



Change Certificate in Solution Focused Practice

(BACP Endorsed)

Unit 3: The Work of Language

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July 2013

Unit 3 looked at the theoretical basis of Solution Focused Therapy (SFT), considering its philosophical origins and comparing it to other therapeutic approaches (psychodynamic, humanistic, cognitive behavioural). The particular learning for me was around the importance of language, the words we use, their contextual meaning and the power they have to create different realities. Language is at the heart of the SF approach and this essay is an analysis of using language therapeutically with a client to co-construct a new reality.

How did the discourse come about?

In response to the question '**What has changed since our previous session?**' the client talked about seeing some old friends and how their bad behaviour towards her had made her angry, prompting her to question herself and wonder why she had tolerated them for so long. The language she was using was problem-based and reflective - she blamed herself for being 'weak' in putting up with them. She was asked to **scale herself from 0-10** on how she felt about herself right now - this came out at a 4/5. Asked why this was so revealed a picture of low self-esteem and self-doubt despite much evidence of a highly functioning, confident person. The client used a lot of 'oughts' and 'shoulds' in this narrative and it led her to a wider narrative of seeing herself as a failure, based mostly on her mother's high expectations and expressed disappointment whenever the client was less than perfect.

What was the client's dominant belief in the 'old discourse?'

The client's dominant belief in this problem based discourse was one of not being good enough. The language used was about being 'the best' and of doing things in the 'right way' and the inevitability of falling short.

How did the counsellor assist in the construction of a 'new' discourse?

I wanted to elicit a different narrative from the client and to explore other, more positive characteristics, revealing another reality to the one she had ascribed to herself. The question **'What's the best outcome for you today'** was used as an opening. Using the word 'best' immediately showed we were aiming high and being optimistic in our outlook. Using the word 'outcome' also suggested action, that something was going to come out of this dialogue between us. This question also enabled us to really hone in on what the client wanted to aim for, moving us away from a continued exploration of the old discourse into a future scenario that tapped into and built on her strengths. What she really wanted to deal with was to think about a new future working life for herself - to explore new directions and business possibilities.

Exceptions and problem-free talk questions were asked. For example, in response to **'What might friends and family say'** about her, the client detailed some wonderful qualities: a strong moral sense, decency, loyalty, good fun, energy and enthusiasm, and a capacity for hard work. This dialogue reinforced the fact that there were lots of aspects of the client beyond the negative one she presented in the 'old' discourse of herself. It showed that there were many 'truths' about her and that she could actually choose to follow a different truth to the negative one she had related.

When asked an exception question about what she might be doing when she felt confident and good about herself, the client identified her working life as key to this. She told me about her successes, the money she had made in business and the lifestyle this had afforded her family. This was a very different narrative to the 'old' discourse, revealing the pluralism that exists for us all in how we define ourselves or are defined by others.

When the **miracle question** was put to the client, she was asked to describe her behaviours on waking to a world where her 'problem' had simply gone away. She physically changed in the counselling room and was much more animated, smiley and alert. She described what she would be doing and feeling on such a morning, what others would notice about her and what life would be like. She used terms like busy, focused, happy, enjoying life and having a renewed sense of purpose. The client was able to visualise this alternative lifestyle and to 'live' it in the counselling room. There was a physical and behavioural transformation.

The client was again asked to **scale herself** from 0-10 on how she now felt about herself at this point in the discourse - this came out at 5/6. Asked what it would take to get her to a 7/8 the client described the actions she would need to take to achieve the new reality. This entailed seeking the help of a business mentor who could guide her in shaping her ideas into achievable goals. She had been following online for some time a few global gurus in the field she was interested in developing for herself as a business. She decided that now was the time for action if she was to achieve her potential and create a new discourse for herself. She committed to looking for a mentor to work with her on taking the next steps to developing her business ideas. The client was a much more energised person to the one who had started the session - she had visibly changed.

What is the dominant belief in the 'new' discourse?

The dominant belief in the 'new' discourse was one of possibilities for a different future reality. It had become about taking action and making changes, about being in control of her own destiny.

How did the counsellor assist the client to reposition herself in the new discourse?

The counsellor helped the client reposition herself in this new discourse by using the techniques of SFT. The language used in the questions asked was forward-looking and positive, carefully chosen to reflect a shared understanding between client and counsellor about the possibilities of living a different life, based on the client's strengths and potential. The questions subtly asked the client to think about the best parts of herself, beyond the 'problem' and to work with this to create a new reality that was possible by doing more of what worked and less of what kept her stuck in the 'problem'. So, **problem-free talk and exceptions** were used to help the client reposition herself in the new discourse.

Using **scaling**, the client and counsellor were able to chart progress within the session itself, which was a tangible way of showing the client a new discourse is possible and showing the counsellor that they are going in the right direction together to achieve this. Asking questions about what it would take to get the client to a higher scale was very useful in arriving at some actions required to achieve the new discourse. It allowed the client to find her own solutions and to identify what she needed to do to live the new reality. It reinforced the fact that without action change will not happen.

The **miracle question** was quite a powerful tool to get the client to really visualise her new discourse and to get a sense of how this new life would be. It allowed the client to tap into the creative part of her brain, using imagery, imagination and story-telling to describe a new discourse. It allowed the client to internalise what that new discourse would feel like in reality.

In summary, from the beginning to the end of the session, the discourse had changed from being problem-based to solution-focused. It shifted in perspective, from backwards to future looking and in tone, from sombre and painful to animated and hopeful. The emphasis had changed completely to a new discourse based on strengths, options and action.