The Solution-Focused Mindset:
An Empirical Test of Solution-Focused Assumptions

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A web-based survey was administered which was filled in by 134 solution-focused practitioners to test a proposed set of nine solution-focused assumptions. The degree to which the respondents could be called solution-focused was established by asking about their number of years of experience with the solution-focused approach and how intensively they use the solution-focused approach. Then, respondents were asked to say to which degree they agreed with nine statements. Intensity of use of the solution-focused approach correlated positively with levels of agreement for all of the 9 assumptions. Length of experience correlated positively with levels of agreement for all of but two of the 9 assumptions. These findings suggest that these variables effectively describe a solution-focused mindset. The set of assumptions may be used for educational purposes and for further research.

The role of assumptions in solution-focused

The solution-focused approach is an approach to helping people achieve change which is based on solution-focused brief therapy (de Shazer, 1988; Walter & Peller, 1992; De Jong & Berg, 2001) and which is now used also in fields like coaching (Visser, 2011; Visser, 2012), management and teaching. It can be defined as an approach in which a practitioner, for example a coach or therapist, supports clients by viewing and treating them as unique and competent, being responsive to whatever they say, helping them to verbalize and visualize the changes they want to achieve and to help them make progress by helping them to build, step-by-step, on what they have already been doing that works while meeting non-negotiable demands (Visser, 2010).

The solution-focused approach has yielded techniques such as scaling questions (de Shazer, 1986), the miracle question (de Shazer, 1988), coping questions (Lipchick, 1988), exception-seeking questions (de Shazer, 1985) and past success questions (de Shazer, 1985).

Equally important as this set of solution-focused techniques is the set assumptions from which is worked. Technique and assumptions can be seen as the two pedals of a bike. With a bike, one needs to push both of the pedals in order to ride the bike. The pedals are interdependent: pushing one pedal will also move the other. The same is the case with solution-focused approach's 'pedals'. Working from solution-focused assumptions will help one to use the solution-focused techniques more effectively and credibly. Knowledge and skillful use of the techniques will enable solution-focused practitioners to express their solution-focused assumptions more effectively.

A paradox of solution-focused assumptions is that solution-focused assumptions both seem to precede solution-focused practice and result from them. Effectively practicing the solution-focused approach requires that practitioners work from the solution-focused assumptions. At the same time, effectively practicing the solution-focused approach is likely to change their view on people, change and helping in the direction of the solution-focused assumptions. For example, doing solution-focused conversations effectively requires a great deal of optimism about people and change but is also likely to gradually make practitioners more optimistic about people and change.

Several of the most influential publications in the field offer lists of basic solution-focused

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assumptions (Walter & Peller, 1992; Lipchick, 2002; Jackson and McKergow, 2002, de Shazer, Dolan et al, 2007; Nelson & Thomas, 2007) These lists of assumptions overlap of course but also vary to some extent and have some unique features each time. No empirical tests of any of these sets of assumptions have been done.

Below is a description of solution-focused assumptions is proposed. This set not only points backwards in the sense that it is based on the solution focused literature; it also tries to point forward in the sense that it incorporates some recent new insights from research and practice. The set contains nine assumptions which are divided into three categories: assumptions about people, assumptions about change, and assumptions about helping.

I. Assumptions about people

Solution-focused assumptions about people are optimistic. Solution-focused practitioners view people as autonomous and competent individuals with a desire to do good. They assume that people tend to follow the constructive path as soon as they see it. It is no coincidence that these assumptions about people resemble the universal basic needs of 1) autonomy, 2) competence, and 3) relatedness which have been identified in Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In an earlier article (Visser, 2010) it is argued that the solution-focused approach and Self Determination Theory overlap in their view on people.

These considerations led to the formulation of the following three statements:

1) People prefer to choose for themselves what they initiate and they want to control as much as possible what they do (*need for autonomy*).
2) People prefer to be competent, view themselves as competent and they are already competent to some extent (*need for competence*).
3) People want to have and build meaningful and caring relationships with other people and want to do things that make a positive difference to others (*need for relatedness*).

II. Assumptions about change

The solution-focused approach is based on the assumption that there is always fluctuation and change happening (Molnar de Shazer, 1987). This implies that there are always times at which problems are less severe and times at which beginnings of success have already been happening. Because of this there will always be some things which are already going well which can be amplified to build progress in the desired direction. An assumption in solution-focused change is that one should not change more than necessary. Small steps are generally preferred to large steps. They require little energy and motivation and are usually generative of more change. The best way to generate ideas for steps forward is to elicit vivid pictures of positive behaviors. This can be done by asking people to describe desired future behaviors or by asking them about situations in which they have shown positive behaviors in the past. Once a vivid picture of positive behaviors has been created it will become very easy and attractive for people to start performing that behavior (Visser & Schlundt Bodien, 2009).

These considerations led to the formulation of the following three statements:

1) There is always already a beginning of the desired situation on which further progress can be built (*existence of past success*).
2) People change best by taking actions, one step at a time, and reflecting on and responding to the consequences of those actions so that an intelligible pattern eventually starts to form (*stepwise change*).
3) Positive behavior descriptions, both in the future and in the past, irresistibly trigger positive behaviors (*positive behavior descriptions*).

III. Assumptions about helping

The solution-focused approach is built on the assumption that clients are not resistant to being helped but may resist against the approach taken because they feel it does not fit their situation. When client's preferences and perceptions are

taken very seriously they are most likely to open up more (de Shazer, 1984). Solution-focused practitioners will not confront their client but will keep on working with what their clients bring forward. They are very optimistic about the ability of clients to develop an ever more realistic perspective while conversations proceed. Solution-focused practitioners focus not so much on internal states or constructs within the client but, instead, on the way clients effectively interact with their environment. The solution-focused approach's assumptions about effective helping differ substantially from mainstream therapy's and coaching's assumptions. Instead of directly offering advice based on experience and scientific evidence, solution-focused change assumes that clients will benefit more from identifying solutions within their own experience (Norum, 1978; Anderson, & Goolishian, 1992).

These considerations led to the formulation of the following three statements:

1) Treating clients as cooperative, no matter how resistant they may appear, is the quickest and most promising way to encourage further cooperation (*cooperativity*).
2) Working within the client's frame of reference, without confrontation or blame and without imposing an expert view on the client is the quickest and most promising approach to help the client develop an ever more constructive, realistic and useful perspective (*client perspective*).
3) Focusing on identifying and amplifying what works, rather than on explanations in terms of personal characteristics and problem causes, is the quickest and most promising way to help clients make progress (*focus on what works*).

A web-based survey was administered which was filled in by 134 solution-focused practitioners to test this proposed set of assumptions. 50 respondents took the English version of this survey; 84 took the Dutch version.

Method

To measure how solution-focused each respondent was, the survey first checked 1) the number of years of experience with the solution-focused approach, and the 2) how intensively the solution-focused approach was used. This was done by asking the following two questions:

1. *Years of experience*: When did you, as a coach, start to use the solution-focused approach? (The solution-focused approach is the approach that is based on the work of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues of the Brief Family Therapy Center). Response options: 1) I don't use the solution-focused approach, 2) I started using it recently, 3) I started using it recently, 4) I started using it recently, 5) I started using it long ago (>10 years ago).
2. *Intensity of use*: How intensively do you use the solution-focused approach? Response options: 1) I don't use the solution-focused approach (or hardly ever use it), 2) I combine it with other approaches, 3) I (nearly) always use the solution-focused approach.

Then, respondents were asked to say to which agree they agreed with the 9 statements on the following 5 point-scale: 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) neither agree nor disagree, 4) agree, 5) strongly agree.

The general expectation in this study is that the longer more intensely respondents have used the approach the more they will agree with each of the statements.

Results

An exploratory factor analysis on the assumptions variables was done in an attempt to reduce to the 9 variables into a smaller set of factors. This was not the case. A one-factor solution emerged which explained 55% of the variance. Cronbach's alpha over these 9 variables was .90, which suggests these items might together be used as an internally consistent scale.

Graph 1 shows the mean level of agreement with the nine assumptions.

Graph 1: Overall agreement with the nine statements
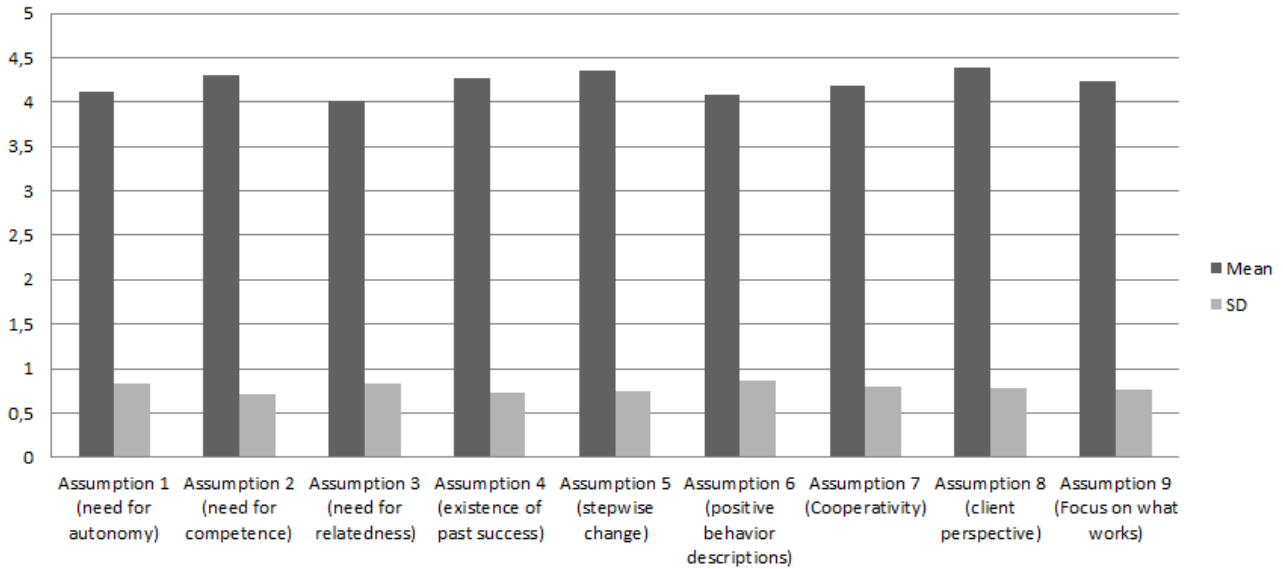
The survey also checked 1) the number of years of experience with the solution-focused approach, and the 2) how intensively the solution-focused approach was used. The purpose of these questions was to check my expectation that the longer people and more exclusively people used the approach the more they would agree with each of the statements.

Table 1 shows the correlations between the level of agreement with the nine assumptions and intensity of use and length of experience.

Table 1: Correlations between the level of agreement with the nine assumptions and length of experience and intensity of use

		Length of experience	Intensity of use
1.	Need for autonomy	.24**	.33**
2.	Need for competence	.33**	.35**
3.	Need for relatedness	.10	.30**
4.	Existence of past success	.26**	.26**
5.	Stepwise change	.16*	.32**
6.	Positive behaviour descriptions	.20**	.27**
7.	Cooperativity	.26**	.31**
8.	Client perspective	.23**	.30**
9.	Focus on what works	.32**	.47**

* p<.05; ** p<.01

Between length of experience and level of agreement with the solution-focused assumptions significant positive correlations (p< .05) were found except for assumption 3 (need for relatedness) and assumption 5 (stepwise change). Intensity of use of the solution-focused approach correlated positively with levels of agreement for all of the nine assumptions suggests. Length of experience correlated

positively with levels of agreement for all the nine assumptions except for assumption 3 (need for relatedness). These findings suggest that these variables effectively describe a solution-focused mindset. Computation of Cronbach's alpha (.90) showed that these items can together be used as an internally consistent scale.

Discussion

The high level of overall agreement with the nine assumptions suggests that the assumptions were clearly defined. That intensity of use of the solution-focused approach correlated significantly with levels of agreement for all of the 9 assumptions suggests that these variables effectively describe a solution-focused mindset. This is further supported by the fact that length of experience correlated significantly with levels of agreement for all of but two of the 9 assumptions (3, need for relatedness, and 5, stepwise change). The fact that factor analysis revealed a one-factor solution consisting of all 9 variables and explaining 55% of the variance and Cronbach's alpha over these 9 variables was .90, suggest these items might together be used as an internally consistent scale measuring a solution-focused mindset.

Due to the relatively small sample size and the non-randomness of the sample the generalizability of these results is limited. However, the findings are encouraging and seem useful as a basis for educational purposes and for future studies.

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