind of an idea of what Suorsa is talking about, let's go back to why Suorsa wants to "initiate a dialogue between the subject-scientific and solution-focused approaches on a practical level" in the first place (Suorsa,

p. 128). Suorsa is particularly interested in how in SF conversations clients describe both life with *the problem* as well as life with *the problem-no-longer-there* in terms of concrete experiences, related to specific times, places and others (Suorsa, pp. 130–131). And, more particularly, he is interested in how these contrasting descriptions inform client's actions. For Suorsa, SF conversations are a great research tool because they can offer the subject-scientific researchers the stuff they need to do their scientific work.

"Typical solution-focused interventions that turn our attention to: *1) actual everyday activities/experiences in a person's life trajectory; 2) important others;* and *3) a utopian future* help us to produce detailed descriptions that we [subject-scientific researchers, HC] can capture as fabrics of grounds belonging: 1) to a problematic situation that was a starting point of the therapy, and 2) to action that seeks to overcome the problem/build up solution. Thus, it is possible to produce in each therapeutic conversation (at least) two FOGs as a research finding. With regard to case study research into the personal conduct of everyday living, it is thus possible to create knowledge: 1) about different kinds of scenes of everyday living from the standpoint of the subject, as well as 2) about the interconnections of these scenes through articulating subjects' translocal and historical participation therein" [= how individuals relate to everyday life across time and space, HC] (Suorsa, p. 133).

It is interesting to see how other fields can benefit from the data SF conversations produce. Especially since in the SF field we have basically been concerned with research on how an SF approach effectively contributes to meaningful change for clients, as well as practitioners. Whereas what Suorsa describes is a whole other ballgame. In Suorsa's view SF conversations produce excellent material for subject-scientific researchers (and probably other people as well) to learn something about human behaviour and experience in general. So instead of simply looking at it as a therapeutic tool, he looks at it as a heuristic tool (a special kind looking glass) for researchers to do empirical research on how people relate to

everyday life. This in itself is a fascinating shift in perspective in how to look at SF conversations and therapy.

A library of useful misunderstandings

As to Suorsa's best hopes about subject-scientific research resulting in an open library of different kinds of ways of moving on in difficult life situations, I can only hope that the library he aims for is rather a living source of liberating confusion which inspires by means of the-also-possible instead of by means the-one-and-only-right-possible. A library that inspires continuous research and dialogue about the change that is happening all the time, and the ways people are able to find out what is useful and build on that. A library that is perhaps best described as an ever-growing collection of the many ways we continue to usefully misunderstand our world.

References

Held, J. (2006). Beyond the Mainstream: Approaches to Critical Psychology in the German-Speaking Community and their International Significance. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, *5*, 101–113. Retrieved from http://www.discourseunit.com/annual-review/arcp-5–critical-psychology-in-a-changing-world-contributions-from-different-geo-political-regions/

Mulqueen, T. L. (2015). Clients' Perspectives of the Summation Message in Solution-Focused Brief Counselling. Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Counselling, School of Health Sciences at the University of Canterbury, New-Zealand. Retrieved from http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/11659

What the client has to say about feedback

"What are clients' perspectives of the summation message in solution-focused brief counselling?" (Mulqueen, p. 9). The summation message, the semi-formal exchange of feedback at the end of a session, is widely regarded among practitioners as a useful part of the SFBT repertoire.

While doing research on the origins and the effectiveness of the summation message in SFBT, Tracy Lee Mulqueen discovered that the client's perspective on how exactly the summation message had been helpful was missing from the literature.

So she set up a research project to add at least a couple of clients' perspectives to the research on the effect of the summation message in SFBT. In her Master's thesis Mulqueen gives a detailed account of the project and its results.

Four benefits of the summation message highlighted by clients

As part of her research Mulqueen interviewed three of her own clients. Their feedback about the summation message enabled Mulqueen to generate the following 'four themes' (Mulqueen, p. 2):

1. The break time helped clients to recognise their own resources and enabled the development of client-chosen tasks.
2. Feedback encouraged clients to describe their own tasks.

3. Feedback encouraged a deeper awareness about resources identified in the counselling sessions.
4. Reflecting on the co-construction of their own solutions enabled clients to feel empowered by their summation messages.

Mulqueen and de Shazer on becoming a better therapist

Mulqueen adds that both the literature review as well as her client interviews eventually had a substantial impact on her own counselling practice (Mulqueen, pp. 68–72). Here is a quote from the journal she used during her research project to document her personal learnings:

"There is no real point or relevance to a client if I provide a message, albeit thoughtful and creative or fabulously wrapped, if it means I am dismissing the client's strengths and resources. What works, what the client notices and what the client knows will work with what they bring to therapy, are at the core or 'heart' of the solution-focused approach. Taking the expert position has become more unnatural to me than when I first, started, as my recent experiences and continuous developing knowledge, with fervent conviction, noticing it is all about what the client knows they are capable of, and what is within their world reach. I see a small snapshot of a client's life whereas they live and exist in it [Sic]" (Mulqueen, p. 71).

Mulqueen's reflections remind me of Steve de Shazer's words at the end of his last book *Words Were Originally Magic*:

"Frequently by the end of a session clients are beginning to know their way about or at least are starting to have some confidence that they can find their way about. Thus there is no need for a therapist to overwhelm clients by making lots of suggestions or by inventing "novel tasks . . . in Ericksonian style" (Efran & Schenker, 1992, p. 72); rather, the therapist simply needs to support the clients' going in their own chosen direction with the confidence that once they get where they want to go they will then know their way about.

Having spent most of the 70s and part of the 80s designing

"novel tasks in Erickson style," I still find it difficult at times to restrain myself from proposing such interventions to clients. However, these fancy tasks are very difficult to design; furthermore, teaching therapists to design such clever tasks is not an easy job. In the great majority of cases these clever tasks seem to be no more, perhaps even less, effective than simpler ones based principally on what the clients have already said they know how to do" (de Shazer, p. 272).

A reminder to always ask about what works

Seasoned practitioners may regard Mulqueen's work as not very ground-breaking. However, her Master's thesis is an interesting and well-documented addition to the expanding body of research on SFBT, adding clients' feedback on how the summation message has been helpful for them within the context of SF therapy sessions.

One part I found particularly interesting was Mulqueen's descriptions of the different ways practitioners have applied the summation message over the years (Mulqueen, pp. 26–30). It reminded me of how carefully these practitioners, Mulqueen included, work with their words, as well as with the words of their clients, and – in doing so – how dedicated they are in finding out what works for their clients.

Reference

de Shazer, S. (1994). *Words Were Originally Magic*. New York: W. W. Norton.

For more than 15 years **Hannes Couvreur** has been studying what people can do with language to turn difficulties into possibilities. He is a certified SF practitioner (Korzybski International Bruges) and founder of Superbly Human. He provides SF conversations that help organisations and their stakeholders deal with complex projects and turn difficulties into possibilities right away. He has a background in German Philology (Dutch & English linguistics and literature), journalism, advertising, social marketing, SF therapy & coaching. He is currently working on how an SF approach can improve the work of urban planning professionals. http://twitter.com/superblyhuman