The Solution-Focused Inventory: A tripartite taxonomy for teaching, measuring and conceptualising solution-focused approaches to coaching

Anthony M. Grant

Solution-focused approaches to facilitating purposeful positive change through methodologies such as coaching have great potential to contribute to the broader human change enterprise. To date there has been limited exposition of psychological theory within the solution-focused arena, and few attempts to articulate taxonomies specific to solution-focused research, teaching and practice, thus restricting the development and broader adoption of the solution-focused paradigm. Drawing on the established solution-focused literature, this paper seeks to address this issue by articulating a tripartite taxonomy for solution-focused coaching based on the framework underpinning the Solution-Focused Inventory. This model consists of three factors: (a) Goal-orientation; (b) Resource Activation; and (c) Problem Disengagement – subscales of the Solution-Focused Inventory. Implications of this taxonomy for teaching, research and practice are discussed and a range of future directions for research explored.

Keywords: Solution-Focused Inventory; solution-focused coaching; coaching psychology.
situations including child behaviour problems (Corcoran, 2006), marital problems (Zimmerman, Prest & Wetzel, 1997) criminal offending (Lindfors & Magnusson, 1997) and orthopaedic rehabilitation (Cockburn, Thomas & Cockburn, 1997). Other reviews of solution-focused counselling and therapeutic interventions have also reported positive effects in relation to increases in good parenting skills, decreased anxiety, stress and depression and reductions in adolescent problem behaviours (e.g. Kim, 2008; Stams et al., 2006). There is also a growing empirical literature on the use of solution-focused approaches in areas such as organisational and personal coaching and sports coaching (Bell, Skinner & Fisher, 2009; Grant, 2003; Jackson & McKergow, 2002; Szabo & Meier, 2009).

This growing body of empirical literature suggests that solution-focused approaches may be applicable in a wide range of settings. However, virtually all the solution-focused empirical literature focuses on reporting outcomes of solution-focused interventions. There is hardly any empirical research explicitly looking at how a solution-focused approaches works (see Grant & O’Connor, 2010), and so the psychological mechanics of how solution-focused approaches create change is relatively unknown.

The conceptual context
Although the solution-focused approach has been used in a wide range of applied contexts, theoretical development that can facilitate causal understandings has fallen substantially behind practical application. Originally conceptualised within a Wittgensteinian framework (de Shazer, 1994) there have been a number of subsequent attempts to relate the solution-focused paradigm to a range of theoretical frameworks. These have included self-determination theory (Visser, 2010), positive psychology (Bannink & Jackson, 2011), hope theory (Michael, Taylor & Cheavens, 2000), discursive psychological theory (Dierolf, 2011) and feminist theory (Dermer, Hemesath & Russell, 1998). However, at present there seems to be few, if any, clearly articulated solution-specific theoretical frameworks or taxonomies.

It is perhaps not surprising that the conceptual aspects of solution-focused approaches have gone relatively undeveloped and attempts to link solution-focused approaches to the broader psychological enterprise have been somewhat tenuous. The postmodernist Wittgensteinian stance adopted by the early pioneers of solution-focused approaches (e.g. de Shazer, 1994) is a complex philosophy that, in part, focuses on how language both constructs and constricts our understandings of the world. De Shazer’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s philosophy resulted in a therapeutic modality that steadfastly avoids causal explanations and was purposefully distanced from the broader psychological enterprise (de Shazer & Dolan, 2007). Indeed some solution-focused proponents argue that attempts to understand how the solution-focused approach works are at best irrelevant and could even be detrimental, stating that it is only important to know that it does work and how to make it work (Kiser, 1996; McKergow & Jackson, 2005).

Limitations on development
Whilst such a position might appeal to some practitioners, and may well resonate with those who subscribe to postmodern philosophical perspectives, I argue that this position has seriously limited the broader development and adoption of solution-focused approaches (for an informative extended critique of postmodern philosophy in solution-focused approaches see Held, 1996).

Firstly, the lack of guiding theoretical frameworks or taxonomies makes it difficult to conduct research beyond straightforward outcome studies (Chalmers, 1976). We need research that gives insights into the psychological underpinnings of solution-focused approaches, and such research is guided by well-articulated theory. In this way the knowledge-base can be expanded, bringing greater rigour and higher standards of
professionalism – vital for the growth of the area. These issues are particularly poignant in an area such as solution-focused coaching which is moving towards a more evidenced-based approach (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007).

Secondly, the lack of a theoretical framework that includes information about the underpinning psychological mechanics means that solution-focused practitioners and researchers have no explicit theory to drive the development of new techniques. Whilst existing solution-focused techniques might be effective in some circumstances, some of the time, with some clients, the development of any area of psychological practice is dependent on its ability to purposefully adapt and change in response to perceived limitations and to develop new applications. Without an explicit guiding framework on which to base expansion and the development of new applications, any area of psychological practice is likely to stagnate and become irrelevant over time.

Thirdly, without a theoretical framework that gives insight into the underpinning psychological mechanics it is very difficult to purposefully develop conceptually-coherent solution-focused case conceptualisations (or case formulations). Case conceptualisation (sometimes referred to as case formulation) is the process of developing a mental model of the presenting issues in a way that makes those issues amenable to change (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008). These are typically developed during the process of working with a client, moment by moment as the conversation and issues unfold, in addition to being refined after the session has finished as part of professional reflective practice.

From a diagnostic perspective a full conceptual model incorporates information about past experience which may have shaped client’s core beliefs and world view, and links those to the development of beliefs and assumptions about self, others and the world, and also identifies the critical incidents that trigger the relevant problem as well as identifying the factors that maintain the problem (Lane & Corrie, 2009).

From a solution-focused perspective a solution-focused case conceptualisation would, in effect, turn a problem-focused diagnostic conceptualisation on its head. Thus the focus would be on delineating preferred outcomes, articulating potential solutions and specific strategies that might be useful in the goal striving process, and in doing so highlighting the client’s personal strengths and resources and how those can be utilised in the goal attainment process.

Whichever perspective is employed, the process of developing a case conceptualisation necessarily involves the use and application of theory. Thus the lack of appropriate theoretical frameworks within the solution-focused approach is a major limitation on its development.

**Key presuppositions**

Although there has been little work on linking solution-focused approaches to the broader psychological enterprises, there are a number of key presuppositions that are generally accepted as informing solution-focused work (see, for example, Furman & Ahola, 1992; O’Connell, 1998). These include:

- **A non-pathological orientation** – Problems are seen, not as indications of pathology or dysfunctionality, but stemming from a limited behavioural repertoire.
- **Future-orientation** – The emphasis is more on the future (what the client wants to have happen) than the present or the past. The past is seen as a potential reservoir of resources, but the past is not used as a means of exploring causality.
- **A focus on constructing solutions and disengaging from problems** – The coach (or therapist) facilitates the construction of solutions rather than trying to understand the aetiology of the problem.
- **A focus on articulating preferred outcomes or goals** – The coach helps the client articulate their preferred outcome/s and then works with them to help them identify action steps that may help them attain their goals. Action steps are seen as
being a series of mini-experiments rather than being predetermined prescriptions for change.

- **Utilisation and activation of existing client resources** – The coach (or therapist) helps the client recognise and utilise a wide range of personal and contextual resources of which they may have been unaware.

The above (and other similar) presuppositions can provide useful guidelines for solution-focused practice, and these may well provide the basis of a taxonomy that may be of use in teaching, measuring or conceptualising solution-focused approaches. Importantly, such a taxonomy may be a useful means of linking solution-focused approaches to the extant body of psychological knowledge.

**Implications for teaching**

The lack of a previously articulated taxonomy for solution-focused coaching also has important ramifications for the teaching of solution-focused approaches. Although solution-focused pioneers such as Steve de Shazer were famously uncompromising in teaching solution-focused work experientially, by demonstration and practice rather than by explaining it, there is some debate in the contemporary solution-focused community about whether or not such theory-avoidance is the best way to engage new learners. Indeed, there is a growing recognition that the explicit articulation of taxonomies and cognitive models is important for the future development of teaching and training methodologies (McKergow, 2011).

It is important to note that whilst a practical hands-on experiential approach to teaching and training might appeal to some pragmatic or experiential learners, those who prefer a more reflective or theorist style of learning may be less engaged (Honey & Mumford, 1982). Whilst some students are able to engage with a theory-free approach to learning solution-focused work, in my personal experience as one who has taught and trained a wide range of individuals in solution-focused coaching for well over a decade in both university and industry settings, I have found that there is another substantial group of students who find it difficult to grasp the essence of solution-focused coaching without having some kind of taxonomy or theoretical framework. This student group may easily be alienated by positioning theory as irrelevant. Furthermore, the failure to include theoretical models in the teaching of solution-focused approaches limits the ability of students to engage in structured reflective practice (McGonagill, 2002; Schon, 1982) and thus makes it more difficult for them to benefit from subsequent double and triple loop learning (Argyris, 1977).

In addition, the lack of explicit theoretical frameworks may make it more challenging for both teachers and students to further develop sophisticated understandings of some of the essential aspects of professional practice such as the role of ongoing supervision, or how to best assess and measure the effectiveness of solution-focused teaching and training (McKergow, 2011).

These are all important issues that need to be addressed if solution-focused approaches are to develop over time and not become a conceptual or applied backwater in the evidence-based coaching enterprise. We need to bear in mind one of the core principles of the solution-focused paradigm (e.g., Cade & O’Hanlon, 1993); if what we are doing is not working, then we need to try something different. If a theory-free approach to teaching solution-focused skills is becoming a problem then we need to disengage from that problem and move towards creating a new solution!

**A proposed tripartite taxonomy of solution-focused coaching**

The previous review of the solution-focused literature identified several key presuppositions underpinning solution-focused approaches including: a non-pathological orientation; an orientation towards the future rather than the past; a focus on disen-
gaging from problems and an emphasis on constructing and moving towards solutions; goal orientation and the identification, utilisation and activation of personal and contextual client resources.

From this overview we can posit three broad themes related to the solution-focused approach and these may well form the core of a tripartite taxonomy for solution-focused coaching. These are:

1. **Goal-orientation**: An orientation toward solution construction through the articulating and use of approach goals and active self regulation.

2. **Resource Activation**: A focus on acknowledging, indentifying and activating a wide range of personal and contextual resources and personal strengths.

3. **Problem Disengagement**: This third theme recognises that a solution-focused approach involves more than goal articulation and resource awareness and utilisation. It also involves an explicit disengagement from presenting problems. It should be noted that although the ability to disengage from a problem is conceptually independent of one’s ability to be orientated towards a solution, problem disengagement is vital for full engagement in the goal pursuit process central to the solution-focused endeavour (Greene & Grant, 2003; Wrosch et al., Schulz, 2003).

In essence the above taxonomy echoes the process of solution-focused approaches to coaching which aim to help clients articulate preferred outcomes, disengage from the presenting problem, and then identify and indentify and utilise the personal strengths and resources needed to move towards goal attainment. These three facets when combined can be seen to comprise the core of a solution-focused approach to coaching. This is represented in Figure 1. It should be borne in mind that this taxonomy only represents the core psychological foundations of a solution-focused approach to coaching, factors such as coaching-related micro-skills, contracting, and client relationship management – all important components of the coaching enterprise – are not included in this taxonomy as it stands.

**A conceptual basis for measuring solution-focused approaches**

The question now arises as how to operationalise the above taxonomy. The following are items developed for the Solution-Focused Inventory – a 12-item self-report measure of solution-focused approaches for use with clients currently in the final stages of psychometric validation (Please contact the author for details regarding the development and validation of the Solution-Focused Inventory.) Note: The SFI may be freely used for research and teaching purposes and each item is scored using a six-point rating scale (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree).

Figure 1: A proposed tripartite taxonomy of solution-focused approaches to coaching.
The Goal Orientation items are designed to encapsulate the key features of goal-focused self-regulation which underpins an orientation toward solution construction (Locke & Latham, 2002).

The Resource Activation items reflect the core aspects of resource activation widely reported in the solution-focused literature (see, for example, de Shazer, 1988; Furman & Ahola, 1992; Miller, Hubble & Duncan, 1996; O’Connell, 1998; Palmer, Grant & O’Connell, 2007).

The Problem Disengagement items assess the degree to which an individual tends to engage in problem-saturated thinking, and by reverse scoring these items it is possible to create an analogue measure of problem disengagement.

Application of the taxonomy in teaching, research and practice
This taxonomy can be used to inform teaching, research and practice by providing a framework for linking core aspects of solution-focused practice to the existing psychological literature on areas such as goal setting (e.g. Moskowitz & Grant, 2009), resource activation as reported in the strengths-based aspects of positive psychology (e.g. Linley & Harrington, 2006), and problem disengagement as discussed in the cognitive literature associated with rumination and problem-saturated thinking (e.g. Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). This would allow theoretically-oriented solution-focused researchers and practitioners to draw on existing psychological research and use that knowledge to advance the development of solution-focused approaches, whilst at the same time linking existing solution-focused work back to the broader psychological knowledge base.

Such an approach may well prove to be a useful aid in the teaching of solution-focused work. A simple taxonomy that encapsulates the core theoretical facets of solution-focused practice and links such practice back into the existing psychological knowledge base, may well make learning the core

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Items from the Solution-Focused Inventory.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal Orientation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I imagine my goals and then work towards them</td>
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<tr>
<td>I keep track of my progress towards my goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m very good at developing effective action plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always achieve my goals</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resource Activation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is always a solution to every problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are always enough resources to solve a problem if you know where to look</td>
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<tr>
<td>Most people are more resilient than they realise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setbacks are a real opportunity to turn failure into success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem Disengagement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tend to spend more time analysing my problems than working on possible solutions *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tend to get stuck in thinking about problems *</td>
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<tr>
<td>I tend to focus on the negative *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not very good at noticing when things are going well *</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The SFI may be freely used for research and teaching purposes and each item is scored using a six-point rating scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). * = reverse scored item.
concepts of solution-focused coaching much easier for students whose background is in other areas of psychology or who hold reflective or theorist approaches to learning (Honey & Mumford, 1982).

As previously argued, the linking of solution-focused approaches to the existing knowledge bases is important if solution-focused coaching is to continue on its evidence-based journey. The taxonomy outlined in this paper may prove to be valuable in measuring and assessing solution-focused change, and practitioners may find this useful in helping them to assess key areas of their practice.

As regards future research questions: It would be valuable to understand the relationship between insight and solution-focused thinking. To what extent is solution-focused thinking associated with personal insight? Do high levels of insight facilitate solution-focused thinking? Does increasing individuals’ levels of insight help them become more solution-focused? Such questions strike at the heart of the solution-focused coaching venture, and the further development of theoretical models and measures of solution-focused thinking may well help answer such questions, and in doing so further develop solution-focused practices.

In addition, it would be interesting to explore the relationship between solution-focused thinking, happiness and health. There is considerable interest at all levels of Western society in the measurement and enhancement of happiness and health (Stratton, 2010), and there is also considerable interest in the use of solution-focused approaches as a means of enhancing mental health and well-being (Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2006; Linton, 2005). However, to date there has been little research into the possible connections between solution-focused thinking and health and happiness. Does solution-focused thinking lead to enhanced health and/or happiness?

Do healthy and happy people tend to be more solution-focused? If there is a connection between solution-focused thinking, health and happiness, to what extent does solution-focused thinking mediate or moderate the relationship between health and happiness?

Conclusion

The above questions and the taxonomy that they spring from provide a potentially rich platform for future research, teaching and practice of the solution-focused approach. Yet none of these empirical questions can be truly explored without the development of taxonomies or theoretical frameworks from which to articulate specific hypotheses and empirically investigate these issues. The Solution-Focused Inventory may in time prove to be one such taxonomy. These concepts outlined above have the very real potential to significantly develop solution-focused approaches to coaching, to add to the existing knowledge base, expand our understandings of evidence-based coaching, improve our ability to teach and thus contribute to the betterment of our coaching clients on both an individual and societal level.

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Correspondence

Anthony M. Grant
Coaching Psychology Unit,
School of Psychology,
University of Sydney,
Sydney, NSW 2006,
Australia.
Email: anthony.grant@sydney.edu.au
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