Peer-reviewed articles

Is SF a Systemic Approach?

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Abstract

This paper summarises main differences and similarities between SF and systemic approaches in deontology, theory, practice and culture. It concludes that SF practice should not be subsumed under the heading of a systemic approach.

Introduction

"Is SF a systemic approach" is a question that leads into all sorts of quagmires and muddles. It can be likened to questions like "Is Pizza a US-American dish?" It all depends on what you mean by "Pizza" and what you mean by "US-American dish".

"Systemic" describes many approaches and it is very doubtful if there is any one defining component that is always present in all systemic approaches. It is a family resemblance concept, so much that leading proponents of systemic consultants like Matthias Varga von Kibéd and Insa Sparrer call their journal "systemischer" – "more systemic". Varga von Kibéd quotes Steve de Shazer "We can know what better means without knowing what good means" (Varga von Kibéd, 2012, p. 6) and refutes any "dogmatism" (ibid.) or "fundamentalism" (Varga von Kibéd, 2012, p. 7) which would define some

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forms of consultancy as systemic and others as non-systemic. Others like "Systemische Gesellschaft" position systemic therapy (and presumably consulting) as an "independent therapeutic approach" (Systemische Gesellschaft, 1995, p. 1) and proceed to define it in theory and practice.

SF practice is in a similar place. Among members of the SOL-community, there are tendencies to label "anything that works" SF, as can be read every once in a while on the SOLUTIONS-L list-server. However, there have also been attempts at creating clarity around what is on offer when someone is "buying" SF practice. SFCT publishes its Clues which is currently in its second revision (Appendix to this journal). The International Alliance of Solution Focused Teaching Institutes (IASTI) is beginning to define certification criteria for practitioners and EBTA is working on "Solution Focused Practice Definitions" (EBTA, 2012).

Both in systemic and SF practice, the struggle to be able to say "what it is" continues. The situation seems hopelessly muddled: neither "systemic" nor "SF" is neatly defined and one could give up answering the question "is SF a systemic approach" by simply stating that it depends which kind of SF and which kind of systemic work you are looking at.

So why not be content with this answer? Even though SF and systemic work are both fuzzy-edged and undefined circles, thinking about their possible overlaps and distinction can clarify "what is on offer" for our respective clients.

This paper is about differences and similarities of the SF and systemic "fields" and the respective widths that they span. It does not presume that one approach is consistently more successful than the other – there simply are not yet any studies comparing the respective outcomes. Labelling something "not SF" or "not systemic" is often seen as a negative or derisive statement – it should not be. Describing something that is "green" as "not red" isn't a negative statement either.

In order to get a grasp on the scope of the fields, foundational writings and recordings of practical work and training sessions in both approaches were used. In both approaches there is not a lot of difference between a coaching session and

a therapy session. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper they are subsumed under "work" or "practice". The systemic field has manifold ways of practice and more publications than can be reviewed for the purposes of this article. An attempt was made to do justice to the existing diversity by including a variety of systemic practice and theory in the tradition of systemic family therapy or coaching. However, the author is aware that this can be in no way complete. Organisational approaches like Peter Senge's systems thinking (Senge, 2006) were not included.

Similarities

Deontology

Systemic and SF practice share many aspects of professional ethics or deontology – in fact, it seems that here both approaches have the most in common. There are some "outliers" in the systemic world. The work of Bert Hellinger, who considered his work systemic, (Nelles, 2005, p. 52; Hellinger, 2006) is labelled authoritarian and dogmatic by institutes like DGSF (DGSF, 2003) or Systemische Gesellschaft (2004).

Stance of the practitioner

In systemic and SF work the practitioner treats the client as the expert for the content of their request and the evaluation of what is better in their lives (SFCT, 2012; EBTA, 2012; de Jong & Berg, 1998, p. 20; de Shazer, Dolan & Korman, 2007, p. 155; Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 122; Sparrer, 2010, p. 21; Schmidt, 2005, p. 86, Systemische Gesellschaft, 1995). The practitioner is responsible for co-constructing the sessions with the client in such a way that "becoming or being better" is possible over the course of the sessions. It is important for practitioners to be respectful of the client.

Customer orientation and goal orientation

Rather than relying on a traditional "diagnosis" (be it psychiatric or an organisational diagnosis), both approaches work on the goal that the customer brings to or develops in the session. The similarity is more in what both approaches reject than in how they deal with eliciting customers' goals. (Systemische Gesellschaft, 1995, p. 2; Ludewig, 2009, p. 83; Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 125; Sparrer, 2010, p. 33; SFCT, 2012; EBTA, 2012, p. 4; de Shazer, Dolan & Korman, 2007, p. 40, de Jong & Berg, 1998, p. 69). The problem does not have to be explored (Ludewig, 2009, p. 78–80; de Shazer, Dolan & Korman, 2007, p. 2). In systemic and SF practice the focus is on "enlarging the scope of possibilities" of the client (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 116; Shazer, Dolan & Korman, 2007, p. 2).

Resource orientation

SF and systemic practitioners assume that clients have resources that can be used to help them create a better future for themselves. The task of the practitioner is to help the client uncover and acknowledge these (Ludewig, 2009, p. 99; Sparrer, 2010, p. 21; Systemische Gesellschaft, 1995; de Shazer, Dolan & Korman, 2007, p. 155; SFCT, 2012; de Jong & Berg, 1998, p. 31; EBTA, 2012, p. 3) so that the client can utilise them.

Theory

History

The work of the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, of Gregory Bateson and of Milton Erickson are mentioned as common "ancestors" of both systemic and SF work (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 20; Cade, 2007, p. 31; Nardone, 2004, p. 67; Jackson & McKergow, 2002, p. 182). There are several attempts at "family trees" with different lineages. Nardone shows SF as an independent branch (Nardone, 2004,

p. 67) while Ludewig seems to count SF as part of the history of the systemic approach (Ludewig, 2009).

Causality

Looking for root causes of human problems is rejected. Systemic work assumes that it is not possible to determine cause and effect due to the interconnected and recursive nature of the system of human relations. The system is seen as the construction of an observer revolving around the issue the client brings to the session and not as something that exists independently (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 90). SF strives for simplicity (de Shazer, 1986, p. 57) and aims to stay at the surface, needing no causal explanations for a problem in order to find a solution (McKergow & Korman, 2009, p. 38). It is not necessary to know anything about the problem in SF work.

Practice

Questions

SF and systemic practice use some of the same questions – systemic work uses a wider array of questions than SF work and some questions used in systemic practice are not used in SF (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 147; Cauffman & Dierolf, 2006, pp. 34–36). SF questions (and practice in general) are sometimes seen as a subset of systemic questions (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 124).

Actions / Experiment

Both SF and systemic work include the possibility of an "experiment" the client can undertake between sessions (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, pp. 184–185; de Jong & Berg, 1998, p. 111).

Culture

When coaches and therapists of both approaches meet, it becomes apparent that there is a similar (yet not the same) culture and attitude of the practitioners. As "non-experts" practitioners take up a stance of modesty. The ability of the practitioner to influence the life of the clients is not overestimated. In systemic work the conversations between practitioner and clients are seen as something that can perturb the system (and not linearly influence it) (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 124). In SF and systemic work the client is responsible for making the appropriate changes to his or her situation "in doing or viewing" (Jackson & McKergow, 2002, p. 16) between and during sessions (de Jong & Berg, 1998, p. 107; Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 205).

Differences

Deontology

SF work is more radical in focusing on what the client wants and nothing else. The practitioner helps the client to figure out a "workable goal" – something that is important to the client, phrased positively in interactional terms, realistic yet challenging in the scope of the client's influence and allowing small steps (de Jong & Berg, 1998, pp. 71–76; Cauffman & Dierolf, 2006, p. 62). The goal of the sessions is to help the client achieve this workable goal, or any other goal that the client develops during the course of the sessions. The collaboration between practitioner and client ends when these goals are met (de Shazer, 1991, p. 57). Other goals the practitioner might have for the development of the client are rejected (de Shazer, Dolan & Korman, 2007, pp. 1–2).

While systemic literature will usually concur (Ludewig, 2009, p. 82; Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 148) there are conceptual differences. Schlippe & Schweitzer (2007, p. 210) warns against a too tight focus on the initial elicited goal as such practice might reduce the opportunities for development of the client. It is also more important that the consequences of

reaching the goal for the whole "ecological system" are actively elicited and taken into account by the practitioner (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, pp. 210–212) which can lead to questions like: "If you reached your goal, who would react negatively?" which would not be asked in SF practice.

In Bernd Schmid's live-coaching session (Schmid, 2008) he states that it makes sense to deal with the presented issue as representative of a more general "steering problem". Schmid takes it as more efficient to treat the issue as an example of this more general issue, thereby looking for the "problem behind the problem" rather than eliciting what would be there instead.

Theory

It is very difficult to ascertain differences and similarities in theory as both approaches look back on significant theoretical innovations and changes in theory over the course of their development. Often criticisms of the other approach relate to previous or outdated versions and we hope to have taken enough care not to have fallen into this trap.

Structuralist / Post-Structuralist

SF is clearly a post-structuralist approach: there is no assumed relevant "deep structure" or otherwise hidden meaning. This has been a consistent claim in foundational writings since at least 1984 (de Shazer, 1984; de Shazer, 1991). It seems that in systemic theory there are structuralist as well as post-structuralist versions. The post-structuralist view seems to be more current. There is even a development toward seeing language as the relevant system (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 95; Stierlin, 1990) which seems close to de Shazer's use of Wittgenstein's philosophy (de Shazer, 1991, p. 48).

Systems Theory

SF sees the relevant system as the system of practitioner and client (including the team behind the one-way mirror if present)

in conversation (de Shazer, 1984, de Shazer, 1991, p. 57). Their cooperation is seen as useful for facilitating change and it is in this system that change becomes visible. For SF practice it is not important to know anything about systems theory nor relevant to apply any insights to the client system.

In systemic literature there are different understandings about what constitutes the relevant system: the system consisting of the clients (Nelles, 2005, p. 61; de Shazer, 1991, p. 31), the system consisting of the interactions of the clients (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 50), the system of interactions of the clients as observed by the practitioner or the system of interactions of practitioner and client and its effects on the client system (Ludewig, 2009, p. 56). The last versions identify as "second order" systemic practices (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 53).

Most training institutes for systemic practice and most textbooks on systemic practice include a long section on systems theory, concepts like autopoiesis and homeostasis, patterns of systems to look out for in practice etc. The work of Niklas Luhmann is quoted frequently (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, pp. 70–74; Simon, 2007). Some systemic constellation approaches use so called "systemic principles" as helpful guidelines for the practitioners (Daimler et al., 2008, p. 53–61) or more questionably as absolute ordering mechanisms (Nelles, 2005, p. 64). In any case is it safe to assume that in systemic practice it is relevant for the practitioner to know something about the general behaviour of systems.

Part of systems theory is the idea that systems strive for stability and equilibrium: homeostasis (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, pp. 61–62). In systemic practice it is assumed that systems (whichever version) cannot be influenced in a predictable way, they can only be "perturbed", shaken up, to find a new, maybe better, equilibrium. On the contrary, SF theory assumes that change is happening all the time and that it is the practitioner's task to notice and amplify it (Jackson & McKergow, 2002, pp. 26–27; SFCT, 2012). In systemic practice the "symptom" or "problem" can be seen as a positive attempt to stabilise the system (Stierlin, 1990,

p. 273) and therefore practitioners appreciate the "symptom-bearer's" efforts. This practice is not used in SF.

Constructivist /Constructionist

SF is a social constructionist approach which assumes that by using language we co-create our social reality (de Shazer, 1991, p. 73). This is different from the radical constructivist view held by many proponents of systemic practice and theory in which the focus is on the individual and the fit of his or her cognitive constructions and the environment (once removed from inner representations taken as "true" or "false"). However, some systemic practitioners also identify as social constructionists.

Enactivism /Representationalism

SF theory sees communication as the active co-construction of meaning and not as the transmission of information (Korman, 2008). As McKergow & Korman (2009) and Dierolf (2011) have noted there seems to be a close proximity to discursive psychology. The basic idea is that our conversations with ourselves and the conversations with others are the same thing and that it makes no sense to distinguish inner and outer processes or give precedence to the description of the "inner" in helping conversations (Dierolf, 2011, p. 38). If we take seriously that meaning is co-constructed and perception is something people do together (Korman, 2010, p. 111), it becomes difficult to integrate concepts like an observer (be it first or second order). More currently there have been attempts at linking enactive or embodied philosophy to SF theory. SF theory seems to reject the idea of an outside content that is represented in the mind (Dierolf, 2011, pp. 38–39) – a concept that seems well and alive in systemic theory and practice.

History

Systemic and SF approaches share a common history. References are made to systems theory, Milton Erickson, the work of Gregory Bateson and the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto (Cade, 2007; Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007). However, with de Shazer's (1991) turn to post-structuralism and language philosophy many of the positions held by the above became obsolete. Systemic practice grew out of the above theories and continues to accept their validity – in a diverse combination of heterogeneous philosophies (Systemische Gesellschaft, 1995).

Practice

Homogeneous practice / heterogeneous practice

SF practice can be observed easily by watching training tapes available through SFBTA. Videos of systemic practice are hard to come by. The only one available was Bernd Schmid's tape (Schmid, 2008). In addition, the following is based on the author's observations of systemic practice in workshops and collaboration with systemic colleagues and on what systemic literature states as best practice for their approach.

It seems that SF practice is rather consistent even when applied by different practitioners, as can be seen in the available recordings. The various instances of systemic practice observed by the author seemed to vary much more.

Elements of practice

Therapeutic (and presumably coaching) practice can be described as consisting of the practitioner's asking questions and formulations (Bavelas & Tomori, 2007, p. 25). There is some research on what SF practitioners do in their practice (Bavelas & Tomori, 2007) yet little or no documented analysis of systemic practice.

Questions

SF practitioners almost exclusively use questions about clients' goals and resources or exceptions (de Jong & Berg, 1998, p. 17; de Shazer, Dolan & Korman, 2007, p. 5; Korman, 2010, p. 108). These questions are also asked by systemic practitioners (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 147; Schmidt, 2005, pp. 102 & 104). Systemic practice, however, also includes many questions that SF practice would not use:

"Questions about the construction of the current reality which clarify current patterns of relationship" (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 146, translation by the author of this paper), especially those which ask about what is not wanted like: "What would we have to do for this to become a failure?" In SF practice this question would not be asked since it focuses the attention of practitioner and client on what is not wanted, on possible or feared problems whose prevention or solutions do not have anything to do with creating a better future for the client. The context and client's explanations of the problem (ibid.) is also not elicited in SF practice for the same reasons. In systemic practice, there is a class of questions labelled "problem oriented questions" (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 148) which elicit what could be done to make the problem worse. These questions are also not customary in SF practice. Another set of questions that is recommended in systemic practice and not in SF practice is about the advantage the client has from keeping the problem, sometimes called secondary gain of the problem. SF assumes that clients want to change and cooperate.

Formulations

SF formulations (what practitioners answer, repeat or para- phrase rather than what they ask) tend to focus on the positive (Bavelas & Tomori, 2007, p. 37) and aim at retaining the exact words that the client uses (de Jong & Berg, 1998, pp. 23–24). Self-disclosure of the practitioner is discouraged (de Jong & Berg, 1998, pp. 29–30) as is anything that takes away

the focus on what the client wants and his or her resources for getting there.

Systemic practice has a wide array of possible interventions from self-disclosure of the practitioner (observable in Schmid, 2008) to the use of stories, metaphors and other content that the practitioner brings into the session.

Many of the interventions which originate from the practitioner in systemic practice stem from the idea of the usefulness of hypotheses. They are generated by a thorough analysis of the client situation: organigrams, genograms, questionnaires or ad hoc during the session through the practitioner's knowledge of system processes and mechanisms. These informed hypotheses are offered to the client who then decides whether they are useful or not. If not, they are dropped immediately (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, pp. 127–136). Second order systemic work is aware of the fact that the practitioner as observer is always also part of the client-practitioner system. Other than in SF, taking an "as-if" outside view is seen as helpful. The idea behind this is related to the concept of homeostasis – the client system can be "perturbed" by offering different accounts of the same story or other ideas and change can ensue.

Analogic / metaphoric techniques

In addition to the traditional SF tasks, in systemic practice clients can sometimes be asked to conduct rituals using non-verbal material, images etc. (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2007, p. 191). As with hypotheses, these rituals are suggested by the practitioner and if they are not useful to the client, they are forgotten immediately. While images and material can also be used in SF practice (Berg & Steiner, 2003, p. 78 ff.), they are used more as a tool to facilitate conversation between client and practitioner than for rituals suggested by the practitioner.

Culture

One of the main differences between SF and systemic cultures of practice and theory is that SF tends to strive for simplicity – Occam's razor is quoted in many publications while systemic theory can become rather complex. One of the reasons is the above mentioned necessity of knowing something about the behaviour of systems which is rejected by SF and taken on board by systemic practice.

Conclusion

So is SF a systemic approach? There are many significant similarities. However, there are also many equally significant and mutually exclusive differences. These are mainly about theories and practice that SF does without. From a systemic perspective it can therefore make sense to view SF as a systemic approach. After all, SF practice could be seen as a subset of systemic practice – SF practice merely does not do all of the things that systemic practice will. What speaks against viewing SF as a systemic approach is the fact that SF theory and practice rejects many of these systemic ideas and practices and not only refrains from engaging in them. This has traditionally not been communicated enough, as Mark McKergow and Harry Korman state in their ground breaking paper (McKergow & Korman, 2009). From the vantage point of an SF practitioner and theorist, it is clearer and less muddled not to subsume SF under the heading of "systemic approach". For SF practitioners, subsuming SF practice under "systemic approach" is a bit like the answer of our favourite pizza waiter who, when asked whether a certain pizza is vegetarian, says in an inimitable Italian accent: "yes, it is vegetarian and there is also meat on it".

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