

Interview with Insoo Kim Berg

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Amsterdam, May 12, 2004 - There is probably not a single person more important to the invention and development of the solution-focused practice than Insoo Kim Berg. This fragile American lady from Korean origin has a gigantic reputation. She is one of the most important inspirators of nearly all of the solution-focused consultants I know. Together with her partner Steve De Shazer, she developed solution-focused brief therapy. Currently, she often travels the world doing consultancy and training people. Last year, she did a workshop in our Dutch training program for consultants and coaches. This year, I met her in an Amsterdam hotel and we had this conversation by the fireplace.

You are an important inspiration to many. Who are your main inspirators?

(laughing)... Oh gosh, I don't know! What a hard question Don't you have an easy question to start off with?

(laughing)....ok, sorry How about this one? When did you start inventing the solution-focused way of doing therapy?

In the sixties, I was doing therapy and I was very dissatisfied with the traditional therapy approach. I realized: 'This doesn't work'. And that was quite something! Just must know, I had a typical Asian girl background: very obedient. I was sent to finishing high school in Korea, the type of school that teaches you to be a good housewife. And my mother's main mission had been to have me married into a nice family. It was quite a revolution that a girl like me could do something like that...be disobedient about how to do therapy.

I knew I had to be disobedient quietly. I started reading a lot and I came across a text by Jay Haley called 'The power tactics of Jesus Christ'. Can you imagine that? This was a shock! I was shaken up. That was the beginning. That you could look at things like that! Then, I read his book 'Uncommon Therapy'. And in the early seventies I started to do things differently. And I really read a lot. For instance a book by Paul Watzlawick of MRI, The Mental Research Institute, in Palo Alto in California. Jay Haley, John Weakland and Paul Watzlawick worked there.

They did strategic brief therapy didn't they? Sort of a predecessor of Solution-focused brief therapy, wasn't it?

Right. They stated that the attempted solution was the problem. They asked the question 'what maintains the problem'? It was a very interesting approach. And it was an important step forward compared to the really problem focused approach that had been dominant. Shortly after that, I went out to study there. John Weakland, who was married to a Chinese lady, became something of a mentor to me.

In this period, I also met Steve, who was also working in California. At that time, he was experimenting with a one-way screen. The therapist would do the session, and behind the one-way screen, there was a team observing the session. Near the end of the session, the therapist would go and discuss the session with the team behind the one-way screen and then go back to the client and finish the session. And Steve and I spend quite some hours together behind the screen.

(Laughs)... It was funny, he used to say: 'You put a spell on me!' I convinced Steve to come back to Milwaukee and there we moved in with each other.

I worked in a therapy practice, and I did well. I worked very hard, and I accepted cases the other therapists would rather not take. We introduced the one way screen. I did the therapy, and behind the screen was a team watching. And I used it to teach students about therapy. And they loved it. Finally, they had a chance to watch therapy sessions. But my colleagues did not like it at all. They were convinced we were doing things that were unethical. There was quite a lot of pressure. At a certain point, my colleagues even would look the other way when I met them in the hallway. I now know, I made the mistake of talking too much about what we were doing. That way it got too much attention. We should have just continued without talking much about it. I decided to leave because of the pressure. And we started our own practice. Because we hardly had any money, we started off in our own living room.

It was a small house. We did the session in the living room and there was a camera on the steps to tape the session. Can you imagine? (laughs) The dining table was our office. After some time, we saved some money and we could start rent a real office. And then we started developing SFBT by trying things out and finding out what worked.

What was your criterion? How did you notice that something worked?

Oh, you can easily see it. When something worked, the clients started to smile, they got all energized. They said things like: 'Yes!' or 'Oh, I never thought of it that way!' or 'What an idea!'.

And we found out that if something works with one person, it does not guarantee it will work with the next one too. That is why you always have to work with what comes back to you. The responses of the client will show you if what you said worked.

And how important is non-verbal behavior?

It's important. It has to fit with the rest of the behavior and the context. But it is important not to isolate attention to non-verbal behavior. Most people emphasize non-verbal behavior a lot. But if you focus too much on non-verbal behavior it can interfere with the attention you have to have for your client. Mostly if you focus your attention well on your client, your non-verbal behavior will automatically fit.

Is the way you apply solution focused working still evolving or renewing itself?

I certainly hope so.... What I am still trying to achieve is to simplify more what I am doing. Steve always explains the importance of simplicity by referring to Occam's razor (William of Occam, who lived around 1300, argued for the most simple theory that could still explain the facts; quite unusual for his time -CV).

I have found that using scales is a very effective way of achieving this simplicity.

However, it would be wrong to think that because it's simple it's also easy to do. People confuse simple with easy. To be simple takes enormous discipline. Working solution-focused is not easy at all, it is hard. First, there is the technique part. This, you can learn. And then there is the art part. The art part is about what to do when. That part is harder to learn.

Using exceptions is an interesting part of the solution focus. Have you ever found yourself not able to help the client find relevant exceptions to a problem?

Oh yes. It happens quite often. For instance, I was talking to this lady and she was with a Church that required her to pray all of the time. Now, she was convinced that an Evil Spirit got into her body. And when she said: 'Sometimes I can get up and cook' I thought: 'aha, there is an exception!' But she blocked it right off: 'O no, yesterday I couldn't cook'. And then she said things like: 'Sometimes I go out in the woods', or: 'I joined the health club'. And when I tried to talk about these exceptions, she would not talk about it, she kept on blocking me off. What did turn out to work well was that I said: 'You must have been overestimating the power of the Evil Spirit'. She asked why. I explained: 'He has been trying to get you down for many years now and he still has not succeeded.' That helped her see things differently. And then I suggested an exercise with throwing a coin every day. If one side came up she would have to completely ignore the Evil Spirit, never mind what he said. If the other side came up, she should do what she normally did. And in the following sessions she never talked about the evil spirit anymore! In the first session that followed, she mentioned that she was moving to another apartment. And in the next session, which turned out to be the last, she mentioned that she had a boyfriend.

Interesting case! I am curious about another case of yours. Last year you mentioned you were going to work with native Americans?

Yes, that is still going on. These Indians live in a beautiful environment and this is why many people move there, mainly professionals. The Indians face two cultures. One the one side, there is their old culture, on the other side, the new culture they're confronted with. Also the Indians now have more money. They have casinos and don't have to pay taxes over their earnings. So they have a lot more money. But many Indians feel as if they're caught between two worlds.

The reason I am doing sessions there is that there is a lot of violence in this community brought on by excessive alcohol use. It is really special for them to let someone like me in to help them. And it is a very interesting experience. I thought them and me would have something in common. Indians were supposed to have Asian roots, you know? But forget it. (laughs). For instance, during a session, they suddenly go out in the lake and they are talking about the lake. And I am thinking: 'What's the connection?' (laughs). They have a lot to teach me!

Patience?

Yes, patience. Although there is no recognizable progression, they keep showing up to my sessions. And another thing I am learning is that they don't like direct compliments. It makes them feel you put yourself above them. What does seem to work is when you say: 'I would like you to do more of this..'

What makes solution-focused working so interculturally applicable?

We value what the client brings to the situation and work with that. Of course you can't totally leave your ideas behind you. And you don't have to. It is like you have

one foot in the client's world and the other in your own. And if a client says something like 'My boss is a lunatic', I work with that but don't have to agree with it. I don't care if the boss is a lunatic or not. I don't have an opinion about that.

Sometimes when people start to notice how effective the solution focus is at helping people faster and making them less dependent they can start to worry: 'Won't that cost me money'?

This is a central dilemma, and I don't have a clear-cut solution. We have had this ourselves. When we experienced how fast clients were helped, we got financial worries about it too. At a certain point, we even tried to prolong our therapies with two sessions for that reason. And you know what? It did not work. Therapies became even shorter. So, the problem is real. But in the long term, the more effective you are, the better your reputation will become, which will lead to financial success.

Another thing is, despite potential short term financial drawbacks, many people are attracted solution-focused working because it helps clients to be effective so well. And it is cost effective. To many solution-focused practitioners it is really fulfilling to notice that your client is really helped. Organizations would really benefit if more consultants would adopt the solution-focused approach.

You're doing consultancy yourself now?

Yes, nowadays, I don't do much therapy. I do many trainings all over the world, and I am helping many organizations. I do a lot of solution focused management training. For instance, I train middle managers and team leaders. I help them manage their team members in a solution-focused way. Sometimes, when we do role-plays, they are shocked. For instance, we do a role-play in which a manager talks to an employee who shows up late for work. And then I say: 'You must have a good reason for being

late. How can I help?' And then I might say: 'What are some of your ideas about solving this problem?' So, by doing this, I am being understanding, helpful, and at the same time I am making my expectations clear. And I keep on asking that: 'What are your ideas about solving this? And those middle managers are amazed and sometimes say: 'If you keep on repeating that, the person will get upset!' But most of the time the employee will not get upset. In fact, the clarity of stating your expectation often helps.

And when they do get upset?

Sometimes they do. For instance, they may start to complain. And then I show understanding.

And then?

And then I move on to: 'And what are some of your ideas about how to solve this?' (laughs)

(laughing) You are tough! Sometimes people think that the solution focus is touchy-feely. What do you think about that?

It is not. You are right: I am tough. People might get that impression of touchy-feely because the way you phrase your interventions softens so much. It is very helping and understanding. But it is also very goal oriented. And it is not touchy-feely.

If you're working in an organization, there will be a hierarchy. That is how an organization works. There is top management who takes decisions and provides direction. And middle management implements it. And if an employee is underperforming that is a problem. You see, as a manager, you expect a performance of an employee. That is the contract you have with him. But it is hardly ever necessary to be authoritative. You get a far more productive conversation when you

use those solution-focused techniques I mentioned.

Any more things you'd like to share?

There is also some fantastic news about schools. Many alternative high schools, schools for children with learning and behavioral problems, face severe problems, like violence and drug use. There is one public school I am working with, in Austin Texas, the Garza Independence High School, that does things differently. They have 400 students. They have never advertised. All students volunteered to join the school. The teachers are called facilitators. And the children are in charge of their own learning. They are treated as responsible; they can come and go whenever they want. And, you can guess what happens, they show responsibility. This school is now drawing national attention. There are no metal detectors or other special safety measures, and the school is safe. The results are very good.

In another school for special education, I am working with in Fort Lauderdale in Florida, teachers are looking at classes as units. They work with goals for the week and use scales for that. The teacher might say: 'My goal is for you to be a 6 at the end of the week'. Every time the teacher notices progress he pays attentions and compliments. Then they gradually moved into helping students set goals and use scales them selves. By Friday, they review the results. In a special scheme the student rates where he is now on the scale. And the teacher does the same. If the goal was a 6 six and the teacher gives a score of 5, he will say something like: 'Okay, you're at five, what is your plan?' This approach delivers good results. For instance, disciplinary measures have gone down. And teachers are so excited. They say things like 'We are making a difference in a student's life' And that is precisely why most of them became teachers in the first place. So, they start to use it more and more.

It's contagious!

It is! What you typically see is that a school starts with the school counselor working solution-focused. They then start to think: 'Hey, this might work for teachers too!'

I just came back from an Institution in the north of The Netherlands, what was it called again?.....Jeugdzorg Drenthe in Assen. They are doing some fantastic things. The director, Peter, is trained in the solution-focus and the entire staff is now trained too. They are not only applying it with the children, their clients, but also in the way they run their organization. And they are doing fantastic things, very innovative. And they are very enthusiastic.

We have to end the interview. We leave the fireplace and Insoo walks me to the door and starts to shiver and laugh: "Oh, it's cold. Why is it so cold? That's one thing solution focused working does not work with!"

With thanks to Gwenda Schlundt Bodien and Kirsten Dierolf

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