Peer-reviewed papers

Burkean Dialectics and Solution-Focused Consultation*

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Abstract

I apply Kenneth Burke's dialectical perspective to SF thought and practice in this paper. Burke's perspective complements themes in SF thought while also pointing to new theoretical and practical possibilities for the future. I discuss these possibilities by, first, reviewing key aspects of Burke's dialectical orientation to language and the construction of social realities. Of particular significance is Burke's emphasis on using incongruity to foster change. This involves developing new orientations that challenge accepted understandings of social reality. I develop the implications of this idea by discussing its usefulness in understanding how solutions are constructed in SF consultations and in moving SF thought and practice forward.

Recently, we have seen a new interest in developing theoretical perspectives on SF consultations. I use the term *SF consultation* to refer to the wide range of contexts (e.g., therapy, coaching, team building, medicine and education) in which SF practitioners interact with clients. Theoretically informed studies are sources of insight about the operations of SF consultations, and may stimulate new practitioner methods. They are also contexts for linking SF thought with more

encompassing intellectual orientations. Building intellectual links promises at least three advantages for SF thinkers and practitioners. First, they are resources for countering depictions of SF consultation as nothing more than the application of a body of techniques to any and all client concerns (Parry & Doan, 1994). Second, such links are intellectual bridges that help others to see how SF thought is part of recognised intellectual currents in the contemporary world. Third, complementary perspectives are potential resources for closely examining and perhaps modifying accepted SF assumptions, claims and practices.

This paper advances SF thought by linking it to aspects of Burke's perspective on human beings as symbol-using animals; the most important symbols being words. While symbols are useful in organising and giving meaning to people's experiences, they are also sources for dilemmas, paradoxes and counterproductive ideologies. This is the context in which Burke develops his dialectical approach to language, interaction and the construction of social realities. It is within social interaction that people engage the dual possibilities of the words they use. Particularly relevant is how words that open new possibilities in people's lives also direct their attention away from other possibilities (Burke, 1966). We begin by building a context for seeing the relevance of Burke's writings for SF thought and practice.

Major themes in SF thought

The obvious beginning point in discussing SF thought is de Shazer's (1988, 1991) uses of Wittgensteinian philosophy in explaining the principles of SF therapy. He defines problems and solutions as distinct social realities that emerge within different language games. Problems and solutions are not so much objective conditions as they are orientations to life that are sustained and changed by talking in particular ways. SF practices are designed to move clients from talking within the problem language game to talking about possible solutions already present in their lives. This orientation to language has

significant implications for how SF practitioners orient to so-called internal processes (thoughts, feelings and other private experiences) that are sometimes treated as forces driving people's actions. Viewed from the Wittgensteinian perspective, however, talk about people's interior, private experiences takes place within language games that include shared vocabularies for categorising the experiences and grammars for turning words into understandable sentences (Miller & de Shazer, 2000). Thus, emotions are implicated in SF consultations concerned with clients' options in building preferred futures.

These themes have been taken up in three recent papers. The first to appear was McKergow & Korman's (2009) depiction of SF brief therapy (SFBT) as inbetween. SF practices are inbetween because they are aspects of SF practitioner-client interactions in which vocabularies for naming and describing aspects of clients' lives are developed. Because the vocabularies emerge within the contexts of particular interactions, neither practitioners nor clients can know in advance what words they will use to describe clients' lives. This is not to say that SF practitioners do not ask similar questions in different consultations. Rather, it is to say that the meaning and practical implications of the questions vary from one interaction to another.

> This means that SFBT is not amenable to reduction to a manualized treatment in the normal sense; what happens next depends on what just happened, not on a pre-determined schema (McKergow & Korman, 2009, p. 42).

In the second paper, Dierolf (2011) links SF thought to Harré's version of discursive psychology by contrasting shared themes in SF thought and discursive psychology [sf/dp] with traditional psychology [tp]. The differences turn on three dichotomies: focusing on the causes of clients' problems [tp] vs. defining clients as agents possessing resources for change [sf/dp]; looking for hidden processes that shape clients' actions [tp] vs. describing desired changes that are possible in clients' lives [sf/dp]; and defining the past as a cause of

clients' problems [tp] vs. treating memories as stories that are created in the present [sf/dp].

Finally, there is Miller & McKergow's (2012) application of complexity theory to SF consultations. According to complexity theorists, social interactions are self-organising, meaning that they consist of seemingly simple processes that have the capacity to produce unanticipated meanings. All social interactions are potential sites of transformation, although most do not realise this potentiality. Complexity theorists add that transformations often begin as modest changes in otherwise unremarkable interactions. Transformation happens when modest changes are intensified, extended and modified within the synergistic processes of complex interactional systems.

These papers extend SF thought in three important ways. First, they point to how SF consultations mirror processes in all social interactions, particularly their transformative potential. SF consultations are distinctive contexts for transformation because they are designed to encourage the emergence of storylines that clients might use in changing their lives. Storylines differ from fully-fledged narratives. Where narratives bring a variety of events, voices and relationships together within over-arching plots, storylines are potential points of departure for initiating change in clients' lives. Miller & McKergow (2012) call this process narrative emergence. Dierolf (2011) adds that storylines may be developed as memories that fit aspects of clients' past lives to the present.

Second, these studies remind us that all social interactions are different to some degree. While SF practices form a general orientation to consultation, they are applied differently in particular practitioner-client interactions. SF thinkers need to attend to both the general and the particular aspects of SF consultations. Finally, these papers undercut the idea that SF consultations can be fully represented by any single description. In particular, complexity theorists recommend the development of multiple representations of complex systems as a way of acknowledging that all descriptions "obscure even as they reveal" (Miller & McKergow, 2012, p. 171). We now

turn to Burke's dialectical perspective. Later sections discuss the implications of the perspective for understanding how SF consultations work, and for the development of SF thought and practice.

Burkean dialectics

Burke uses the word *dialectic* in several different but related ways. Generally, Burke (1969) uses it to call attention to the potential for linguistic transformation in social interaction and the study of such transformation. This theme runs throughout his writings. For Burke (1969), dialectic also includes attending to how similarity and difference are ever present aspects of interaction, even when they are unnoticed by the people who are interacting. Burke tells us that one part of managing social interactions—and life itself—involves balancing the similarities and differences that people create through their uses of language. We live in multiple realities because people balance similarity and difference in diverse ways as they deal with changing situations.

Both of these uses of the concept of dialectic are central to Burke's concern for how socially constructed realities link mergers with divisions. Merger refers to the ways that people connect multiple symbols to form distinctive frameworks of meaning. Consider the following example offered by Burke (1943, p. 40),

> When an average compatriot expresses his allegiance to *capitalism*, he is not considering merely the things that make it *different* from other economic systems. The symbol also includes for him such notions as family, friendship, neighborliness, education, medicine, golf, tools, sunlight, future and endless other sundries. When the orator shouts 'Down with capitalism!' the auditor often resists because he is countering in secret, 'I love the memory of the river bank where I lolled in the sun as a boy'.

Here, we see how seemingly straightforward words represent multi-faceted meanings involving several otherwise disconnected concepts. Each element in the symbol cluster serves as a background for the other elements, thus imbuing them with values that might not otherwise be associated with them. This is how the compatriot constructs capitalism as representing the values of family, friendship, neighbourhood, health, healing, learning, recreation and the joys of nature. Of course, the orator's shout orients to its own symbol cluster, which might include the exploitation of labour, class conflict and the destruction of the environment.

The compatriot's and orator's constructions of capitalism also involve different selves. The compatriot casts himself as a person who cares about others, physical vigour, and the environment, whereas the orator's shout might signal a personal commitment to equality, community and justice. For Burke, socially constructed realities and people's senses of self are connected because people are both constructors of social realities and constructed by them (Crusius, 1999). One way of seeing how people are constructed by social realities is to notice how some emotions and orientations to action are encouraged within different portrayals of people's lives and selves. Indeed, the connections that link reality, self, emotion and action may become so merged that they are inseparable. This is why the compatriot might hear the orator's shout as 'Down with you and all that you represent!'

A second aspect of Burke's example involves how the compatriot's and orator's mergers implicitly point to what capitalism is not. This is division. While the compatriot and orator would likely agree that capitalism is not socialism, they are not likely to agree about what else capitalism is not. While we might assume that divisions are simply reversals of the symbols in mergers, this assumption can blind us to the precise ways that people define what their mergers exclude. For example, the compatriot's association of family with capitalism does not necessarily mean that all forms of family are included in his merger. Finally, Burke's example illustrates how constructions of social reality are incomplete. Humanly created symbols are

incapable of fully capturing the realities that they presumably represent. Burke (1969, p. 59) states that people

> seek vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality.

Reflection and deflection form their own dialectical relationship because all social constructions are susceptible to correction by other social constructions that are themselves incomplete. For Burke (1968), there are no ultimate answers to the questions that we ask about ourselves and the worlds in which we live, only unending dialogues about our questions (Crusius, 1999). This is not to say that all social constructions are equally useful in addressing issues in one's life. Burke (1969) explains that useful social constructions fit better with the situations in which people find themselves. But because life involves dealing with multiple situations, the usefulness of any social construction is limited to the situations that it fits. Our unending dialogues are efforts to construct useful orientations to shifting situations. This brings us to the possibility of linguistic transformation in SF consultations.

SF consultation as perspective by incongruity

Socially constructed realities are orientations to issues in life. They orient people by defining what is relevant and irrelevant to particular issues, how people should feel about the issues and themselves and what counts as appropriate responses to the issues. This is another way in which people are both agents who use language to shape their options in situations and constrained by the limitations of their language choices. SF consultations are points of engagement with clients' language choices. SF practices are methods for reconsidering the mergers and divisions to which clients—often implicitly—orient. They are standpoints for seeing how clients' constructions reflect and deflect possibilities in their lives.

Viewed from a Burkean perspective, SF consultation is both distinctive and not distinctive. The consultations involve distinctive questions and other methods for examining social realities. SF practitioners create further distinctiveness in adapting these methods to differing interactions with clients. But the general strategy for fostering change is not distinctive. Burke (1984a, 1984b) calls the strategy *perspective by incongruity*. It involves challenging conventional wisdom by pointing to alternative meanings involving new orientations to reality, self and action. Burke (1984a, p. 308) characterises perspective by incongruity as

> verbal 'atom cracking.' That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category – and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category.

Perspective by incongruity may take several forms. For example, it is basic to puns, which involve applying the "wrong" sense of words to situations. It is also common in the arts where poets, novelists, painters and others challenge conventional wisdom by linking symbols that are usually treated as unrelated or contradictory to create new understandings of people, issues and relationships. Puns and artistic constructions of incongruity illustrate how new perspectives emerge as symbols that are conventionally divided are merged, and symbols that are usually linked are divided. Perspective by incongruity is an ironic approach to change that turns on claiming that things are not what they seem to be. The corollary, of course, is that things are what they seem not to be.

A first step in applying the concept of perspective by incongruity to SF consultations involves noticing how problem constructions operate as conventional wisdom for clients and others. Problems are undesired facts of life that clients must learn to live with if not accept. Perhaps the most obvious way that SF practitioners challenge the conventional wisdom of problems is by asking about exceptions. For example, when have the problems been less severe or absent from clients' lives and when have clients noticed a little bit of their miracles

in their lives? In identifying exceptions, clients construct standpoints for seeing their lives as not what they seem to be. SF practitioners may extend the incongruity by asking clients to describe how their lives were different during the less problematic times, including how clients asserted their personal agency during these times.

Clients' answers are also resources that practitioners use in interpreting clients' lives. Interpretation is central to practitioners' use of compliments and formulations. SF practitioners formulate by recasting clients' descriptions as evidence that clients possess personal qualities and other resources for creating change (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Korman, Beavin & De Jong, 2013). Much like Burke's concept of "verbal atom cracking," SF practitioners' compliments and formulations "wrench" clients' words out of their usual contexts and put them in new contexts. Incongruities may also emerge when SF practitioners ask clients to describe their preferred futures. The miracle question is an obvious example, but this issue may be raised through scaling questions or by asking clients to describe their hopes in life (Ratner, George & Iveson, 2012). Equally important is the implicit incongruity associated with questions about possible next steps that clients might take in building new lives. Such questions invite clients to construct themselves as agents of change. SF practitioners also encourage client sensitivity to incongruity by asking, "What might you notice that will tell you that things are getting a little bit better?"

The SF practices discussed here illustrate how change emerges as the power and scope of problem constructions are reduced. This is perhaps the most important aspect of perspective by incongruity for Burke. He rejects the idea that change is best achieved by insisting that there is one all-encompassing, moral or truthful understanding of any issue. Rather, he defines useful change as continuing expansion of orientations in ongoing dialogues.

Implications for SF thought and practice

Burke's dialectical approach fits with many contemporary SF thinkers' understandings of SF consultation. SF consultations are contexts for getting inbetween the mergers and divisions that organise clients' social constructions of reality. It is from inbetween clients' mergers and divisions that new storylines may emerge as modest shifts in clients' orientations to their lives. The promise of SF consultation is that incongruities created in practitioner-client interactions will be modified, extended and elaborated in clients' interactions outside of consultation rooms, perhaps producing new storylines for clients' lives. Burke would add that such shifts also invite new forms of client emotional engagement with their lives, as well as new possibilities for action.

Burke's dialectical approach is also a standpoint for examining SF consultation as a socially constructed reality. It is constructed as SF thinkers and practitioners merge and divide symbols in much the same way that Burke's compatriot and orator construct capitalism and clients cast their lives as problem-filled. Further, just as the compatriot, orator and clients might learn from dialectical analyses of their mergers and divisions, so SF thinkers and practitioners might extend their horizons by considering the incongruities associated with their constructions of SF consultation.

One starting point for reconsidering conventional wisdom in SF thought and practice is the claim that clients are agents who possess the personal resources needed to effectively manage their lives. This claim is basic to defining SF practices as ways of collaborating with clients to identify the next steps that clients might take in realising their preferred future lives. It is also significant that the concepts of control and constraint are excluded from most, if not all, such constructions of SF consultation as a social reality. For example,

> With every therapeutic approach that works, it works, in the end, because the client has been helped to draw in some different way on their resources: therapy doesn't change

people, it enables them to discover their own resources so they can make the changes themselves. Discovering and attending to the client's resources is an essential element of solution-focused practice. (Ratner, George & Iveson, 2012, p. 52).

Burke might ask, "What is excluded from this and other symbol clusters that define SF consultation, what are the dualisms that organise practitioner-client collaboration, and how do practitioners and clients manage similarities and differences in identifying possible next steps?" These questions form a background for understanding the dialectical meaning of clients as agents in SF consultations. Specifically, there is a sense in which clients are made into agents in SF consultations. We see this in the ways that practitioners' actions instruct clients on practitioners' interests in their lives. These actions include asking for nonproblem talk from clients, only treating some aspects of clients' descriptions as resources for change and selective listening (Ratner, George & Iveson, 2012). Such actions are designed to create restricted contexts within which clients might act as agents.

I am not saying that SF consultation is only about control, nor are clients powerless victims of practitioners' manipulations. Rather, I am pointing to one aspect of the complex dialectical processes that organise SF consultations as sites for linguistic transformation. Sf practitioners seek to widen clients' options in life by narrowing their interactional options. So viewed, collaboration in SF consultation consists of negotiations between two agents seeking to both follow the other party's lead and to lead the other party. Agency is an emergent aspect of social interactions, not an inherent quality of individuals nor something that practitioners give to clients. Different interactional arrangements facilitate different kinds of agents and agency. Sf practitioner-client negotiations are also micropolitical contexts for giving practical meaning to such symbols as help, enablement, discovery and clients as makers of change.

Treating SF consultations as negotiations involving multiple agents (with potentially different interests) challenges conventional depictions of clients as experts. While this metaphor captures important aspects of practitioners' orientations to consultation, it is insufficient in representing clients as multi-dimensional agents who are shaped by practitioners' actions and shapers of practitioners' interactional options. It misses how SF consultations involve managing similarities and differences. Imagine that we replaced half of the literature written by and for SF practitioners with a literature written by and for clients. What assumptions about SF consultation are we likely to find in the new literature; what client interests are likely to be emphasised; how do those interests coincide with and depart from practitioners' interests; and what practical advice might clients give others about how to enable SF practitioners in discovering useful resources for making positive, collaborative contributions to their interactions with clients?

Burke's approach to creating change through incongruity is also a standpoint for asking, "How else might SF consultation be done?" Consider, for example, Panayotov's (2011) re-examination of the metaphor of client as expert. He points to incongruity in asking if clients are experts on their lives, then why do SF consultations begin with questions that practitioners think will be useful to clients? Doesn't it make more sense for practitioners to ask clients, "*What do you think is the most useful question I have to ask you now?*" (Panayotov, 2011, p. 8). Panayotov further unsettles conventional wisdom in discussing how the SF approach is a toolbox that practitioners draw from in interacting with clients. He notes that master crafts-people use existing tools and also sometimes make new ones in addressing diverse and unique situations. Closely examining when and how SF practitioners (and perhaps clients) invent tools within ongoing interactions is a potentially rich next step in developing SF thought and practice. SF thinkers might also look at how practitioners use "tools" associated with other parts of their lives (e.g., family, hobbies, other jobs, popular culture and academic interests) in interacting with clients (Nick Drury, personal communication).

Conclusion

I have sought to expand the reach of SF thought and practice by discussing aspects of Burke's dialectical approach to the construction of social realities. Within Burke's perspective, so-called SF techniques are methods for unsettling the mergers and divisions that define clients' lives. They are aspects of the strategy of perspective by incongruity. I have also applied Burke's perspective to aspects of contemporary SF thought and practice. Finally, I have noted how dialectical analyses of sf thought might stimulate new sf practices that expand the ways that practitioners and clients might collaborate.

The storylines making up this paper might be developed in several different ways. One approach involves further application of Burke's writings to SF thought and practice. This is a promising direction, since Burke's writings represent a veritable trove of insights into language, social interaction and the social construction of realties. Another approach is to explore the relevance of writings that complement Burke's perspective for sf thought and practice. Two possibilities are Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic method and aspects of pragmatist philosophy (Menand 1997). A third possibility focuses on empirical research on SF consultations. Burke is one of many scholars who have pointed out that data do not create or speak for themselves. Researchers construct data by orienting to events and issues in particular ways. Burke's dialectical perspective represents a distinctive standpoint for observing how SF consultations are organised and accomplished.

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