

## **Unit 5 - Certificate in Solution Focused Brief Therapy**

**Making a Difference  
(taught by Dean-David Holyoake)**

**Louise Barnett  
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## **What is reflexivity?**

Unit 5 introduced students to the idea of reflexivity, which I understand to be what is going on in the space between two people, in the Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) context, that being between client and counsellor.

I personally have come to think of reflexivity as the largely unexpressed sub-text to the narrative that takes place between client and counsellor. It is a sensed experience that both parties have when talking to each other, that is a little out of reach and which can supplement or perhaps drive the discourse and help shape the relationship.

This opaque area of something existing between two people that is non-verbal is there in every exchange but perhaps more acutely experienced when meeting people for the first time or with people who are fairly new to each other. It is essential in many ways to our survival and is connected to our fight or flight impulses. In essence, it is something we do as human beings - we suss each other out, we make instant decisions and form judgments about someone based on how we interpret what is happening beneath the surface of our conversations. It is a powerful and tricky terrain, throwing up all manner of possibilities, as we give further meaning to words with our knowledge, experience, thoughts, beliefs, values, and social conditioning to assess what exists between us and another.

The space between client and counsellor and what is happening in it, the understandings and misunderstandings between the two and the attempts to make meaning of these intangibles is the stuff of therapy. Psychodynamic therapy acknowledges the material in the unspoken space between client and counsellor through things like projection and transference in an attempt to understand what might be going on and possibly to offer interpretations but only as they relate to the client. It strikes me that reflexive practice is as much about seeking an equal understanding of the counsellor as it is of the client and, in this way, reinforces the SFBT notion of the counsellor being a co-collaborator rather than an expert in the therapeutic relationship.

The idea of musing on the non-verbal territory between client and counsellor and what it might mean for them both led me to thinking about power within that relationship and an attempt to think of this reflexively, both theoretically and practically, in drawing on a past counselling session. What follows are my musings.

## **Power and responsibility**

The modernist and therefore received notion of therapy is that the counsellor is a learned expert who understands how people function psychologically and can deal with or fix problems that cause anguish, distress or collapse. The reality is that the best a talking cure can offer, whatever the therapeutic model used, is to give dedicated space and time and some skilled management of that to help the client deal with or fix their own problems. The SFBT approach places the client as the expert in their own lives and thus the power balance shifts towards the client finding their own solutions, guided by the counsellor as a co-worker.

Power is an interesting concept which is central to modernist therapeutic approaches, ranging in degree and distribution - with psychoanalysts being very powerful individuals within the therapeutic relationship and humanistic counsellors being more prepared to be considered equals - being there, maintaining the core conditions, above all being genuinely themselves in a more balanced relationship. The expert counsellor may know a

lot about psychology, human behaviour and mental illness, for example, and be qualified in a particular or several therapeutic models, but the client is the expert in their own lives and he/she is the one who has to do something to change their situation and thus solve their own problems. The counsellor's job is to collaborate really effectively in helping the client find answers and to help him/her behave differently so that the problem stays away.

## **Responsibility**

Stan Lee, editor of super-hero comic books in the 1960's coined the phrase "With great power there must also come great responsibility" (Amazing Fantasy No.15, August 1962 and others). A version of this truism has almost certainly existed way before the 1960s and in SFBT terms, power and responsibility co-exist, not so much as polarities but certainly, to coin a line from a well-known song "You can't have one without the other" (Love and Marriage, Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen, 1955, published by Barton Music Corporation, ASCAP).

Thinking reflexively about responsibility, the client's expectation of a 'cure' for their problem places a huge burden of responsibility on the counsellor and takes away responsibility from the client for 'curing' themselves. It perpetuates the learned expert model and can create tensions in the opaque space between client and counsellor about who is responsible for what in the relationship. At worst it is delusional and starts the therapeutic relationship off in a fug about roles and responsibilities between the two protagonists.

Counsellors often assume too much responsibility for therapeutic outcomes, either believing they are or 'should' be the expert. It leads to supervision discussions about how practice can be improved, what might have been said/not said and a focus on 'being' whilst ignoring the client's responsibility for action and change, that is, the client's responsibility for 'doing'. This *reflective* analysis, whilst well intentioned and essential in seeking to improve counsellor performance, can lead the counsellor to feel inadequate, incompetent and a failure. For the client, it can lead to mistrust of the therapist and disillusionment that the problem is not going away or the miracle cure has not happened, leaving them feeling powerless to effect change in their own lives.

## **A reflexive account of power and responsibility in action**

I had a sharp lesson in the potency of reflexivity, as defined by the unspoken space between myself and a client when I was training as a psychodynamic therapist back in the late 1990s. I was working in the modernist tradition of the opaque expert who said very little, with a woman whose presenting problem was 'relationship difficulties'.

Before she spoke a word, I gleaned a lot about her - her presence, her demeanour, her appearance, then came her articulateness, the markers she was putting down about the type of person she was - her background, upbringing, education, career path, where she lived, what she liked to do etc. The space between us was filled with tension and possibility around this material and what it triggered in me. Straight away I was anxious about 'curing' a middle-class, professional woman who was used to telling others what to do (including her partner who was a house husband and not who she wanted him to be). She was powerful and polished but not very likeable. I compared myself to her automatically in the space between us and, although I had also been a white, middle-class, educated professional, my route (and background) had been very different to hers. Quite quickly I felt I was not up to the mark as a psychotherapist for her and became overly

emotional (anger mostly) about the material and the person which was debilitating to the counselling relationship.

The space between us was uncomfortable and not one that we were able to build a therapeutic alliance on because we did not trust each other and probably did not like each other. I imagine the client thought me lightweight, in fact rather like all the other people in her system who singularly seemed to fall short of her standards of perfection. But, instead of using this within the counselling sessions, I let the space between us become destructive and for the client to become a bully, the worst excess of herself, which I suspect she detested, but as no-one stood up to her, she continued to run with. From the client's perspective, she may have had all sorts of other meanings going on in the space between us - my thoughts are pure conjecture as I did not put them out there or verbalise what was going on for me at the time. If truth were told, I wanted her gone from the therapy room!

Looking back, an SFBT approach might have had more chance of success with this client and she would have been better served by the counselling community. I would not have set myself up as the learned expert, power and responsibility would have been more equally distributed and the client would have had to take responsibility for her own life instead of blaming everyone else for her unhappiness. I would like to think I might have explored what was going on in the space between us more openly because it had the potential to help her see what she possibly needed to change about herself. She needed to be challenged. I could have done this at the time, with a psychodynamic hat on, of course, using transference, but I was cowed by her power and was struggling with my role.

Power and responsibility are key ingredients in the dynamics between people and they are played out at a discourse level and, of course, reflexively in the space between people. The reflexive playground is an endlessly fascinating place, full of possibility and options that can be used in the here and now exchanges in the counselling room to help forge greater understanding between client and counsellor in the ultimate service of finding solutions.

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