Small Steps: The Practical Origins of Brief Therapies

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Outline

• Which “brief therapies”?
• Which came first: philosophy or practice?
• The practical context
• Seven small steps to big changes
• Implications for therapy and research
Which “brief therapies”?

The original Brief Therapy  
(Brief Therapy Center, MRI, Palo Alto, CA)

Solution Focused Brief Therapy  
Brief Family Therapy Center  
(Milwaukee, WI)
From Brief Therapy to Solution-focused Brief Therapy

John Weakland
(Brief Therapy Center, Palo Alto)

Steve deShazer
(Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee)

Insoo Kim Berg
(Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee)
Shared assumptions, one small change

Central philosophy of Brief Therapy

1. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.
2. If it doesn’t work, don’t do it again: Do something different.
3. Once you know what works, do more of it.

BFTC revision of central philosophy

1. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.
2. Once you know what works, do more of it.
3. If it doesn’t work, don’t do it again: Do something different.

From: deShazer & Berg, 1991, pages 250 & 252
John Weakland:

“People know how to be well.”
Which came first: philosophy or practice?
Brief Therapy & Solution Focused Brief Therapy

Grand theories and Philosophies

Testing small but vital assumptions

E.g., de Shazer & Weakland, in M. Hoyt (2001), pages 1-33.
Philosophical connections came later

Grand theories and Philosophies

Brief Therapy & Solution
Focused Brief Therapy

Testing small but vital assumptions
The practical context
The mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century

- Psychoanalysis
- Cybernetics (Weiner, Ashby, Cherry, Shannon & Weaver; Bateson)
- The Natural History of an Interview (NHI) project (Frieda- Fromm Reichmann)

The MRI

Brief Therapy Project

E.g., Jackson, 1968a, 1968b; Watzlawick & Weakland, 1977; Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967;
Seven small steps to big changes
Steps to a different view of clients: 1

What they didn’t do

• Assume that therapy takes a long time.

• Therefore, take years to “rebuild” a person.

What they did do

• Assume that therapy could be very short.

• Therefore, limit themselves to 10 sessions.
Steps to a different view of clients: 2

**What they didn’t do**

- Assume that problems behaviours are driven by mental processes (e.g., emotions, cognitions, motivations, perceptions).
- Therefore, focus on and diagnose these processes.

**What they did do**

- Assume that problem behaviours are the problem. (Mental processes exist but are not what needs to be addressed).
- Therefore, focus on and identify observable, behavioural phenomena.
Steps to a different view of clients: 3

What they didn’t do
• Assume that the cause of the problem is in the client’s past.
• Therefore, search the past intensively for clues.

What they did do
• Assume that the problem exists in the present and must be addressed in the present.
• Therefore, focus intensively on the present.
Steps to a different view of therapists: 4

What they didn’t do

• Assume that therapists do not influence their clients.

• Therefore, do therapy “non-directively.”

What they did do

• Assume that therapists are inevitably influential.

• Therefore, do therapy actively and be responsible for these actions.
Steps to a different view of therapists: 5

What they didn’t do

- Assume that a well-trained and experienced therapist knows what to do.

- Therefore,
  - Work primarily alone.
  - Don’t permit observation or intervention by others.

What they did do

- Assume that even experienced therapists benefit from a team.

- Therefore,
  - Work in a team; meet regularly.
  - Observe each other’s sessions; intervene in each other’s sessions.
Steps to a different view of therapists: 6

What they didn’t do

• Assume that the therapist remembers what happened.

• Therefore,
  – Don’t record.
  – Focus on the therapist’s interpretations, not the details of sessions.

What they did do

• Assume that a recording of the session is essential and that it will reveal important insights.

• Therefore,
  – Record sessions.
  – Discuss the precise details of sessions.
Steps to a different view of studying therapy: 7

What they didn’t do

• Assume that the purpose of studying psychotherapy is to confirm one’s model.

• Therefore,
  – Focus on what one already knows.
  – Seek evidence that it works.

What they did do

• Assume that the purpose of studying psychotherapy is to discover new possibilities and new puzzles.

• Therefore,
  – Be open to new insights.
  – Embrace puzzles rather than dismissing them.
Implications for therapy and research
Paths to innovation

Assumptions ↔ Observations

- Question an unquestioned assumption
- Would this lead to new actions?
- Question an unquestioned practice
- What alternatives are there?
- What assumptions does this change?
- Notice a new action or something that doesn’t fit.
- Examine it closely; make sense of it
- Examine one of your own assumptions.
- What is it based on?
- What actions does it lead (and not lead) to?

Bavelas (1987)
References


