

Is it really that simple?

Minimalism in Solution Focused Brief Therapy

At the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, in the room used for observing therapeutic work there was an inscription on the wall: “Keep it simple”.

This motto reminded everyone that their task was to observe what the therapist and client are doing and to focus on the resources that can help the client achieve her/his goal.

To this day, these words guide practitioners who set off to follow the direction set by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer and study Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT¹).

“Can it be that simple?” - Asked the organizers of the EBTA conference in Brugge many years ago. True to the essence of the SFBT approach, and yet provoking reflection, this question has accompanied me since then.

In my practice of SFBT therapy, I use to experience two types of situations:

- Old experience that all the time remains fresh in my memory; this is the discovery I made right after I had experienced the revelation of SFBT and begun working in this model; this revealed a completely new world, clear and simple, consistent with the promise to give responsibility to the client. The experience of making these discoveries is repeated in infinite variations in my work as SFBT mentor and supervisor, supporting SFBT work and learning in my other colleagues
- The recurring question about why something works, how I should do something to make it as useful as possible for the client, as helpful as it can be to him. It's a reflection, how little I know about what to do to work best. It's an experience that it's not so easy. These are the questions about the essence of effectiveness.

Both of these experiences focus on the issue of the simplicity of the approach and the assumption of minimalism in its application.

I would like to argue that minimalism is both presupposed and explicitly pronounced in the works of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. De Shazer, called a man with the Ockham's razor, did not tolerate sageing and unnecessary complications of therapeutic work. However, was he so parsimonious always and everywhere? He was not in his books, where he considered eloquently and from many points of view the issues he posed². But he certainly was in discussions, where he would famously summarize what he felt was meaningless ramblings with his famous *bullshit!*. And he was a true minimalist in his practice, where the questions he asked either hit the nail on the head, or he would abandon them and try formulating a different one.

If something works - do more of it; if it does not work - let it go.

^{1 1} I use here the abbreviation SFBT, as now widely adopted determination of the approach, to ensure clarity for the reader, although in my therapeutic and training practice I use the abbreviation that we established in Poland in 1991 with I. K. Berg and S. de Shazer - BSFT.

² You can recall here the phenomenal considerations about the language in de Shazer S., *Words Original Magic*, Norton & Company, New York London, 1994

What is *simple*?

It's important to ask what is implied by *simple* in this context, i.e. what is meant to be simplicity in SFBT.

as According to a common-sense Wikipedia definition:

Simplicity is the state or quality of being simple. Something easy to understand or explain seems simple, in contrast to something complicated. (...) something is simple or complex depending on the way we choose to describe it. In some uses, the label "simplicity" can imply beauty, purity, or clarity. In other cases, the term may occur with negative connotations to suggest, a deficit or insufficiency of nuance or of complexity of a thing, relative to what one supposes as required.

The concept of simplicity has been related to in the field of epistemology and philosophy of science (e.g., in Occam's razor). Religions also reflect on simplicity with concepts such as divine simplicity. In the context of human lifestyle, simplicity can denote freedom from hardship, effort or confusion (...)³.

Oxford Dictionary says that simplicity is:

- The quality or condition of being easy to understand.
- The quality or condition of being plain or uncomplicated in form or design.
- A thing that is plain or uncomplicated.

Thus, simplicity is considered a virtue. People who are characterized by simplicity and have an ascetic approach to the world are often assumed to possess valuable common-sense wisdom. In many religions, simplicity is a trait that predisposes to salvation⁴. In design or fashion, simplicity is thought to be a manifestation of good taste. In mathematics, simplicity, or elegance, is inherent to a good mathematical proof. In other sciences, simplicity of an argument is taken as a sign of expertise and high competence of the person presenting the subject. Someone who can present her/his thesis in a simple way is considered a person with a deep knowledge of things.

It's good to be simple.

The discussion about what is simplicity in SFBT has been going on for many years. In the background of these disputes, the question is often asked who is and who is not a SFBT therapist or who is a purist of the method. Here are the most common definitions of simplicity in SFBT:

- Simplicity as a simple model / scheme of conduct - that is, *proceeding according to the session structure* and / or *principles of the Central Philosophy*

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simplicity>

⁴ *I am who I am*, as God reveals to Moses in the Book of Exodus, 3.14. How can any word express Eternity? Only with simplicity.

- Simplicity as a parsimony requirement - that is, acting according to the principle: *whether it could be simplified even more*
- Simplicity as a stance of *not knowing* in working with a client - means *being simple in relation* with a client
- Simplicity as *not adding anything unnecessary* to theory - means *acting in accordance with the Ockham razor principle*
- Simplicity as *following the Simple Therapy* procedure
- Simplicity as *a testimony to the elegance of the therapist's practice / the entire structure of the BSFT model* - more the result of other activities than the action itself
- The simplicity as *the condition required for not leaving traces* in the client's life

Is it so easy to *keep it simple*?

Yes, of course.

Referring to simplicity of the SFBT work model⁵, we come to the conclusion that following the relatively uncomplicated SFBT session structure can bring satisfying outcomes. Both the practice of working in the SFBT model and empirical research on therapy efficiency suggest that following the SFBT work model benefits the clients⁶.

Following this uncomplicated approach to therapy or helping⁷ step-by-step, clearly helps clients to look for changes in their lives and to accomplish them.

One can of course ask what is effective in this method, or what is effective and what is unnecessary in it. The idea of not being complicated by exclusion of unnecessary or ineffective elements is present in SFBT's work from the beginning⁸. Its proponents justify this procedure based on two aspirations:

⁵ Described as the scheme of the first session and the next sessions - see, for example, handouts from Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee, but also de Shazer s., Kim Berg I., Lipchik E, and others, Brief Therapy: Focused Solution Development, Family Proces, 1986.

⁶ All studies described by the list started thanks to the work of Dr. A. Macdonald and mentioned in publications such as Macdonald A., Solution-focused Therapy: Theory, Research and Practice, London, Sage, 2007; Gringerich WJ, Kim JS, MacDonald AJ, Solution - Focused Brief therapy Outcome reserarch, in Fraklin C., Trepper t. S., Gringerich WJ, McCollum E., Solution -Focused Brief Therapy: A Handbook of evidence-based practice, New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 2012.

⁷ This thread of thinking about SFBT as a structural model, ie implemented in accordance with a specific session structure, was present at the beginning of its construction, e.g. Kral R., Strategies that Work, Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee, sec ed. 1989. Similar thinking sometimes appears in connection with the considerations of implementing artificial intelligence or on-line programs for SFBT in the work by providing the client with specific sequences of questions

⁸ One example of this is to leave the therapist outside the therapist's entire information baggage (usually creating a negative image of the client) resulting from the examination of the history of the problem, so liked by representatives of other approaches. A breakthrough discovery that solutions do not have to be related to problems has opened the door to a completely different way of helping.

1. Do not leave any traces in the life of the client
2. The simpler - the faster, that is, the more brief

However, leaving no traces in the lives of our clients is not a value in itself, but rather a suggestion about how to work to strengthen the sense of client's agency and responsibility. Importantly, this aspiration does not require limiting the tools the therapist uses in their work, but rather postulates *the therapist's removal from the client's field of view, helping with non-existence*. It can be implemented in many different ways⁹.

The second aspiration, to radically simplify one's work model, appears to be very attractive. The fewer elements of the work program need to be implemented, the less time it will take to complete it. The fewer elements of the procedure / session scheme, the shorter the work needed to achieve the goal¹⁰. Unfortunately, in many situations this is not an effective rule. Strikingly, a different principle is sometimes true - *the slower it is, the faster*. When working with people, we have to deal with multiple-fold systems, so it is difficult to have confidence in what effects we will achieve by taking the next step, asking the next question. For example, there is a common belief among therapists that a client who sits on an armchair in front of us, and sometimes pays for it from their own pocket, has a purpose, wants something. Meanwhile, many of our clients come to therapy because they were obliged to schedule a visit with a therapist¹¹. Working with such a client will require extraordinarily long time to reflect on its goals and motivation, and only after explaining these issues will the therapy rapidly gain momentum. In such cases, one cannot dispose of the slow and cumbersome process of developing the sense of security and comfort in the client.

Notwithstanding, the aspiration to simplify one's work model provokes deep reflection on the possibility of limiting the techniques, questions and activities used by the therapist. It is therefore a step towards extending the principle of minimalism in SFBT.

Simplicity and minimalism are also often considered in the context of the absence of the underlying theoretical model in SFBT. But conversely, the simplicity of the SFBT approach does not have much to do with the lack of theory, but rather with its¹² skeletal nature. Looking closely at SFBT practice, it becomes clear that this approach is based on a collection of theoretical assumptions – views on language, on the process of change, on the systemic structure of the world and phenomena, etc. Further, each therapist working in this model adds to this hers/his beliefs about values, ethics, priorities, hers/his linguistic and cultural

⁹ For example the extra question invented by P. Panayotov: What can be the next question I may ask you now? See: Simple Therapy.

¹⁰ Just to remind the reader: it is not the therapy goal to make it lasting less, its goal is to help the client.

¹¹ So therapy helps them to achieve a goal that is not connected with the help they may get from the therapist – but rather with the therapist's existence.

¹² Which means this approach .

experiences. This is because the SFBT does not build¹³ its own Theory¹⁴, nor is it based on any Theory.

How to *keep it simple*?

If SFBT was based on some theoretical findings - it would not be possible to adapt it to so many contexts of application. The simplicity of the approach is necessary so that it can be flexible and effective in different contexts. Thanks to this, SFBT is able to adapt to different contexts, situations and clients as one of the few therapeutic approaches.

Each client needs a sense of security in their therapy, support in defining the goal she/he wants to achieve, and incentives to take action and remain active. These tools can help a client who wishes to develop their competences, but they will also be useful *to some extent* when working with a client who wants to get out of depression or re-establish their relationship. But *to some extent* means they *need to be adapted*.

Each adaptation will consist in taking into account the specificity of a given situation or context - that is, it inevitably leads to complicating and relativizing a simple work scheme. Each adaptation requires the addition of specific elements, emphasizing or expanding its specific parts, or even adding something that is not necessary in a different context / situation. Consequently, the work model becomes more complex¹⁵.

Another way to achieve simplicity in SFBT is then to assume a stance of empty mind. The stance of empty mind¹⁶ is described in SFBT as a stance of not knowing, openness and not imposing any meaning or interpretation by the therapist on the client. To put it differently, it is to a certain extent the resignation from our experience and knowledge that we acquired during both the training to the profession and professional / life experience. However, not giving meaning to what you hear and see is a very demanding task. Our entire process of learning about and moving around the world is based on understanding the meaning of its elements - therefore, the stance of not knowing puts the therapist in a situation of abstaining from the natural processes of cognitive action¹⁷.

¹³ One example of this is to leave the therapist outside the therapist's entire information baggage (usually creating a negative image of the client) resulting from the examination of the history of the problem, so liked by representatives of other approaches. A breakthrough discovery that solutions do not have to be related to problems has opened the door to a completely different way of helping.

¹⁴ I use a capital letter here to refer to Steve de Shazer's postulate on the lack of theory (as a constitutive notation), although the possibility of using theory (as different variants of description and explanation of the helping process) ordering work in SFBT.

¹⁵ That means *it is not the same simple*, but it still can follow the rules of SFBT.

¹⁶ I use the term mentioned here by meditation schools to emphasize the special nature of such behavior.

¹⁷ This is in sharp contradiction to the theses of constructionism or general: postmodern understanding of the world, saying that there is no way to escape the socially, conceptually recognized and constructed vision of reality. According to the thesis of postmodernism, in the human experience, there is no reality as such - only reality understood according to some point of view.

Developers and SFBT teachers give us a hint of what we should do in exchange: focus on the client's point of view, language, wording and goals¹⁸. However, this does not change the fact that we are not entirely able to avoid the processes shaping our cognition.¹⁹

That is why practitioners of SFBT often struggle - and sometimes lose the fight - with their thinking, understanding of the client's situation or emerging temptations to give an interpretation or suggestion of therapeutic technique to the client who does not ask for any.

One of the moments when such a temptation appears particularly strongly are situations when we think about the client's story in terms that our education imposes on us or the vision / understanding of reality shared by us. Unfortunately, our cognitive constructs might not necessarily be consistent with the client's vision, so it is always better to ask what does the client want or think.

Another way to deal with this problem is to follow the Simple Therapy rules developed by Plamen Panayotov²⁰

This way of being simple is really very helpful for the therapist, because it is based on clearly formulated guidelines, along with proposals for specific questions to the client. Following this variant of SFBT allows one to avoid the threat of introducing some unnecessary elements to their work model²¹. but can it safeguard therapist against relying on their own interpretation of reality?

Of course, it is possible to treat the assumption of following the client in a radical way and assigning him total responsibility for the change / therapy process. However, this does not seem to be consistent with the assumptions of constructionism or systemic / cybernetic thinking about the meeting of the therapist and the client²².

Does it have to be that *simple*?

The claim that applying the principle of simplicity in SFBT practice is not easy or even impossible leads, of course, to a question about the boundaries within which simplicity is

¹⁸ According to the principle of acting and speaking in positive terms - the existence and beginning of something, not end or absence - see the principles of a well-formulated goal according to Insoo Kim Berg, e.g. Kim Berg I., Reuss H. N., Step by Step Solutions, A Substance Abuse Treatment Manual, Norton & Company, New York London, 1898.

¹⁹ The very interesting issue is if it would be better to be really stupid and ignorant as some may interpret this assumption. I would never say so, as my personal point is that not knowing stance is a strongly behavioral limitation put on the therapist, not the expectation to be ignorant. The more you know the better for both you and your client. The less you implement your knowledge into client's life the more space you left for client's competences.

²⁰ See, for example, The Difficulties and Benefits of Being and Simple Therapist Plamen Panayotov, Alasdair Macdonald, Boyan Strahilov, published at http://en.solutions-centre-rousse-bulgaria.org/files/the_difficulties_and_benefits_of_being_a_simple_therapist.pdf

²¹ Of course, I do not undermine its effectiveness for many customers, but its consistent use is often very difficult and demanding for many people

²² If we look at therapy as a process of internal change taking place on the road of reflection on oneself and one's life, it is easy to compare it to meditation. This way of reflecting on therapy was considered especially by psychotherapists of humanistic trends, eg Welwood J., On Psychotherapy and Meditation, In: Welwood J., Awakening the Heart, Boston, London, Shambala, 1985; Schoen S., A Note on Gestalt Responsibility and Buddhist Non-Attachment, The Gestalt Journal, Vol. VII, No.2, Fall 1984. One of the forms of therapy they described was the therapy used in Japan and based on the silence of the therapist and the client, which were rather a form of common meditation! Can there be more trust in the client and his responsibility for himself?

possible. One of the variants of this question is the issue of the admissibility of introducing into SFBT work techniques originating or identified with other therapeutic approaches.

„In debating the issue of what differentiates SFBT from other approaches, one seasoned Solution Focused therapist suggested that one would not see a Solution Focused therapist giving advice. This brought a quizzical look to Insoo`s face. „What?“ she said. „You mean that if you knew something that would help the client, you wouldn`t tell them?“. The Solution Focused conviction that clients have the information they need to design and achieve the desired outcome can sometimes be taken to mean that the therapist never offers ideas, suggestions, or alternatives during a therapeutic conversation.”²³

This quote from Steve de Shazer, along with many examples from the sessions by Steve and Insoo, simply says that it is possible. Steve complements this with two reservations:

1. The client is always the first and the main source of suggestions or techniques, and the therapist is frugal in proposing them
2. Inclusions from the SFBT therapist are only suggestions, and never any definitive term of things. The client should always be invited by the therapist to review these inclusions, eg by the question "Does that make sense for you?"²⁴

SFBT is absolutely open to the use of any techniques, conversational interventions or work styles by therapists²⁵. Such openness is possible thanks to the simple structure of the session, *the selection of only few elements* of the therapist's conduct to the canon of its operation.

For the safe use of such additions²⁶, however, it is necessary to adhere to the principles of Central Philosophy and other principles that are described as the philosophical basis of the approach. This fact is also a response to the frequently asked question about whether it is more important in SFBT to use techniques, or the session pattern, or rather the philosophical assumptions of the work. You cannot separate them.

The openness of SFBT and its simple structure without philosophical assumptions will guide the therapist towards applying not only different techniques but also a different way of thinking that is associated with them. The philosophical assumptions themselves, without sticking to some degree of work pattern, will lead him towards philosophical considerations and losing sight of the client's goal, because in order to achieve it, s/he needs a certain discipline of behavior that fits in the SFBT work pattern.

Philosophy without action is a wandering without real value, acting without a foundation in a well-established system of philosophical views is a reaction to the world, not its creation.

²³ De Shazer S., Dolan Y., (and others), *More than Miracles, The State of the Art. Of Solution Focused Therapy*, The Haworth Press, New York London Oxford, 2007 .

²⁴ De Shazer S., Dolan Y., (and others), *More than Miracles, The State of the Art. Of Solution Focused Therapy*, The Haworth Press, New York London Oxford, 2007 .

²⁵ *If it works , do it* – says one of the rules of Central Philosophy.

²⁶ If the therapist is not aware of this, he may risks a quick descent on the trail of strategic therapies, looking for ways to effectively influence clients in more and more techniques. The world is full of therapists asking what techniques to use when working with schizophrenics, children, therapists, etc. Knowledge about these techniques that have worked in the practice of other therapists and other clients, or in other models of helping, can be very inspiring or severely disrupting work in SFBT.

SFBT needs to be simple

In sum, sticking to simplicity is one of the basic values of SFBT. It is its hallmark and also the way of understanding the therapist's practice. That does not imply, however, a constant pursuit to simplify everything, but rather postulates that one should remain faithful to simple ways of acting and understanding / explaining reality, without adding unnecessary new elements to those that are already included in the approach.

Insoo Kim Berg always encouraged her students to follow the SFBT model. We do the same when we train our students²⁷, not only out of respect for our Teachers, but also from the purely practical point of view that the elements in the session structure are useful and needed.

But always, when our work with a particular client requires it - which means that this client will be asking for it or the next step in the session structure will be needed - we adapt our work model by adding a comment, explanation, education, introducing a construct that will make the client's situations more clear or beneficial, even if it means making things more complex²⁸.

Persisting in simplicity is about doing what is necessary, not the value of itself.

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- Oxford English Dictionary,
- Book of Exodus.

²⁷ At the Brief Therapy Center in Łódź, Poland, a center that has been promoting SFBT since 1990.

²⁸ For example, we will tell a psychologist about his personality traits or a member of the AA movement about his addiction.