

Matthias Varga von Kibéd

Solution-Focused Transverbality: How to keep the Essence of the Solution-Focused Approach by extending it

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Summary:

As the Solution-Focused Approach of the BFTC Milwaukee School is expanding, spreading to ever new professional realms, certain essentials may be endangered in its transmission. The idea of Solution-Focused Transverbality is proposed as a concept that may be helpful both to keep the essentials in method and attitude for the Solution-Focused Approach and to expand it to, as well as transform it for, new fields of application. Tetralemma work, the Solution Geometric Interview and Systemic Structural Constellations are used to exemplify these ideas.

I]

Steve de Shazer was a man with a vision - although he never would have phrased it that way. His special gift to condense useful observations into clear patterns and to dedicate years of hard work after to make the Solution-Focused work even more simple and more easy to teach, lies at the very foundations of this approach.

'Everything I learned I stole from Insoo' was one of his ways to acknowledge the enormous influence that the ingenious practice of Solution-Focused interviewing in the work of his wife, Insoo Kim Berg, had on his way of thinking and acting. Still, sometimes the importance of Steve's ability to go to the methodological roots and essential principles of the approach that he and Insoo (in collaboration with their co-workers from the BFTC Milwaukee) formed over the years is not given its full credit.

Steve's contribution is in a certain sense at the same time theoretical and practical - in a way where he found his closest intellectual relative in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. 'All explanation has to go away and only description take its place' is one of Wittgensteins famous dicta in his 'Philosophical Investigations'. Steve lived and exemplified this teaching for the field of therapy and consultation.

II]

As the Solution-Focused approach was so successful that it kept and keeps spreading to an enormous diversity of different fields (this congress bearing proof to some of these recent developments) new modifications and combinations, variations and implementations of this approach appear all the time. While this process is necessary and natural, it contains some danger of loss. Thus it seems appropriate to exchange ideas about which elements and aspects might be especially useful and suitable to not only keeping the spirit and the logical clarity of the SFBT approach alive but to allow it to develop in a natural way among all these useful new developments around it. (I'll use here the abbreviation 'SFBT approach' not only for the therapeutical applications but also for the use in consultation, social work, teaching etc.)

III]

In this brief paper I would like to make some remarks on aspects that seem useful to me in this respect. As I'm myself 'guilty' of one of these combinations of the Solution-Focused approach with other methods- developing in cooperation with my wife Insa Sparrer, (who introduced the idea of combining SFBT with constellations in the first place) the *Systemic Structural Constellations* (SySt)¹, I'll introduce the concept of *transverbal language* that has become a fundamental concept of our structural constellations approach. I then will extend this notion to the idea of *Solution-Focused transversality*, hoping that this concept has something to offer for the question of keeping and developing the liveliness of the BFTC approach.

In a preliminary fashion the concepts of transversality, transverbal language, Solution-Focused transversality and their relation to the SFBT approach can be characterised as follows:

(A) Transverbality

...means going beyond the verbal and the nonverbal in a way that encompasses both and extends them by irreducible aspects of groups of persons in a specific way. This extension is connected with possibilities for forming models of systems behaviour by groups of persons. Scenic methods are primary fields of application for the concept of transversality. We will briefly hint at in which way aspects of transversality are implicitly contained in a good SFBT practice and in which way transversality in a fuller version as appearing in scenic methods, especially in the SySt approach, may be helpful for developing the SFBT approach further and for transferring it to new

¹ In this text the term "Systemic Structural Constellations" (SySt) stands for that as it was developed by the author and Insa Sparrer (Sparrer, 2004). SySt is a registered trade mark.

fields. *Tetralemma work* and the idea of the *tetralemma constellation* can be used to exemplify this.

(B) *Transverbal language*

...looks at scenic methods as a specific example, and at many everyday aspects of human behaviour in groups and communities as processes that can in a useful way be regarded as generalised linguistic processes, going *beyond verbal and nonverbal expression* by making use of certain perceptual abilities specific to human groups as *model systems* (cf *representative perception* later in this paper). Role playing, use of theatre principles, sociodrama, sculpture and constellation work can be seen as examples.

We will briefly consider in which way SFBT on the one hand already contains some aspects of the transverbal language and, on the other hand how certain formats of SySt work, especially Insa Sparrers *Solution Geometric Interview* as an expansion of Insoo Kim Berg's methodology for *Solution-Focused group interviews* expands the possibilities of the SFBT approach.

(C) *We will use these ideas at the end of this paper to propose a concept of Solution-Focused transversality*

... as a possibility to protect and transmit essential aspects of the SFBT approach. We will by this make clear in which sense we consider any more or less purely linguistic analysis centered on verbal and nonverbal expression in the usual sense as insufficient for an explication of the core of SFBT.

Before looking at some details of these ideas I will touch certain in my view basic aspects of the SF approach.

Let's start with compliments and miracles.

IV]

Although the *miracle question* is seen by many as the center of the SFBT, Steve always stressed the indispensability of the *break* and the *compliments* according to his experience and to research results. At least in the German speaking regions the notion of compliment generated a lot of misunderstandings as it usually was translated as "Komplimente"- but 'Komplimente' in German have a clear touch of unsincerity and are much closer to 'flattery' than are 'compliments' in English and American usage. In Steve's practice, the ability to use compliments in a suitable way in the Solution-Focused interview required a high observational skill not only to discover admirable resources the clients had already, but also to use a phrasing by mentioning them in a way the clients would be able to agree with.

Here lies one of many truly Ericksonian aspects of Steve's and Insoo's approach: compliments should be seen (and rather be translated) as *appreciative observations* and phrased in the client's language. This at the same time constitutes a possibility for connecting SFBT with ideas from Virginia Satir and Carl Robert Rogers.

The ability to give the right type of compliments in an acceptable language is only partially a technical element- it requires the experience and observational skill usually learned in many years of practical work as well as the attitude gained by that. But as Steve said 'without the right attitude it's not even a good technique', thus making attitude a part of a decent technique.

V]

This already constitutes a strong change of the notion of technique. Using the ordinary meaning of the word, the central role of the compliments already combines in a way technical and non-technical aspects, and thus requires at the same time a language centered approach and a going beyond it by developing observational abilities and a different attitude; and they are at the same time 'simple but not easy', as Steve liked to say.

The usual way of looking at the SFBT approach is often hindered by too narrow a restriction to the linguistic patterns in the sense of verbal language. For this I'd like to stress what seen from the structural constellations point of view are the *transverbal aspects of the famous miracle question*.

VI]

The miracle question doesn't exist' was one of the rather provocative remarks of Steve at the occasion of one of the conferences on constructivism in Heidelberg '-there is only the process of asking it!' Thus in order to understand the miracle question one has to look at the *process of its application in the language game of SFBT*. This process should be distinguished from the use of the *future perfect* as the analogy that was proposed by McKergow and Jackson in their book 'The Solution Focus'.

Their's is an exposition of the Solution-Focused view that gives a very useful didactic simplification of the SFBT approach that had many good effects for opening further up the field of management and consultation to it. The title already avoids the definition of the SFBT approach as either therapy or consultation - Steve de Shazer once said concerning this definitional question 'Let's just call it 'it' !'.

VII]

At the same time some of the didactic means used by McKergow and Jackson contain the danger of losing certain essential aspects for the sake of easier teaching. The fu-

ture perfect analogy doesn't contain the subtle and at the same time powerful modal aspects of the miracle question. Let's make the difference clear:

Considering a client who wants to successfully complete a business project, the change from 'I want to have success with this project' as an expression of his aims to the future sentence 'I will be successful with this project' would only constitute some sort of positive thinking- something Steve abhorred and saw as totally unrelated to the SFBT approach.

The future perfect sentence here would be 'I will have had successfully completed the project.' While this maybe a useful framing of an autohypnotic trance state for exploring future possibilities, it still is of course far from the process of interviewing in the Solution-Focused style.

We come closer by using (like McKergow and Jackson do) questions of the 'How will you notice/find out that"-type to a conditional version of the future perfect. Thus 'If you will have had success with the project, what will you notice that is different? What will you do that is different? What will others notice that is different?' would constitute such *conditional future perfect questions*.

But still we have lost a lot of the in our view essential subtleties of the miracle question as a process:

(1)

The effectivity of the miracle question as a modified version of Erickson's crystal ball technique is closely connected with the expertise in carefully *pac-ing the client's access* to her resources. In order to do this you need the modal versions like irrealis and optativus changing into the indicativus at a suitable point of time closely mirroring the client's verbal and nonverbal expression in the interview.

Thus when a client still seems to have a rather loose connection with her resources you might not only start the central part of asking the miracle question by the usual 'just suppose ... a miracle' but continue with 'had happened and ...' instead of '...happens', but even go on to 'how would you find out' while with clearer signs of having gone to the experience of the 'miracle state' on the side of the client you would change in a not altogether grammatical fashion to factual statements 'happens' and 'how do you find out'.

This possibility alone makes already rendering of the grammatical status of the miracle question as *future perfect* already *inadequate as a full analysis*.

(2)

Asking the miracle questions is connected with the process of interrupting causal connections by the miracle's happening 'in the middle of the night' underlined by the aspect of surprise and unpredictability entailed by the notion of

'miracle'. None of these *modal aspects of imagination beyond causal connections* is describable by a future perfect alone.

(3)

The use of interruptions and pauses while asking the miracle question was often hinted at by Steve as an important part of the effectivity of asking it. Together with a strong emphasis on the hypothetical character given initially in this question by the intonation of the 'suppose...'-part of the question, the miracle question contains a *hypnotic frame for inner search processes* with a higher degree of creative freedom than the former everyday experiences of the client.

(4)

The miracle question is embedded in questions about exceptions in the past. This generates a grammatical mode that in Structural Constellations Work is called the *aramaic mode* because there is, according to Pinkas Lapide's comments to the jewish exegesis of the gospels, a grammatical mode in the arameic language that exactly suites this purpose. This mode expresses the partial manifestation of a future event in the present as indication that a certain possibility really exists. The typical SFBT questions about parts of the miracle that have happened already before serve exactly this aim. This seems to be much more exact as a version of the structure of asking the miracle question than a future perfect.

Therefore, we would call the grammatical form analogous to the miracle question 'the arameic mode'.

(5)

Future and future perfect alike can relate to a point in time like a goal or an aim and its attainment- but, as Insa Sparrer has pointed out in much detail, in her book 'Wunder, Lösung und System' *miracles are states* (and one, not many).

VIII]

Thus, to reduce the process of asking the miracle question (for which much more essential differences could be pointed out and were so by Steve) to a mere future perfect, while being a smart didactics for beginners, at the same time would constitute a relevant loss in the SFBT approach. (Still, careful exposition of the use of SFBT language like in Yvonne Dolan's "One small step" is of high value to everybody trying to find her way into the field- and likewise for the transfer of the approach to the language of management the work of McKergow and Jackson opened the door to many.)

It should be mentioned however, that the frequent *confusion of goal and miracle* - eg. in some parts of NLP-literature - is effectively avoided by the future perfect analogy.

On the other hand, the future perfect seems to me to be closer to the *algorithmic didactics* used in teaching the basics of NLP where the degree of choice and freedom of the methods is highly restricted- "algorithmic" meaning here close to a flow diagram as a sort of recipe . SySt on the other hand uses an *axiomatic didactics* where there is a choice of possible basic forms and interventions built on them without any general rule in which order to apply them. (Axiomatic systems of sufficient complexity surpass in a certain sense the realm of the algorithmic decidable.) Louis Cauffman has proposed to describe the pattern of the SF interview in a new way that differs from the usual exactly in the way axiomatic calculi differ from algorithms -and tool boxes from recipes.

IX]

What seems especially precious in Steve's usage and way of asking the miracle question is something that easily gets lost when we try to transmit and codify the process by purely verbal, especially by written means. Naturally it will for the same reason be difficult to touch this aspect in written form here. However, as there is this track on Solution Focus and Scenic Methods at this conference, there is a chance that the idea will be understood.

X]

We see the Structural Constellations Approach (SySt, developed by Insa Sparrer and the author) as one form of scenic methods, building on what was developed in psychodrama, sociodrama and sociometry (Jacob Levy Moreno), sculpture work, family reconstruction, organisational reconstruction work (Virginia Satir), family constellations (Ruth McClendon, Les Kadis, Thea Schönfelder, Bert Hellinger), organisational constellations (Gunthard Weber), forum theatre work (Augusto Boal) and others. The SySt approach is characterised by combining the scenic methods especially in the style of Virginia Satir with an Ericksonian use of language and trance, systemic methods from the Milano and Heidelberg school and the Solution-Focused approach. The main emphasis in SySt lies on a constructivist methodology and the possibility of *hidden work* (where only the client has to be informed about the contents of the work).

XI]

All these different scenic methods can in a fruitful form be considered as *generalised linguistic frames* where the verbal is expanded beyond the nonverbal language of gestures and facial expression, beyond the prosodic qualities of verbal language like pitch and intonation, to a realm that in the SySt approach we have defined as *trans-verbal language*.

Transverbal language is defined by us as a language in the sense of regular behaviour (a) *encompassing verbal and nonverbal language*, (b) having certain types of *groups of persons*- not the single person- *as primary speaker* and (c) which is founded on *representative perception*.

As to (b), it is important that the groups in question form in a sense a sort of *model system*. Whatever is modelled than becomes a possible space of interpretation. All scenic methods form such model systems but there can be also such a forming of a model system as a spontaneous phenomenon in everyday life.

As to (c), *representative perception* in the SySt approach is defined as the *spontaneous appearance of differences in proprioception and perception in members of a group forming a model system* in reasonably good correspondence to structure and to tendencies for change in the modelled system.

Systemic Structural constellations (SySt) systematically use representative perception in the groups of people that by choice of representatives (possibly without any information about role contents) and *spatial arrangements are intended to give a picture of the system* for which the model was formed.

Therefore we consider the pictures of a constellation (and likewise for other scenic methods but with less emphasis on representative perception and stronger emphasis on other aspects) to be *sentences of the transverbal language* of structural constellations.

XII]

In what sense can now the SFBT approach and especially the miracle question be seen as part of such a transverbal approach? In what sense is this potentially essential for the application, teaching and transmission of SFBT? What could be considered as a consequence of this as the *transverbal solution focus*?

I propose to look at the SFBT approach at the same time as a linguistic approach in the sense of verbal language, as a form of *semantic reactions training* in the sense of *Korzybski's General Semantics*, as a special form of inductions from *Ericksonian hypnotherapy* and as a *general attitude* to the world.

There was a lot of useful analysis of the linguistic forms of SFBT language that enormously enhanced understanding and teachability of the approach.

Therefore it is justified to look at SFBT as a linguistic approach in the sense of patterns of verbal language.

Semantic reactions in the sense of *Korzybski's* general semantics are the totality of cognitive, emotional and physiological changes brought about by linguistic behaviour. Therefore semantic reactions are much better suited to understand the effects of hypnotherapeutic use of language in the Ericksonian sense of modifying the focus of

attention and utilising natural states of trance than the usual Carnapian style semantics.

Taking Steve's famous *comparative concept of understanding* - " we can understand what `better` means without knowing what `good` means " - in the SySt approach we train the use of language in structural constellations work by developing daily habits to make small *semantic reaction differentiation exercises* (SRDE), because the differences in semantic reactions matter according to this very basic idea of Steve's.

This idea of Steve de Shazer would in my opinion make a good *corner stone for the whole of systemic thinking*.

To train people working with SFBT by e.g. asking them to develop compliments and tasks for a client during the SFBT interview's break and then discussing the merits of the proposed compliments not by criticising them but by asking which intervention might seem less risky (i.e. in less danger to be refuted by the client) and by clarifying what is hoped for by the intervention ("Intending what?") is a beautiful tradition for semantic reaction differences. In the SySt approach we have used and expanded these types of SRDEs, giving more attention to various forms of systematic variation for forming the differences.

Thus the SFBT approach can also be seen as part of the program of General Semantics.

Steve told about the origin of many SFBT ideas coming from analysis of videotapes from Erickson sessions. After it had arisen, the miracle question was seen as closely related to Erickson's *crystal ball technique*.

These and many other aspects justify looking at SFBT as a special version of Ericksonian work.

The Solution Focus is not a method or specific technique but rather a general attitude or basic point of view. It also could be seen as a language -a language never being just a method or technique but rather a net of *language games* belonging to different *forms of life* in the sense of the late Wittgenstein's "Sprachspiele" and "Lebensformen" in his "Philosophical Investigations". Therefore the SFBT approach might deepen its understanding about what constitutes a Solution-Focused way of living. In the sense of the comparative methodology hinted at in (b), this will be possible by progress in applying the SFBT approach to new fields as every successful new application will require that something is better and that we have better possibilities to deal with certain problems and pains, wishes and hopes.

Gale Miller who gave the practice of SFBT an *ethnomethodological description* (in the sense of Garfinkel) in his "Becoming Miracle Workers" has developed astute observational experiments which demonstrate convincingly the huge influence of attitudes on reactions and observations in groups. Nobody who had any experience with experiments of this sort could reasonably doubt the *importance of noticing* and taking

into regard the importance of *attitudes in SFBT* practice. Thus according to Steve's dictum on attitude and technique mentioned in the beginning such aspects of teaching must be regarded as part of teaching a decent technique.

Therefore the SFBT approach is always beyond full verbal expression as no verbal expression ever covers the totality of language, life form and attitudes towards the world and as teaching about the influence of attitudes goes beyond a mere teaching of linguistic or paratactic patterns.

I'd like to add here a remark on *transcontinuity* as part of the SFBT approach. This notion was introduced for the SFBT world as a practical possibility to apply ideas of Gregory Bateson and of Bradford Keeney by Luc Isebaert and Marie-Christine Cabié in their book "Pour une thérapie brève" and described by showing how to balance the need for homeostasis (as a principle of continuity) with making a difference (as a principle of discontinuity). (The recursive interaction/entanglement of continuity and discontinuity was given as description of the idea of transcontinuity on an EBTA conference in Bruges by Louis Cauffman.) To find out the way in which other approaches can be seen as transcontinuous often helps to bring about useful comparisons and even combinations of different forms of working with clients. In the SFBT approach the continuity is to be seen e.g. in the scaling questions, the good-enough-numbers on the scale and the standard first session formula task, while the miracle question exemplifies the importance of the sudden (and not causally explained) change in SFBT. Thus SFBT (and every stronger form of systemic work) is a *trans-continuous way of proceeding*.

Being justified in different ways none of these four aspects captures the whole of SFBT. I take therefore the idea of *transverbal solution focus* as program to discover and train aspects of the solution focus not covered by these aspects. The astonishing ability of human beings to form model systems is at the very heart of scenic methods at least since Moreno's foundational work. It is compatible with the SFBT approach and partially present in its practice. To understand this seems to me not only very helpful for training people to understand and apply the SFBT approach in its original form but also to take brave new steps in the spirit of the original approach to new realms. This section of the SOL conference should be seen as a modest expression of that vision.

Transverbal solution focus thus should mean the *conscious extension of the SFBT approach to the human ability of simulating a system's behaviour by forming model systems* with groups of persons (and the spontaneous perceptual differences arising that way, i.e. *representative perception*).

This will expand the possibilities for application and has already done so as Insa Sparrer's use of the *solution geometric interview* has demonstrated. A solution geometric interview in Sparrer's sense means a Solution-Focused group interview in the style of Insoo Kim Berg's work but with constellated (i.e. *in resourceful patterns spatially arranged*) groups of representatives (possibly mixed with original members

of the system in question). Thus Solution-Focused work with an even higher degree of discretion and the possibility to simulate the presence of the full team in absence of some of the members not by role playing but by spontaneous perceptual changes became possible which alone already opens up many new applications. (Details and case examples can be found in Insa Sparrer's "Miracle, Solution and System".)

But the transverbal solution focus also will draw attention and help teaching certain qualities (already inherent in Steve's and Insoo's work but easily overlooked as long as the analysis of verbal (and nonverbal) expression alone is seen as relevant for understanding the essence of SFBT). And we also see the beautiful possibility of scenic methods proponents becoming more interested in creative use of the SFBT approach within their own methods like Elisabeth Pfaefflin, Matthias Lauterbach and Hans-Peter Korn e.g. have begun to do for the work of Moreno. And by this, a Solution-Focused creative dialogue has started already and is developing further.

XIII]

Let's end with some remarks on tetralemma work and SFBT. *Tetralemma work* is the basis for the *tetralemma constellations*, one of the main formats in structural constellations work, but it is really independent from any explicit usage of constellation work. Being founded in patterns from early Indian and buddhist logic (the so-called negation of the tetralemma coming from Madhyamika buddhism) it is in SySt tetralemma work characterised by looking at dilemmas and conflicts with five different perspectives:

- One side of the dilemma
- The other side(s) of the dilemma (where a bipolarity instead of a full dilemma would suffice for a tetralemma process to arise)
- Both (as the principle of *hidden or unnoticed connections* between the sides of the dilemma)
- Neither (as principle of *hidden or forgotten contextual aspects of the dilemma*)
- None of these ----- and not even that! (as the principle of *reflexive interruption of patterns*)

where the only from a purely theoretical perspective at first sight mysterious fifth aspect (a non-position as the buddhists would have it) encompasses all *attitudes that allow us to transcend any context*, e.g. compassion, reflection and humour.

In "Miracle, Solution and System", Insa Sparrer explains in detail how the Solution-Focused dialogue has the problem as first and the goal and/or the exceptions in the past as second position in the SFBT interview while the process of asking the miracle question contains access to the third, fourth and fifth position. If one or more of these positions are left out in the interviewing following the introduction of the miracle,

usually the effectivity of the question is diminished. Therefore this analogy of tetralemma work and asking the miracle question is another practical example on how transverbal methods (like tetralemma work) may be useful to get a deeper understanding and expertise in the application of the Solution-Focused approach.

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