

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD, AND LOOKING SOMEWHERE ELSE

Interview with Therese Steiner, child and youth psychiatrist, Switzerland

UB:

I am wondering how you started working with solution focused brief therapy. When and how had you the idea that it is an interesting approach that would fit in your work? From whom and how were you learning the approach? When and under which circumstances did you met Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg the first time? What are your special memories of this time?

TS:

I studied medicine and specialized in child and adolescent psychiatry and psychotherapy I was trained by Jürg Willi at the university of Zürich in systemic therapy for couple and families. After having worked for several years in a child psychiatry day clinic and an outpatient service I opened my private practice. I started well and soon had lots of children and families for treatment.

After a certain time in private practice I realized that I would not be able to do my work and at the same time have enough energy for my family. Somehow I felt too loaded. I was listening to problems all day long, felt responsible for the ‚right‘ treatment and there was just not enough laughter. That was not the life I wanted to have. Now what? I loved my family and also liked working with children and their families and no doubt there had to be a change.

One day I attended a workshop held by Gunther Schmidt and he was talking about Steve de Shazer and his completely different approach. A short time after Steve gave a workshop in Heidelberg. Together with other professionals from Zürich I went there. It had over 100 participants, the auditorium was huge and far away on the stage was Steve, a rather strange looking man who hardly ever looked at his clients. He was talking about things I had not heard before. He also showed a video with two persons who had been diagnosed schizophrenic. The way Steve talked to these clients, the questions he asked were absolutely fascinating. What impressed me most was how Steve let guide himself by the clients‘ answers.

I got immediately the idea that this could be the solution to my personal situation and that this was the way I wanted to work with clients in the future. On our way back to Switzerland I realized that there was just one other person who thought the same way as I did. All the others considered the workshop as waste of time and Steve’s way of working as not professional. At that time I did not yet know that this reaction was quite common.

At Gunther Schmidt’s place in Heidelberg Steve gave more workshops. I attended several of them and then decided to go to Milwaukee to learn more. That is where I met Insoo for the first time. When I saw Insoo and Steve working one of my first impression was: what a huge difference there was in the way they were using exactly the same approach: Steve in his very focused, slightly grumpy way, Insoo with her friendly, warm personality. And it worked for both of them!

Some years later I had the chance to get to know Insoo and Steve more closely as they both used to stay at our house while they were giving workshops in Switzerland. There were many interesting chats at our kitchen table, however it touched hardly ever our work: With Steve it was about music, cars, cooking, beer, with Insoo about being a mother and other relationships.

UB:

In your opinion how has the approach developed in the years that you have been working? What are the most important changes?

TS:

The approach was first developed as a therapy model for adults and families with children and adolescents. Throughout his life Steve mainly worked with adults. Insoo started to work as a coach for organizations like the American child protective service and also published books about coaching.

It was not before Kasper and Marianne Baeschlin started to use the approach in the context of a pedagogical institution, Harry Korman from Sweden and I myself in the context of child psychiatry that SFA was regularly used with children. Steve was very skeptical about it and for a long time claimed that he was not convinced it would work for this age group. One of his concerns was that no research had been done.

When I started to use SF on a regular basis I realized that I had to adapt some communication methods in order to meet children with not yet elaborated language skills. The mindset however and the way to construct solution ideas seemed to fit even better children's thinking than that of adults. SFA conquered the pedagogic world: it is used in schools, institutions, child therapy. In 2001 Insoo and I decided to write a book about our experience while working with children. Children's Solution Work was published in 2005.

Over the years people like Yvonne Dolan, Luc Isebeart, Harvey Ratner, Chris Iveson and Plamen Panayotov just to mention a few persons modified some of the communication techniques, the essential though, the mindset stayed the same.

UB:

For several years you have been working in Africa and South America. What exactly are you doing on your journeys? With what kind of people are you working? What are your reflections about the solution focused approach in this field?

TS:

My work in Africa and later on in Central and South America started with a phone call from the NGO terre des hommes schweiz. The person calling me had attended one of my workshops. The question was, whether the solution focused approach could be of use in the psychosocial support of vulnerable children and youth in the Southern part of Africa. My answer was: I don't know and mentioned that the only persons being able to answer this question were the young people themselves.

The NGO terre des hommes schweiz was generous and courageous enough to organize a meeting in Dares-Salaam with some youth from the different countries where terre des hommes schweiz was running a psychosocial support program. I met adolescents who were all volunteering in local NGOs trying to give support to orphans, street kids, children in townships for example. They themselves had a similar background as the children and youth they were spending time with. Some of them had lost their parents through Aids, were HIV positive, had experienced violence or were sexually abused, most of them came from very poor backgrounds. During the week we met I did not expect to come across such a lot of competence, strength, brilliant ideas and humor. There was laughter and

dancing and at the end of the week it was quite clear what these volunteers needed in order to feel more competent and prepared for their task. Out of these findings emerged a program called youth2youth. It includes three training modules of one week over the period of 1 1/2 years with different topics:

- get to know and realize the own strength
- learn to discover the strength in other human beings
- learn to formulate own well formed goals and help others do the same thing
- learn to pay attention to progress as small as it might be in the personal life as well as to highlight it in the life of others .

Depending on the group of participants specific topics were discussed. For example:

how to deal with

- loss and grief
- the belief in witchcraft
- shame
- violence and violent conflicts
- people having suffered from abuse

The goal of the youth2youth program is to give support to young people who are dedicated to make a difference in their fellows' life. In other words empower them to deal as well as possible with the challenging situations they meet.

Whenever I see these young people I have the impression that many of the counselors and psychiatrists back home have never come across such complex and difficult situations as these volunteers. Of course the goal is not to do therapy; yet what is the difference between making a difference in our client's life and therapy?!

What turned out to be helpful in this work was SFA. As the approach is future oriented, is based on the competences and not on the deficits, works with small yet significant differences, it is just right for working in surroundings where people are traumatized and have lots of problems.

All participants say that getting to know the SF mindset challenged their own life. They feel much better about themselves, feel more hopeful personally as well as in regard to their work. They say that meeting children and youth in the SF way makes things easier for them. They do not take too much responsibility, feel less loaded and are simply thrilled to see how much is possible once they start to work with the already existing strength and a goal in the future instead of being overwhelmed by the huge amount of problems.

2007 the first course including three modules started in the Southern part of Africa. After the pilot course I facilitated three more of them. Then the time was ready to train some participants as trainers. In this training some youth acquired the competence to teach SFA. Later on the trainers also adapted the approach to the local culture. This cultural adaptation is very important and can of course only be done by locals. By now the program in Southern Africa runs independently from foreign trainers. Terre des hommes schweiz finances regular meetings where the African trainers can exchange best practice. There is also a platform on Facebook where there is an exchange of what works. The only thing I still do in Africa is to run the trainer training course.

As the youth2youth program had been a great success in Africa terre des hommes schweiz and I started to implement SFA also in the countries of Central and South America. (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Peru, Columbia)

It is evident that we adapted the youth2youth program to the needs of the participants of those countries. Again we gather youth and asked them what could be helpful for them to give support to the children and adolescents they work with.

UB:

What are your best hopes for the solution focused approach for the coming years?

My best hope is that there will be always enough professionals to discover how fascinating and liberating it is to work with the solution focused approach and that these people respect the big personal knowledge clients have.

As long as health systems in the western world are pathology oriented the chance that SFA will get a broad scientific acceptance is very low. (After all turkeys do not vote for Christmas). Personally I prefer the freedom to be able to follow my clients ideas than to be forced to do a treatment according to the state of the art.

Interview made by Ursula Bühlmann with Theres Steiner as part of a supervisions meeting in Bern, Switzerland in march 2015.