Reviews

RESEARCH REVIEWS

By Gilbert J. Greene

Grant, A. M., Cavanagh, M. J., Kleitman, S., Spence, G., Lakota, M. & Yu, N. (2012).

Development and Validation of the Solution-Focused Inventory.

Journal of Positive Psychology, *7*, 333–348.

When positive psychology first became a formal speciality in psychology I immediately thought about how consistent SF therapy is with this approach to the study of strengths of people, organisations and communities. Over the years I have been disappointed in how little mention of the SF approach there has been in the positive psychology literature, though in recent years this seems to be changing. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (JPP) was first published in 2006 and has contained a few articles dealing with the SF approach. In a recent issue of JPP Grant, et al. discuss the development and validation of the Solution-Focused Inventory (SFI). The purpose of the SFI is to measure the psychological mechanisms underpinning the SF approach (SFA). In reviewing the literature the authors discuss a previous attempt to develop such a measure by Smock, et al. (2010), who posited that there are three factors theoretically underpinning the SFA: (1) clearly identifying the solution; (2) awareness of exceptions to the problem; and (3) developing a hope in the future (Grant, et al., p. 336), and developed a 22–item instrument to measure them. However, Smock, et al. found eight instead of three factors. In addition, they did not report test-retest reliability and predictive validity.

Grant, et al. posited that there are three factors theoretically underpinning the SFA: (1) a focus towards desired goal states (GO); (2) a focus on recognising and utilising strengths and resources (resource activation RA); and (3) a focus disengaging from problems and problem-focused thinking (problem disengagement PD) (Grant, et al., p. 336). The SFI instrument Grant, et al. created to measure these three factors initially consisted of 14 items. The SFI was administered to 242 legal and health professionals participating in an intervention study of coaching and leadership and 322 undergraduate psychology students who participated in the study for course credit. In a first study the authors used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test their model with the professionals and the students separately. The analyses resulted in the authors reducing the instrument to 12 items. Further analyses supported the existence of the three factors and found that each factor as well as the SFI overall has acceptable internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha reliability ranging from .68 to .78 for the factors and .84 for the SFI overall.

To test for convergent validity the authors correlated the SFI with several measures: the Satisfaction With Life (SWL) was used to measure satisfaction with life, positive well being was measured by the Positive Well Being Scale (PWBS), perspective taking was measured by using the Perspective-taking Scale (PTS), resilience and hardiness were measured by using the Cognitive Hardiness Scale (CHS), and psychopathology was measured by using the Depression and Stress Scale (DASS). For this analysis only the data from the professionals were used. All the correlations were statistically significant at the $< .001$ level with the SFI negatively correlated with the DASS and positively correlated with all the other measures as expected, thus supporting the convergent validity.

For test-retest reliability the authors used a subset of data from the professionals who had been randomly assigned to a waitlist group who took the SFI at two different times with 20 weeks between times. Statistical analysis found good test-retest reliability ($r = .84$). In addition, the coaching intervention was found to be effective when those that

received the intervention were compared to the control group. Grant, et al. conclude that their study supports the validity and reliability of the SFI, and like all good researchers point out limitations of the study and the need for further research. However, unlike the Smock, et al. study, Grant, et al. did not discuss the potential uses of the SFI which would have been helpful.

Antle, B. F., Christensen, D. N., van Zyle, M. A. & Barhee, A. P. (2012).

The impact of the Solution Based Casework (SBC) practice model on federal outcomes in public child welfare.

Child Abuse & Neglect, 36, 342–353.

SBC is an evidence-supported approach to case management in the child welfare system and is based on three theoretical foundations: (1) the family life cycle; (2) relapse prevention; and (3) SF family therapy. The following are the assumptions on which SBC is based: "(1) full partnership with the family is a critical and vital goal for each and every family case; (2) the partnership for protection should focus on the patterns of everyday life of the family; and (3) solutions should target the preventions skills needed to reduce the risk in those everyday life situations" (p. 343). SBC has been implemented statewide in Kentucky in the U.S. There have been four previous studies of SBC. Previous research has found that SBC has been effective in helping families achieve goals and objectives, especially with families with long-term involvement in the child welfare system, and reducing recidivism. These studies have also supported the critical importance of supervision and that clients reported having positive experiences with case managers using the SBC approach. The study reported in this article used a quasi-experimental design comparing cases in a high adherence-SBC group to a low adherence-SBC group. The total sample consisted of 4,559 child welfare cases

randomly selected from the state's Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process from 2004–2008.

A 178-item CQI instrument developed by the state child welfare agency was used to measure the use of SBC as well as the outcomes of safety, permanency, and wellbeing. Thirty-three items of the CQI instrument measure adherence to SBC. Other items on the CQI instrument measure the outcome variables of safety, permanency, and wellbeing and these items were developed so they would be consistent with federal government definitions. Cases were reviewed by independent raters trained in using the 178-item CQI instrument and all raters were employees of the state child welfare agency.

Factor analysis of the 33 SBC items and the rest of the CQI items resulted in four factors of the SBC instrument and seven factors for the CQI instrument. Pearson correlations among these subscales were statistically significant at the $< .001$ level. Regression analysis found that components of SBC significantly predicted the outcomes of safety, permanency, and wellbeing better than any other casework process factors. T-tests were used to compare the high adherence-SBC to the low adherence-SBC groups on the outcome variables of safety, permanency, and wellbeing. Those in the high adherence-SBC group had significantly better outcomes on safety, permanency, and wellbeing when compared to those in the low adherence-SBC group. Thus, families that received high-fidelity SBC experienced outcomes that exceeded federal standards and families that received low-fidelity SBC experienced outcomes that did not meet federal standards.

Lagana-Riordan, C., Aguilar, J. P., Franklin, C., Streeter, C. L., Kim, J. S., Tripodi, S. J. & Hopson, L. M. (2011).

At-risk students' perceptions of traditional schools and a solution-focused public alternative school.

Preventing School Failure, 55, 105–114.

Many students at risk of school failure and dropout have problems in traditional educational settings. In the U.S. many

school districts have created schools that provide an alternative to traditional schools to try to meet the needs of many at-risk students. One alternative school was established in 1998 in the Austin, TX area. From the very beginning this alternative school was based on an SF approach. At this SF alternative high school (SFAS) all staff including administrators, teachers, counsellors, social workers, clerical staff, janitors, cafeteria workers, etc. were trained in the SF approach (SFA). It has been reported that at-risk students who attended this SFAS as compared to at-risk students who attended traditional schools earned more credits and had higher graduation rates (Kelly, Kim & Franklin, 2008).

This article reports a qualitative study comparing at-risk students' experiences in and assessment of the SFAS as compared to traditional schools. At the time of this study 374 students attended this SFAS and the data were collected from interviews with a sample drawn from the 374 students. Purposive and convenience sampling were used to match at-risk students at the SFAS to comparable students attending a traditional public high school. Researchers used a semi-structured interview schedule for conducting the interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Two members of the research team analysed and coded the transcripts and identified themes and categories. Prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and triangulation with quantitative data were used to ensure trustworthiness and rigour.

At-risk students at the traditional schools identified poor teacher relationships, lack of safety, overly rigid authority, and problems with peer relationships as major contributors for their lack of success. The at-risk students at the SFAS reported experiencing the following as compared to the traditional school: positive teacher relationships, improving maturity and responsibility, understanding about social issues, better peer relationships and a supportive atmosphere. Based on their findings in this study the authors make the following recommendations for teachers and schools to support at-risk students: focus on supportive and non-judgmental teacher-student relationships, make home-school connections a

priority, plan and implement strategies to improve school climate, be flexible with school rules and offer choices when consequences are given, provide education to staff members and support services for students, and adopt a strengths-based approach.

Pan, P. J. D., Deng, L. Y. F., Chang, S. S. H. & Jian, K. J. R. (2011).

Correctional officers' perceptions of a solution-focused training program: Potential implications for working with offenders.

International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 55, 863–879.

This article reports on a study conducted in Taiwan of teaching an SF approach to correctional officers in a jail setting. In a review of the literature the authors note that there have been studies conducted on the use of an SF approach (SFA) with people involved in the criminal justice system such as juvenile offenders, sex offenders, incarcerated fathers and parents, and domestic violence offenders, but none on the perspectives of correctional officers working in that system. This article reports on an exploratory study of the perceptions and experiences of correctional officers who participated in an SF training programme (SFTP). Data were obtained by means of focus group interviews, weekly training notes, field notes, and a brief questionnaire. Of the 30 correctional officers who participated in the training 29 agreed to be in the study. A follow-up survey was conducted 2 months after the end of the SFTP. Training participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (the least agreement) to 10 (the most agreement) the appropriateness, importance, function, and difficulty of using pre-treatment between-session change questions, exception questions, scaling questions, miracle questions, relationship-oriented questions, and praise. Thus, there was a total of 24 items on which the respondents were to rate on a 1 to 10 scale.

The authors used a grounded theory approach to analyse and code the qualitative data. In describing the methodology for data analysis the authors provide a very good explanation for their coding process and how they ensured trustworthiness. The authors identified a total of 6 codes with only 3 specifically related to the training participants' perceptions of the SFTP and using an SFA. The relevant codes are: advantages of an SFA, potential advantages of applying SFBT in working with offenders, and the need for consolidating learning and transformation. Twenty-six of the twenty-nine respondents stated that they highly valued the advantages of an SFA. The elements of an SFA that these respondents liked the most are the use of scaling, positive and future-oriented questioning, and constructing a problem and a goal. Regarding potential advantages of applying an SFA with offenders, the respondents reported that the most helpful are the identification of resources and effective behaviours for potential change, providing chances to try out new behaviours in a safe environment, and receiving reinforcement for change. With regard to the need for consolidation of learning and transformation, respondents liked the change to viewing offenders from a positive perspective and the fact that it seemed to increase trustworthiness between correction officers and offenders. At the same time, however, 21 of the 29 respondents reported difficulties and performance anxiety in transferring learning the SFA to actual practice.

The authors also reported descriptive statistics from the 24 items, ranking six SF techniques as to appropriateness, importance, function, and difficulty. On average the respondents rated each technique in terms of appropriateness and importance around 7 to 8 (7.28–8.15) and in terms of function around 7 (6.86–7.33). With regard to difficulty, the respondents' ratings of each technique were lower (4.52–5.17), which is not surprising given the qualitative responses mentioned above about challenges in transferring their training into actual practice. Based on the findings in this study the authors recommended organising training to involve "small steps, frequent repetition, and a wide variety of consolidation

activities before expecting productive use" (p. 875). However, some very important information missing from this article is a description of how the original training conducted for this study was organised, and the frequency and length of the training.

Some Concluding Comments

The research summarised here has implications for the use of SFA in organisations. The instrument developed and validated in the Grant, et al. (2012) study should be a useful tool for research on the SFA, especially in evaluating the effectiveness of training and fidelity to the practice of an SFA. The Antle, et al. (2012) study demonstrates that SF practices can influence a large public system like statewide child welfare, which in turn can result in positive outcomes for at-risk children and families. The Lagana-Riordan, et al. (2011) study demonstrates that training an entire staff at a medium sized organisation like an alternative school is possible and can result in positive student outcomes. The study by Pan, et al. (2011) shows that employees in a system that traditionally has not been strength-based and therapeutic can be receptive to training in and use of an alternative strengths-based paradigm. Further research is needed, however, to see how far this can be taken and whether or not it can improve outcomes with offenders.

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