De taal van oplossingen: een empirisch begrippenkader voor oplossingsgerichte interactie

van Dijk, D.J.

Publication date
2013

SUMMARY

After my career in secondary school, I did not lose my fascination for interactional processes in the school domain. Following various training-sessions the co-construction, which is what the dialogue construction is, kept my interest. And when I started training students to become *Masters* in *Special Educational Needs*, I realised once again the significance of the way matters are shaped by means of interaction. For insights, theories, convictions, etc. only become meaningful when they actually and effectively reach the person addressed.

Getting acquainted with the *Solution Focused Brief Therapy* ignited my enthusiasm for the therapeutic processes which optimally make use of the self-regulating abilities and strengths of the person seeking help. Concerning to counseling students, the basic principle is that, within the margins of the educational situation, the student is competent and able to manage his own goals. If he gets thrown off the track for a while, refuses to focus on a better future or is unable to do so, it is the trick to get him to orient once again to the opportunities he has obviously lost sight of.

In spite of my enthusiasm, my educational activities as well as various publications, the question presented itself more and more often: what makes it work? Even though I had data at my disposal that were satisfactory in their own right, they did not provide me with me the information I was looking for: the constituent elements of a successful Solution-Focused Interaction (SFI) at a pragmatic-linguistic level. That gap was filled by the methodology developed by Bavelas cs. In order to understand the co-construction of sender and receiver it is 'necessary to examine their communication, extremely closely, a few seconds or a few words at a time, that is, at the level of microanalysis of dialogue' (Bavelas, 2012, p.146). Microanalysis became the vehicle of a study, which developed into a thesis as the study progressed.

The inductive approach is structured in such a way that 'observation and analysis continually alternate and are guided by reflection'. (Wester & Peters, 2004, p. 40). Chapter 1 is the introduction; 2, 3 and 4 are empirical chapters describing the observation of effective factors and the development of a conceptual framework. Chapter 5 contains the conclusion and a discussion leading to some recommendations for the training of future Solution Focused (SF) specialists in the field of education.

CHAPTER 1

Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is a form of psycho-therapy which was developed in the early 1980s by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues at the *Milwaukee Brief Family Therapy Center (USA)*. There was more than a moderate interest in the distinguishing factors crucial to the mental healing process. By means of accurate observation the developers registered which interventions led to concrete solutions. 'The Milwaukee group discovered that change proceeds in small

steps, and that small changes often lead to more significant and permanent ones', according to Gingerich in De Jong & Berg (2001, p. 13).

So far over 48 outcome studies have been published and the quality is 'steadily improving' (Franklin, 2012, p. 107). There is no need for us to explain that the SF approach works – that has been satisfactorily done by others. We do wish to prove, however, which phenomena are actually responsible for that success. Referring to John Austin, who holds that language can change reality, we seek to make an analysis of critical incidents in effective SF interventions. With the results of that analysis we hope to develop an 'empirisch begrippenkader' (Wester & Peters, 2004, p. 87), which means an empirical conceptual framework, for the training of specialists in the field of education. We observe and listen to the items we are interested in without bias. Observation is quintessential to the SF approach.

But before we begin, we will take a close look at the domains in which our research is embedded, Interpersonal Communication and Language and Social Interaction. There are differences and similarities and furthermore there is ground in common with Conversation Analysis (CA), Discourse Analysis (DA) and Functional Pragmatism (FP). Our point of view is eclectic: 'There are no *facts*, or *data*, or *structures*, or *laws* as such, there are only assemblages. Strictly speaking there is always only construction and interpretation." (De Shazer, 1988, p. 85). Looking for the interactional characteristics of SFI, we opt for the circular approach of Bavelas (in Knapp & Daly, 2002): 'observation and induction → hypothesis and theory → confirmatory observation' (p. 111). The emphasis is on the what and how during the counseling sessions. We are particularly interested in the deals and means that accomplish the intended goals. Chapter 1 concludes with a section on the planning and structure of this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

The ultimate aim of this research project is the enhancement of the SF quality of teachers in coaching situations. The starting point is that one can learn to observe SF characteristics. The assumption based on this is, that a person who is better at identifying SF characteristics, will also be better at working SF himself or at supporting others in this field. The ability to diagnose differences in the quality of observation is a must. Therefore an instrument is required which is able to rank observation skills. The qualities needed for such an instrument are content validity, reliability and the power to discriminate.

For this exploration we are on a par with the practice of a two-day SF introduction course for *Master SEN* students. The *stimulus* is provided by a fragment, in which Insoo Kim Berg gets into a conversation with Carl, a suicidal young man from a school in Austin (Texas). At the beginning of the course the students are shown the fragment, followed by an *assignment*. They indicate on a *work sheet* which SF factors are the most relevant ones according to them. The procedure is repeated at the end of the two-day-course. In between these assignments the intervention takes place, which might have an impact on their observations.

Encoders deal with the data in accordance with the rules and regulations in a *code book*. There are six variables and three combination variants according to which the observations are tested. That is how we acquire a varied impression of the quality of the students' observations at the initial and final measurement. With regard to Diversification it turns out that the students recognise a greater number of factors and are more adept at appreciating their SF value after the intervention. As far as the Reporting is concerned we may say that the students benefit from the transfer of SF jargon. With respect to Registration, matters are less clear-cut. The results show that the observers still have a lot to learn about the *Nature* (interpretation and observation), the *Type* (verbal and non-verbal) and the *Focus* (individual and interactive) of the elements observed. The final conclusion of chapter 2 is that the instrument is valid and reliable and that it sheds more light on the differences among and inside the observers.

In the meantime there have also been made discoveries on SFI. De main lesson is that is the conceptual that the conceptual framework needs to be specified, before a new trainings program is developed.

CHAPTER 3

Now that we know that observation is measurable and can be developed (in the sense that it can be learned), we wish to find out what the characteristics are of a successful SF interaction. We seek advice from the great masters: Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer and Therese Steiner. They have made video recordings available which are considered eminently successful examples of SF conversations. Due to the availability of these master protocols we have requested five experts to identify the SF characteristics of these conversations. This chapter reports the findings of the panel of experts and concludes with a reporting of SF phenomena. Subsequently five master protocols are presented. The selection criteria are: authenticity, recognizability, educational history, age and reference. The panel considers, analyzes and confers according to the Delphi method, which means as long as it takes to reach a consensus.

The members of the panel first select the crucial passages from the master protocols and subsequently identify the pragmatic-linguistic phenomena that are typical of the SF approach. The method is consistent with Bavelas' microanalysis. In order to gain a clear understanding of the things that are relevant in the field of interaction, it is crucial to transform first impressions of observable, interactional conduct. The more detailed and varied the observation, the more accurate the analysis.

The panel discussions show a fixed pattern, which is evident from the very start at the preparation stage when the members are requested to make individually a preselection on a form. Subsequently an agenda is followed and the reported passages are analysed and discussed. A verbatim report is made of the discussions (which are completely video-taped). In processing these data the forms, video recordings, verbatim reports and flap-overs (if available) are used.

The result is that each master protocol presents a detailed narrative. It is the record in story-form of the course of the conversation between agent and client, presented in terms that especially accentuate the SF functionality. This is followed by

the identification of typical phenomena, on the one hand commensurate with the parts of the *Seven-step-dance*, on the other hand in line with the unique insights of the panel itself. At the sixth (and last) meeting of the panel the phenomena are put in a logical order and provided with more specific labels. Thus the result of chapter 3 is a list of 26 SF phenomena spread among three functions: *Attunement*, *Defining direction* and *Keep direction*.

CHAPTER 4

By scrutinising all the phenomena reported by the panel separately, we seek to get grip on their meaning. In using the word 'meaning' we do not simply refer to the semantics of words. It is the interactional reality showing itself in the phenomena themselves that counts. The results of these exercises are the indicators for the rest of our search. Our aim is to arrange the concepts and subsume them into an adequate conceptual framework.

In the first part of this chapter, the specification phase, we attempt to find an answer to the question how agent and client both contribute to a meaningful SFI. We opt for micro-analysis, because we are concerned with the 'moment-by-moment, *micro* influence' (Bavelas & Healing, 2010, p. 13) in a 'collaborative, reciprocal dialogue' (ibid.), in which 'actively shaping the information, feelings etc.' emerges, and we hope that prospective specialists will benefit from it on balance.

We always start our exercises with a qualitative analysis. An accurate description is the prelude to an investigative question, which, in its turn, results in the analysis of the details found. If the research focuses on quality, the question is actually invariably: what exactly is going on here? What choices are made, how is feedback divided, how is cooperation established, etcetera? They are all variations on that theme. Of the 26 exercises 17 focus on quality. If the focus of the exercise is on quantity, we gather countable data. How many turns does an actant get, how long do these turns last, how often do the subjects use the conjunction *but*, what type of questions is mostly used etcetera? By comparing the data of the counts, statistical contrasts appear and they can be quite significant. Of the 26 exercises 8 focus on quantity. One exercise is as well qualitative as well quantitative: which words facilitate the answers and how frequent does that happen?

If the panel reported a phenomenon once, we give a description of it, how it occurs, and how it impacts the actants. Then the question presents itself: what causes it to do what it does? Generally we record also if the phenomenon manifests itself somewhere else in the protocol in a similar or in a different way.

In three tables, labeled in accordance with the selection of the panel mentioned in the previous chapter, we present the phenomena, findings of the panel, research questions, analyses and boundaries. Then records of nine sessions follow (the other ones have been included in the appendix *Exercises*). The selection is a representation of the master (Kim Berg, de Shazer or Steiner), the protocol (1/5 m), the setting (single or multiple), the nature of the exercise (qualitative or quantitative) and the phenomenon (see panel report chapter 3).

In the second part of this chapter we deal with the reduction and integration of the data. We wonder how these results compare with the phenomena observed and with each other. What can be regarded as means and what as goals? Does recursivity occur? By means of a cross-case analysis we gain a better insight into the structure of operational elements.

What we have here is a means-goal chain, which requires an adequate conceptual framework. We find that framework with Van Lint (1980), who assigns the various forms of language exchange to four modes of analysis: *goal, strategy, tactics* and *manoeuvre.* SFI recognizes only one goal: tapping resources. The phenomena the panel reported are *tactics*. They constitute 'the systemic bases of inferences hearers make based on what someone says' (Fitch & Sanders, 2005, p. 18). The agent's actions are the most concrete unit we deal with in the conversation: *manoeuvres.* Thus we have provided the *SF chain* with a conceptual framework.

The variation of manoeuvres has to do with the tactics and the context. But above all we see similarities. Based on mutual affiliation we identify fourteen SF clusters and one non-SF cluster – the latter is meant to support accompanying SF manoeuvres. We compare the new classification with usual classification*,* the *Seven-step-dance***.** The parts of the *Seven-step-dance* turn out to be unequal. They cover various levels of the conceptual framework's hierarchy.

Finally we check if the phenomena, which have been studied in this chapter, are typical of the individual masters or if they have a wider validity. A definite conclusion will require more research, but it is assumed that something like a common denominator does exist. In order to maintain a grip on the subject matter, we include everything the research has produced in a story we tell future SF agents at the end of chapter 4.

CHAPTER 5

We take stock, and once more we find ourselves at the beginning of a new undertaking: the *transfer*. We scrutinize the results of our research and select some recommendations from it for the intended training practice. But first we will make a few comments on our research at this point.

Our *research focus* was on the effectiveness of SFI. Therefore we studied the literature published on this subject. We can draw the conclusion that the prescription of SFBT clashes with our findings. Meta-analyses by Gingerich & Eisengart (2000, Kim (2006), and Lipchik et al. (2012) comply with the criterion *face validity,* but not with the criterion *construct validity.* A 'review of change process research ' to SFBT by McKeel (2012) shows that many typical SF techniques, such as the miracle question, scaling question and presuppostional question are effective. Our question is: what makes them effective? We continue where McKeel (2012) stops. Standing on the shoulders of former researchers, we reflect in chapter 4 on a theoretical foundation for a conceptual framework.

Research among the student body indicates that the constituent elements of the construct SFI can be measured and developed. Research among the members of the panel shows exactly which phenomena are being dealt with. Microanalysis of these

phenomena proves that we are dealing with a so-called SF chain. Reduction and integration provide us with a theoretical-empirical conceptual framework. To a certain extent we have succeeded in getting a grip on the theoretical structure of SFI.

The remainder of chapter 5 shows us what lies ahead. Whoever wishes to acquire the language of solutions, will have to start putting it into practice. By means of repeated exercise the renewed conceptual framework can systemically be integrated, internalised and automated.

In keeping with the findings of this research project, the original course plan can be adjusted. The approach resembles strategy training, which has taken root in numerous disciplines and domains. The last stage is shaped by 'deliberate practice', a term coined by Ericsson (2012): 'to improve specific aspects of an individual's performance through repetition and successive refinement' (p. 6). Reflection will take care of the rest. Ericsson (2006) writes about this: 'Deliberate practice [...] can be mastered within hours of practice by concentrating on critical aspects and by gradually refining performance through repetitions after feedback' (p. 292).

We cannot create experts. We do think, however, that *inquiry learning* could constitute the beginning, on the understanding that it will only become SF, if goals, strategies, tactics, and manoeuvres contribute to the desired result.