Solution-focused ideas in social work

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A group of social workers from Helsinki City Social Service Department working in an ordinary community-based social welfare office were trained to use basic solution-focused ideas in their work with people seeking living allowances and with families in child welfare. These social workers' relationships with their clients were compared to their previous similar relationships and to a control group. There were no significant changes in goal achievement but in line with solution-focused orientation there were increases in positive statements, goal focus, and shared views between social workers and their clients.

Social work in Finland

Local authorities in Finland run the biggest part of the social services. The Social Service Department of Helsinki has, for instance, 9,000 employees. Private organizations, companies and the Lutheran church provide supplementary services.

Child welfare and controlling living allowances are two traditional forms of social services. Social workers work together with other authorities and with families whose children have been reported to be at risk. There has been a continuous public debate about what kind of support to offer and what kind of control measures should be taken in this kind of social work. A living allowance is a discretionary form of last-resort assistance in cases where other forms of income fail to provide a person or family with an adequate living. The size of living allowances is set by the State Council. Social workers handle the living allowance applications of those individuals who seem to have other problems besides financial ones. Social workers assess the life situation of these individuals and help them deal with their problems, which are typically defined as addictions, mental disorders, physical illness and/or crises. The ‘real’ problems and solutions are, like everywhere else, debated all
the time. Finnish social work has incorporated a variety of theories with traditional bureaucratic practice which originated in the era of the Russian tsar (Rojek et al., 1988; Arnkil, 1991).

Many long-term unemployed single men, lone parent families and families breaking up, those with little education, mental and substance abuse problems, end up as social work clients in child welfare and living allowance matters. Most of these clients have used social services for many years and are second generation clients. At the time of the research reported here there were also some middle-class clients, whose life situation changed drastically when the recession suddenly struck the country in 1990. Helsinki has, however, very few street people and no slums like most European cities.

This research was carried out in the midst of the worst recession since the 1930s. The unemployment rate had just gone up from 4 to 20% in two years; more and more people were without work and money. Educational, health and social services were cut and workloads increased. The political debate on the ‘welfare state’ was hot. There was a need for more tailored, self-critical and empowering social work, and calls to use more of clients’ own strengths, paying close attention to roles and language (Arnkil, 1991; Satka, 1993; Siiriäinen, 1995). The solution-focused approach seemed appropriate in this situation because it is practical and emphasized the use of even the small resources of the people involved. It could also make social work tailored to the individual needs of people.

The aims of the project

The aim of this research was to examine how the use of solution-focused ideas might change the relationship between social workers handling living allowances and child welfare issues and their clients. Changes in attitudes about the work were not investigated. The goal was to find changes in areas of importance both to the solution-focused tradition and to the social work discourse. Four areas of interest were investigated (Figure 1).

With regard to the solution-focused ideas, the goal was to apply the main BFTC concepts in a non-therapy environment. The main concepts concerned goals, exceptions and positive feedback. In terms of social work practice, the main idea was to explore the potential of solution-focused ideas in ‘empowering’ clients. In living allowance matters, the challenge was to find a few simple solution-
focused questions, remarks or suggestions that the social workers could make within a single short meeting. Initially the social workers were encouraged to ask about what good or useful tasks clients were managing besides money issues. It was thought that new goals and steps might evolve this way. The social workers were also encouraged to give positive feedback and to support any useful ideas the clients reported. In child welfare cases, a lot of attention was put on talking openly with the clients about their goals. The social workers were also encouraged to split long-term work into smaller sub-goals, to use clients’ suggestions about steps to be taken, to monitor possible change, to evaluate the progress of the relationship with the clients and to involve resourceful people in problem-solving with the clients. The research design was based on before and after evaluations using quantitative and qualitative measures.

Participants
This project began with solution-oriented training in a social welfare office serving the central part of Helsinki. Social workers handling living allowances and child welfare were asked to participate in the research as an experimental group, in which they used the solution-focused ideas in their work. Eleven out of twenty-four social workers accepted an invitation to participate. They had an
average of six years’ work experience with two years in their present job. Their motives were to learn more about solution-focused ideas and to obtain supervision. Social workers working in comparable areas of Helsinki in terms of social indicators and who worked in similar organizational settings were asked to join the research as a control group; fourteen responded. Compared to the experimental group, they had about two more years’ experience on average and three more years in their present job. On the other hand, they had a heavier workload. None had had any lengthy training in any particular method of practice. All workers were native Finnish women, most in their 30s.

This design gave two fairly well-matched groups of social workers with a similar type of working environment. Everybody knew that they were observed and they probably tried to do their best. The results are therefore probably not representative of their everyday work. The excitement about this new approach probably improved the experimental group’s results compared to those of the control group. The social workers in the control group had a hard time keeping up their spirits although the researcher assured them that only differences between the groups were being examined.

Method

Having selected the participants, the researcher chose ten clients at random from each social worker’s case load. The social workers were instructed to ask the chosen clients to participate in the research. A total of 382 out of 399 (96%) clients who were asked agreed to participate. The two client groups were fairly similar in terms of demographic factors. There were, however, more single men in the experimental group and more families in the control group. Typically, work with these men concentrated on money and ‘survival’ issues. The men were in general treated as ‘chronics’, with little emphasis on ‘change’ (Pohjola, 1994). Work with the families usually focused on their changing relationships and home-related financial matters. Social workers often worry about these families and probably invest more in trying to help them (Kivinen and Marjamäki, 1995).

The research design is summarized in Figure 2. The project started with introductory solution-focused training for social workers in the forthcoming experimental group. The solution-focused training covered the basic concepts developed by the Brief Family...
Therapy Center and Mental Research Institute. Most emphasis was put on goal negotiation, starting from the clients’ perspective, using small signs of progress, designing specific tasks to achieve the goals and clarifying the worker’s role in each case. The workers who joined the experimental group had a further twenty-hour workshop on how to implement the solution-focused ideas in their current practice. This workshop, together with the previous training and supervision during the research was the only input. In the supervision the social workers described and discussed their current client relationships. Each social worker personally decided how she would use the solution-focused ideas. There was no formal control, but the workers discussed their choices quite openly. The tape recordings also added valuable pieces to the picture.

All twenty-five social workers in the experimental and control groups completed a questionnaire about their work with ten clients. This concerned the clients’ current situation, the goals and the means to achieve the goals. Each social worker also tape-recorded one randomly chosen meeting for a qualitative analysis.

![Solution-focused training and supervision](chart)

Figure 2. The research design

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The same procedure was repeated a year later. The eleven workers remaining in the control group continued to work as before with supervision and training opportunities organized by their workplace. The nine social workers remaining in the experimental group continued to use solution-focused ideas with their chosen clients. Finally, after six months, all workers filled in a second questionnaire similar to the one in the initial phase with an emphasis on changes from the time of the first questionnaire.

This design made it possible to look at differences between the experimental group and the control group and within both groups between each phase of the experiment. The differences were interpreted as social constructions, rather than as the ‘truth’. Statistical calculations were therefore used as tools to organize the constructed concepts.

The questionnaire (Figure 3) shared many similarities with a standard solution-focused procedure and excluded questions about problems. The questionnaires were completed by the workers and their clients together in a way both parties felt comfortable with. This was mostly done by the worker in the office either at the beginning or the end of the chosen meeting. In some cases the clients did the writing. The clients always answered one question regarding the helpfulness of the worker privately. They put the questionnaire in an envelope, which was sent to the researcher.

Each worker recorded, with the knowledge of the clients, one of the chosen meetings on an audio tape. The recording was not representative for all relationships, but at the end there were many different kinds of relationships among the fifty (56%) recorded meetings. The results from the tapes mainly describe the experimental groups’ client–worker relationships, because the control group recorded only seven relationships in the experimental phase.

The main issue of this particular meeting, defined by participants, was analysed directly from the tapes. The questions shown in Figure 4 were chosen to give a feel of the relationship and both parties’ verbal intentions. These criteria were adopted from previous social work research, apart from the final one, which was operationalized from a philosophical theory about intentional action (Moya, 1990).

The dependent variables were therefore measured from the questionnaires and the tapes. The researcher coded the questionnaire responses. Another coder, blind for the setting, checked the
reliability of the coding. The result was a 70–80% correspondence with an error margin of one classification per multiple choice question. This probably meant that the classification criteria for these questions were somewhat unclear. The interpretations of the tapes were not double-checked, because they were even more complex and subjective than the questionnaires.

**Procedure**

The sample of ten cases to one worker represented 20–30% of the child welfare workers’ caseload and 7–11% of the financial aid workers’ caseload. In the end, 52% of the questionnaires were completed. These represented the population, except for cases where the workers planned or had taken a child from the family by force. The participating social workers had only a few of these families during this time, and they did not want the research to interfere in the process. Most of the drop-outs occurred because the clients did not have scheduled contacts with the worker within the time limits of the research. Some of these clients probably did not want to have contact with the social workers.

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Results

A full report has been published in Finnish (Sundman, 1995) and only the main results are reported and discussed here. Before presenting the results, some qualifications are in order which mean that the results should be interpreted with caution. The main identified problems were:

(1) The key solution-focused concept ‘goal’ is, in social work practice, a complicated ongoing negotiation, if done at all. It was therefore difficult to know when there was an agreement and what exactly the agreement was about.

(2) The experimental and control groups did differ in some respects, as noted above. Lack of money forced the researcher to do most of the solution-focused training supervision, matching of the groups and interpretation of the results. In spite of some double-checking, analyses of the relationships in question and emphasising the workers’ independence, the researcher still influenced the results to some extent.

(3) All research has to focus on something specific, in this case decision-making as part of the social worker–client relationship. The workers however make some of their decisions with their peers, managers and workers in other agencies. The design therefore captured only a part of what workers did with and for their clients.

Positive vs negative statements

At Time 1 (the baseline) there were on average more positive statements in the questionnaires about the clients’ living situation in the
experimental group compared to the control group at the same time ($\chi^2 = 9.81, p < 0.01$). These were statements like ‘The child has gone to school on some days’ as opposed to statements like ‘The child has not gone to school regularly’ (or no such statements). This difference was not evident at Time 2 six months later. Instead, within the control group neutral statements like ‘They now have a job’ were more common at Time 2 than at Time 1 ($\chi^2 = 11.66, p < 0.005$). The control group started with more negative statements and ended up with statements similar to the experimental group. They therefore saw more positive change occur during their work. The experimental group on the other hand based their work on a more positive view. The solution-focused ideas thus showed up as a more positive baseline, but they did not seem to help to create more change. Several interpretations are possible. It is possible that the control group did a better job. Changes in the lives of single men who were more strongly represented in the experimental group were perhaps harder to achieve compared to the lives of families. Further, it is possible that the expectations of change were higher in the experimental group and that an initial negative view gives more space for positive change.

**Shared views**

The tapes revealed that a shared view of the clients’ life situation became more common within the experimental group.\(^1\) A shared view meant that statements from both parties were used to describe the clients’ situation in the same way. For instance, *Client*: ‘I can’t live with this money’; *Worker*: ‘How much more money do you need to live?’ A worker-centric view would have involved statements such as: ‘All right, let’s see what the norm says about that.’ These workers paid closer attention to what the clients *said*, instead of interpreting what they *meant*. Closer analysis however gave the impression that the workers were usually accepting the clients’ views at face value, without reflection, as one would expect in these complicated matters; the workers’ expertise could have been useful for the clients.

**Goals**

At Time 2, the experimental group worked on fewer goals than before ($t = 1.7, p < 0.05$). They usually agreed on one or two goals

\(^1\) There were insufficient tapes from the control group analysis.
instead of two or three. They took into account more areas of the clients’ life at Time 2 than did the control group ($t = 1.7, p < 0.05$). These accounts were about money, relationships, work, health, and so on. They started with a broader view and then focused on something more specific with their clients.

**Social work interventions**

At Time 2, the social workers in the experimental group had made fewer interventions for and with their clients compared to Time 1 ($\chi^2 = 17.51, p < 0.01$) (Figure 5). The clients in both groups remained as active as before; they all got as far towards their goals as before, but the clients in the experimental group were happier with the help they had received ($\chi^2 = 18.47, p < 0.01$). This implies that the same results were reached in spite of fewer efforts by the social workers. It is possible that previously they had been doing too much or too many unnecessary things. Maybe they were supporting their clients’ efforts most. This suggests that it may be possible in this kind of work to rely more on clients’ own efforts.

**Personal vs organizational representation.** Analysis of the audiotapes at Time 2 showed that statements made by nearly all social workers and all the clients in the experimental group represented themselves rather than an agency or referrer. For instance, a worker who concluded: ‘We have decided to give you this benefit’ was considered to represent an agency (her own organization). A worker summarizing: ‘I have decided to give you this benefit’ represented herself. Both the clients and the workers became in a sense more personal instead of acting on behalf of somebody else. They seemed to invest more in the kind of collaboration supported by both social work theory and the solution-focused tradition. Social work theory stresses the importance of tailoring care to the individual and the solution-focused approach encourages people to express personal desires and to act on them.

**Investment in change.** At Time 2, there were more frequent statements conveying a positive approach to problem-solving, for example, ‘What do you need to do in order for things to be all right’ and ‘I think I will manage it’, ‘Is there anything that can be done?’ or ‘Who knows about tomorrow’. These changes are shown in Figure 6. Under the influence of solution-focused ideas, both the workers
and the clients in the test group got into solving the problems, even though caseloads were rising and the living conditions for clients did not improve. Maybe they maintained their hope for a better future? Maybe small achievements had not yet made a real difference?

Interpretation of change. There were no statistically significant differences in goal achievement between the experimental group and the control group. There was however a qualitative difference between the groups. At Time 2, clients in the experimental group thought, in general, that their own accomplished intentional actions meant a positive change for them. Previously they had reported some change, but the change did not mean a real difference for the better. It seemed as if those workers who were influenced by solution-focused ideas started to plan and support
the clients’ actions in a way the clients felt meant something better for them. One client reported, for instance, that he started to use more money for food instead of bus fares; but this made no positive change for him, because he could not now visit his son, who was living some way away. In a similar situation another client said that he used his money to decorate his apartment, which was a positive change, because he could then finally invite his relatives for a visit. This suggests that the goals, although similar, were differently, maybe even more thoroughly, negotiated. If so, one important aspect of the solution-focused approach had been useful.

Conclusions

Using a solution-focused approach did not change the entire outcome of the client–worker relationships investigated. Only

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twenty-four statistically significant differences were found out of 124 possible. There were no significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in the extent to which clients achieved their goals. This was not really surprising given the limited training provided. One can hardly expect that a small change in the method of intervention would alter the entire picture. However, clients seemed more satisfied and more focused towards their goals and they also became more engaged in problem-solving with the social worker.

In other words, when social workers used solution-focused thinking, their relationship with their clients began with a broader and more positive view of the clients’ situation. The relationship became more personal and focused only on a few goals which were based on a shared view. Both parties intended to accomplish the goals. The workers actually did less for them, but the clients did a good job for themselves. The goals and the means did not look different from standard social work practice. The goals were not accomplished any faster, but again this is not surprising. New words and talking alone do not provide much-needed money, and child welfare problems do not disappear in six months. However, there are indications that solution-focused ways of achieving the goals nevertheless meant a more positive change for clients. The workers’ positive attitude may have helped and the goals might also have been more thorough and more what the clients wanted.

References


