

Taking solution focused practice to China

This is a personal reflection of a visit to China to deliver solution-focused practice training in April 2009 by six people brought together by the tragedy of the Sichuan earthquake, and their keen interest in the approach. The three colleagues travelling with me from the UK were: Eva Golding (Solution Focused Counsellor and Lecturer); Dr Mamoun Mobayed (Consultant Psychiatrist); and Basharat Hussain (Youth Justice Manager). Our final team members were Hank Chan, who acted as our host and coordinated the course at Shue Yan University (SYU) in Hong Kong and Sai Tarot a final year student from Beijing Normal University (BNU) in the capital who similarly acted as host and coordinator there.

Background to the visit

The catalyst for the visit was the earthquake on 12 May 2008 that caused widespread devastation and loss of life in the south-western province of Sichuan. Shortly before this, one of the province's sons, Sai Tarot, had developed an interest in solution focused practice and had made contact with Eva and me through the United Kingdom Association of Solution Focused Practice (UKASFP) email discussion list. Initially, our correspondence was in relation to helping Sai to identify solution-focused resources and the potential for applying a solution-focused approach to career development counselling. However, following the earthquake, the content of the discussion turned towards identifying possible ways the approach could assist Sichuan's inhabitants. Mamoun joined these discussions and shared his specialist knowledge and experience of providing assistance following man-made and natural disasters including earthquakes.

At this point, prompted by the guidance of Eva's brother, Dr John Chan (who was based in Hong Kong) consideration was given to the prospect of a group visiting Sichuan and delivering - via an established non-governmental organisation - solution focused sessions and training to professionals already engaged in providing support throughout the province. This was later discounted due to the logistical problems of visiting an earthquake region and the likely lengthy timescale to organise this. However, from these conversations emerged an enquiry from Sai and BNU about the possibility of a group of UK-based solution focused practitioners and trainers visiting Beijing in the near future.

In the end, it was arranged to provide four days of training at Beijing Normal University to a variety of professionals and students from the region who were already involved in assisting Sichuan inhabitants through the university's "*Heart going on*" project. Later, it was established that many of those likely to attend these training days were teachers from the province who were grappling with the difficulties of their own losses whilst attempting to support their pupils and parents affected by the earthquake. This information prompted contact with Basharat with whom I had previously worked on a school-based solution focused project. His agreement to become involved increased our team's experience of working with teachers and pupils in an educational context. Finally, the link with Hong Kong came to fruition as it was agreed to provide an additional two days of solution focused practice training at SYU to qualified counsellors and therapists. This opportunity would help the team to become more familiar with working together before the visit to Beijing. It was also aimed at initiating further interest in solution focused practice in Hong Kong.

This detailed description of events prior to the visit has been included in this account because it struck me, on reflection, that the process that took us to China shared a likeness to several features within the approach we had planned to teach. First, the visit to China started as vague goal that developed clarity as the six of us and others embarked upon a process of co-constructing the details of the visit. Second, what actually happened during the visit built upon resources that were already available and was shaped by the knowledge and skills of everyone involved - including the participants - at the training days. Third, throughout the process the progress made and the next steps identified were regularly reviewed and adapted by the team as the

circumstances changed and possibilities emerged. Fourth, in retrospect I noticed that these events did not occur as part of a formal structured process, but rather I believe through the solution focused 'culture' that was established as consequence of the six of us having a shared goal that we worked towards utilising many of the assumptions within the solution focused approach. This final feature only became apparent to me through the course of writing this article as I wrote down the details of *what* we did and *how* we did it.

Pre-Visit Questions

In the weeks prior to travelling to China my curiosity grew and several questions materialised as I began to speculate upon the visit and its possible outcomes. Between the four of us travelling from the UK, there was little experience of presenting solution focused practice training in other countries, and for me, none. Consequently, I wondered

- *Would the approach make sense in a Chinese context?*
- *How would it be received?*
- *Would the presentations and exercises I had previously utilised in the UK transfer effectively to China?"*
- *What would be the differences that I would notice when using translators?*
- *Would the participants find solution focused practice useful?*
- *Would any learning be utilised by participants in future practice with service users?*

Finally, there was the niggling question of "*What led Sai to become so interested in solution focused practice that I ended up in China?"*

The Visit

The pattern of the group working within the culture of a solution focused approach continued in Hong Kong and Beijing as we decided upon how to conduct the training days. As the most experienced solution focused trainer, I provided the oversight for the training days to ensure the content and processes we wished to present were structured in a way that utilised each member's skills and experience and was understood by, and responsive to, the wishes of the participants identified on the initial training days.

In Hong Kong, after brief introductions, Sai explained to the around 20 participants how this training event had stemmed from his curiosity about the approach and provided an overview for the two days. Bearing in mind that I had made several adjustments to his presentation late on the previous evening and that he was presenting in English, his immaculate performance indicated previously hidden abilities to present and organise that were subsequently utilised throughout the visit. Eva's fluency in Cantonese was also of assistance throughout the two days. Also, her experience of solution focused counselling and lecturing lent itself well to a presentation on the paradigm and a 'live' demonstration of asking problem focused, then solution focused, questions in response a minor problem as presented by Hank. Hank's warmth, humour and natural gregariousness greatly enhanced this demonstration and throughout the two days he maintained a fun and relaxed atmosphere for the presenters and participants. Basharat presented on the relevance of solution focused assumptions and his groupwork skills and exuberance for the approach kept everyone engaged as participants were encouraged to 'walk the scale'. Mamoun presented on the approach, its wide range of applications and the use of scaling questions. His qualifications as a doctor and psychiatrist provided a high level of credibility to the approach his charming style and relaxed approach appeared to warm him to several of the participants who had initially been skeptical of it; particularly at the end of the training when a circle was formed for a question-and-answer discussion. Throughout I regularly introduced practice exercises that encouraged participants to work in triads (worker, service user and observer) to elicit details of their fellow participant's abilities, to use the Miracle Question. I was also able to provide short

video-clips from a session I had recently conducted. Other than this, my over-riding memory of these training days was the amount and frequency of food that was provided for, and consumed by the presenters and participants during the two days. As I discovered, it's not easy to maintain focus on training after a large lunch-time Chinese meal!

The content of the sessions, and most of the team member's roles from Hong Kong were repeated in Beijing where the theme throughout these for days was solution focused possibilities for working with children and parents. Here we presented to a group of about 40 that included psychology students from the university and teachers from Sichuan. This time, the presentations were made in English and accompanied by translations into Mandarin and Sichuan dialect. We had expected this and made more use of images including an overview for the training days based on the metaphor of house-building that I had developed. That is, the 'design' (detailed goal) and 'materials' (resources) were identified by the service user, with the worker utilising solution focused assumptions as 'foundations' and solution focused techniques as 'scaffolding' throughout the session. Also, I enhanced an exercise (from Mark McKergow) of drawing pictures of "*me having fun*", "*me at work*" and "*me after this course supposing everything has gone really well*" to provide a fun and informative way for the participants to begin thinking about the approach and practicing some of the techniques. The training days also included a sprinkling of Chinese proverbs that appeared to be aligned to solution focused practice. These included "*A journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step*"; utilised to introduce solution focused scaling and the concept of 'small steps'. We finally included was a presentation by Mamoun demonstrating how the approach can assist professionals help with both typical adult and child responses to traumatic events and support themselves and their colleagues. Understandably, many of the students and professionals struggled to keep focus on this highly emotive part of the training though a quick trip by Basharat to the nearby student canteen for a variety of biscuits and cakes appeared to ease their anxieties and assist their concentration levels.

Post Visit Thoughts

All of the questions I had before the trip to China were answered during the six days of training. The exercises previously used in the UK were either presented in the same format, or slightly altered to accommodate language differences. In both cases, the participants engaged quickly with the practice tasks and were able to identify the strengths and abilities of their exercise partner, the details of their 'miracle day'; and implement solution focused scaling. Following this they engaged in discussion about the differences and possible benefits of such an approach in comparison with their traditional practice. Also, similar to my training experiences from the UK, the qualified counsellors and therapists required more time before beginning practice exercises and afterwards spent more time examining their previously learned assumptions about therapy, with some struggling to envisage significant change could occur in a short period of time. In contrast, the students and teachers in Beijing appeared less constrained by previous teaching, simply wanting to be told what to do in the exercises and to get on with it. They then determined from this whether they believed it would be useful to them or not in their future practice. Finally, the questions asked of the presenters by the participants matched those that were typically voiced in the UK including *What if the client says they wished they were dead or someone else was alive?* and *What if the client wants to talk about the problem?* I found little evidence of cultural or language differences affecting the impact of the presentations or participant responses and in hindsight this answer should have been apparent to me before I left the UK. Amongst the four of us who had travelled from the UK, each of whom who already practised and promoted the solution focused approach: only one person had been born and raised in the UK. Two came to the UK in their teenage years, from Hong Kong and Pakistan respectively, and another arrived from Syria as an adult. Indeed, my observations and the comments from my fellow trainers indicated that our own ethnic and cultural background differences did not seem to influence or alter either our understanding of solution focused practice or our utilisation of the approach with service users from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The use of translators in Beijing had led to several minor adaptations being made to the presentations and discussions. Notably, much of the discussion and practice took place in small groups facilitated by one of the presenters where the student's language of choice could be used. Also, due to the use of translator each presenter had more time was available to formulate responses to questions and we learned through experience that the introductions to solution focused concepts and exercises needed to be succinct to ensure the translation was not over-arduous and unnecessarily time consuming for the participants. However, for several of the students who appreciated speed some of the presentations were not succinct enough, as I found, on one occasion, when demonstrating how to ask the Miracle Question with a typically measured delivery. When I commented their faces appeared as if I had been 'murdering them' slowly, they nodded in unison.

As for the participants finding the training helpful and informative for their future practice with service users, their responses indicated that this was generally the case. In their discussions with presenters and responses to the evaluation forms, the participants in Hong Kong noted several different ways they could integrate solution focused practice into their work and gave their highest scores to the content and usefulness of the training. Students in Beijing commented,

"Some concrete techniques are very useful such as miracle q and scaling I think I will use them in future"

"The most amazing thing happened to me that I can see brighter aspects of the person"

The students in Beijing were also willing to quickly use their learning outside the training sessions. For example, one student informed us she had used a solution focused scaling question with her boyfriend, following the second day of training, to ascertain the status of their relationship, to identify what he liked and what small changes could be made to improve it. The speed was astonishing bearing in mind this was accomplished during a short journey in a lift! Also, in Beijing some of the students used the training in their contact with services users and agreed to be filmed about their findings. Further details on the evaluation of the training days in Hong Kong and Beijing are on the "China" page at www.usefulconversations.com the site also contains video clips in both English and Mandarin of comments from several Beijing students who used their learning with friends and service users, made two days after the training had ended. However, my favourite memory is of a teacher who had come from the Sichuan region smiling and laughing as she engaged in the exercises and thanking each of us for the possibilities we had given to her to take back for the children and parents she worked with.

Lastly, during a quiet part of an evening in Hong Kong I finally managed to ask Sai what led him to become interested in solution focused practice in the first place. Sai explained that he had been given an assignment to write about a model of therapy and had picked out Bill O'Connell's (2003) book "Handbook of Solution-Focused Therapy" from the Beijing Normal University library. He found the approach interesting and began to use apply his learning in both his personal and professional life. My curiosity got the better of me so I asked "How come you chose that particular book?" to which he replied "I had to submit the assignment the following day and it was the thinnest book on the shelf"! The various implications of his answer for brevity in therapy, writing and training has remained with me ever since.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

O'Connell, B. and Palmer, S. (Eds) (2003) *Handbook of Solution Focused Therapy*. London. Sage.