voices from the frontline

Collectivising solution-focused practice

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Introduction

When solution-focused practice first arrived on the therapy scene back in the 1980s, it was unquestionably a radical approach to working with people, at least in the sense of 'radical' as innovative. It was also 'critical' in relation to received wisdom about activities that were seen to be essential to the practice of therapy. Steve de Shazer, who was perhaps most central in the approach's development, certainly in terms of writing about it (de Shazer, 1985, 1988, 1991a, 1994), was an iconoclast, and whether or not he delighted in such a role, some of his followers most definitely did, the authors of this article included.

We continue to believe that solution-focused practice has much to offer radical social workers who wish to find genuinely empowering approaches with which they can first get alongside and then be led by service users towards the changes they are hoping for. We hope that more social workers can discover and make use of this approach, which – not least through its radical nature – is not always easy to apply in modern-day local authority departments. We also believe that it has the potential to become more radical, in the sense of being used in the pursuit of social change, including through finding collective forms for its use and being open to integration with other ways of working.

At the centre of solution-focused change efforts is the belief that change is always happening, and that there will be instances of any particular desired change happening already (Shennan, 2014). In this article, having outlined a little of what we think makes solution-focused practice a radical approach, we will give an account of an already-existing solution-focused organisation, the Zebra Collective, which we believe points to ways in which it can become more radical still. We will conclude by outlining an initiative that we, with a number of others, are involved in to develop a manifesto for a critically and socially engaged solution-focused practice, and a broader collective of like-minded practitioners.

A radical approach

One of the means by which de Shazer (1985: 58) challenged accepted ideas about therapy was his use of Ockham's razor. This principle of economy, attributed to the medieval philosopher William of Ockham, can be stated in a variety of ways – that preferred by de Shazer being: 'what can be done with fewer means is done in vain with many'. He wielded it to strip away much that was common to most other therapy approaches. Most strikingly, the realisation that it might be more productive to ask about *exceptions* to the problem than about the problem itself, which was accompanied by an interest in the service user's abilities evidenced by these exceptions, ultimately led to a practice that involved no active problem exploration at all.

Associated with this was the absence of an assessment component to the work (Shennan, 2003). The solution-focused practitioner is not trying to 'know' the service user or to work out what is going on from an expert position. Steve de Shazer, who believed that 'understanding' the client was not possible and that 'creative misunderstandings' was the best that could happen (de Shazer, 1991a: 69), had an admirably simple approach to problem causation – 'shit happens' (de Shazer, 1991b). This led to the worker relinquishing an 'expert' role and, no longer preoccupied with their thoughts about what is going on, being more able to focus on and give precedence to the service user's own thoughts and ideas.

Most importantly, the initial focus is on what the service user wants from the work, which should guide all that happens from that point. This makes the solution-focused social worker an agent of the service user rather than an agent of the state, which is one of the reasons why the approach can clash with local authority imperatives. The BRIEF team, who were chiefly responsible for establishing the approach in the UK (Ratner et al, 2012), coined the opening question 'What are your best hopes from our work together?', and the focus on hope is a potentially progressive one (Eagleton, 2015). Hope, unlike desire, is performative and 'not simply an anticipation of the future, but an active force in its constitution' (Eagleton, 2015: 84). Having established the person's hopes from the work, the next step in the solution-focused process is to enable descriptions of the future that could arise from their realisation. Eagleton (2015: 85) goes on to suggest how hope and a focus on the future can lead to political action:

> The mere act of being able to imagine an alternative future may distance and relativise the present, loosening its grip upon us to the point where the future in question becomes more feasible. This is one reason why the Romantic imagination has a link to radical politics. True hopelessness would be when such imaginings were inconceivable.

The other major focus of solution-focused practice is on the progress that is already being made towards these 'preferred futures', through the construction of 'progressive narratives' with service users (de Shazer, 1991a), which are based on a belief in their agency and ability to make changes. This adds further both to the potentially empowering effects of the approach, and to its potential for creating collaborative relationships, both features of radical social work.

There are a number of points above, however, where solution-focused practice might be thought to depart from what we would usually consider to be necessary

for a radical social work. First, it has come from the world of therapy, and has shared that world's focus on individual rather than social change. Second, if solution-focused practitioners do not actively explore the causes of the problems faced by people who use social work services, then, by definition, they are not addressing the structural nature of these causes. How can the pursuit of social justice be undertaken without such a societal analysis? Some answers to these questions can be found in the work of the Zebra Collective.

Solution-focused practice for social justice: an example

The Zebra Collective[1] is a worker cooperative founded in 2003 and based in Plymouth in South-West England. Its core value is social justice, which it pursues through development work, action research and training, in the areas of equality, solution-focused practice, community work and well-being. Each cooperative member has a helping profession background, for example, in social work, community development, mental health, substance use and homelessness. As well as providing training and consultancy in solution-focused practice, Zebra is itself a solution-focused organisation, both in its internal management and in how it provides all its services.

Zebra believes that it is essential to frame the situation of any individual or group explicitly within the realities of social injustice in which they exist and operate, particularly poverty, inequality, discrimination and systems of oppression. Such an analysis helps to make sense of the situation without effectively blaming the person or group by holding them responsible for structural and systemic forces beyond their control. This decreases the risk that the person internalises their traumatic experiences: 'This isn't about me; it's about the situation in which I find myself'. The focus of the work then becomes, 'Given this social injustice, and how it impacts on you, what are your best hopes?'. The question of coping becomes pertinent in such contexts as people have the opportunity to recognise their strengths and resilience while 'up against it'.

So, in Zebra's work, whether training workers in solution-focused, trauma-informed practice, or working with marginalised inner-city community groups in their efforts to improve or take control of their neighbourhoods, this analysis of social injustices and their impact is a constant backdrop, though with the focus always on hopes, possibilities, strengths and progress. Challenging these injustices may be an element of what the professional, citizen or community group decides to do.

Zebra's founding objects state that it will always raise the debate on social justice, and name this in appropriate forums. Collective members therefore consistently challenge the norm within the statutory, voluntary and community sectors of accepting the UK government's austerity agenda as unavoidable and a fact of life to be accommodated. Their challenges, which can provoke discomfort and disruption, though hopefully a 'constructive dissonance', draw on evidence generated by such bodies as the New Economics Foundation (see, eg, Arnold, 2018) and the Equality Trust,[2] which promotes the work of Wilkinson and Pickett (2009). Using its solution-focused profile, Zebra promotes and frequently leads discussions on what is possible within this current socially unjust system and seeks to unearth the strengths of the individuals and communities living within it.

We recognise the risk that a solution-focused approach can be seen as the poster child of a neoliberal agenda. Zebra is commonly approached by organisations seeking

solution-focused input as they have heard it to be a good approach for getting more for less. In a context of swingeing cuts to public services, it might be hoped that a shift to a solution-focused approach will close the gap. Zebra walks a delicate line as it engages with such enquiries, being explicit about its position on the injustice and impact of cuts in terms of the suffering and even death of citizens that they cause, while confident that a solution-focused approach can get the most from whatever limited resources remain. Furthermore, naming the social injustice and critiquing such agendas is an inherent and explicit element of the work.

Of the many examples of Zebra's solution-focused work, one is taking place currently in a social work context. Zebra is working with a local authority adult social care department on a change management programme towards a solution-focused culture and practice. The strengths-based, person-centred nature of the solution-focused approach resonates with the values underpinning social work training, and there has already been feedback from participants that this is re-engaging them with the job they were trained to do. One comment during a post-training reflective group discussion was typical: "Solution-focused has a feel of old social work". Throughout the programme so far, Zebra has framed the work in the context of austerity.

Similarly, in community contexts, the emergence of the concept of 'resilience' in recent years can be seen to serve small-state politics and the notion that communities should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps rather than be served by a nanny state. We believe that this is a false dichotomy. Communities are, of course, the best they can be when in touch with their own resourcefulness and pursuing their own agendas, hopes and preferred futures. However, their capacity to meet their aspirations is constrained by the forces of poverty, inequality and discrimination. As Michaels (2006) points out, the problem with the American Dream is that it is a myth, the pervasiveness of which is oppressive to those who strive but are not able to break through the glass ceiling. To ignore these social forces is to put the responsibility for their impact onto the very people who are most oppressed by them. Thus, when Zebra works with such communities, its solution-focused approach to the work is framed in this context of oppression. This can include an element of education, offering communities such analyses for their consideration in order to assist them in making sense of their situations in ways that do not lead to the internalisation of the causes of their difficulties. A comparison can be made here with the process of conscientization in the work of Paulo Freire (1972).

Developing a broad collective and a manifesto for a socially engaged solution-focused practice

The integration of Freire's ideas with solution-focused practice will, we are sure, seem a radical step to many solution-focused practitioners, and probably misguided to some. Steve de Shazer himself rejected the idea of integrating solution-focused with other approaches (O'Connell, 2000) as it would involve importing problem-focused concepts, though others have been more sympathetic to the idea (Beyebach, 2009). Our view is that the scale of the problems in these austerity-ridden times is such that radical measures are needed, and that these should include a consideration of how the power of the solution-focused approach can be enhanced by the addition of other activities.

Such a consideration is part of a wider initiative in which we are currently engaged, along with a number of other solution-focused practitioners with whom we share a desire to make solution-focused practice relevant and useful in the quest for social justice. This initiative is in its very early stages, having been prompted by a stream of presentations at the annual conference of the UK Association of Solution Focused Practice in June 2018 on solution-focused practice and social change, curated by one of the conference organisers, Suzi Curtis (Shennan, 2018).

Our initial plans include the creation of a manifesto that will make clear our intentions and act as a call to arms for likeminded practitioners and others, as well as the establishment of a solution-focused collective to continue the development of these ideas. The Zebra Collective provides an excellent example of how the process is as important as the content that is actually produced, and we are committed to a process that is both collective and open. We welcome anyone who shares our aims to become involved, and our contact details are provided at the end of this article.[3] We look forward to solution-focused ideas becoming increasingly relevant in a progressive narrative towards the goal of social justice.

Notes
[1.] See: www.zebra.coop
[2.] See: www.equalitytrust.org.uk
[3.] Email: solfocollective@gmail.com

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