

Initial "as if" experience

Some months ago I received an invitation from Ferdinand Wolf to contribute to the EBTA conference book, which was going to be published for the EBTA annual conference in Florence, 2019. Proposition sounded extremely interesting, especially for someone, who possibly never ever before had heard about the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger and his work "Die Philosophie des Als ob" (The philosophy of "As if") (Vaihinger, H., 1911). In reaction to such invitation I've experienced questions like "How can I contribute to the book, without any knowledge about "as if philosophy"?", "Is there anything in my 22 years of SF practice in connection to such topic? Such thoughts got transformed quite rapidly into the question "Suppose you know something about "as if philosophy" on the basis of your practice and thinking... what would you like to say or write?", and later on into conclusion "Tomasz, as if you knew about "as if" for a long time, without conscious knowing about it!" So here I'm now by the hotel's desktop, by the end of February, 2019, as if I could write something about "as if" in my SF practice and thinking.

Initial tips about "as if"

My first intention is to challenge the possibility of using "as if philosophy" toward thinking about SF approach itself rather than to its practical implementations within any therapeutic, or any other context of working with clients. Following the descriptions of Hans Vaihinger's work he "argued that human beings can never really know the underlying reality of the world, and that as a result we construct systems of thought and then assume that these match reality: we behave "as if" the world matches our models. In particular, he used examples from the physical sciences, such as protons, electrons, and electromagnetic waves. None of these phenomena has been observed directly, but science pretends that they exist, and uses observations made on these assumptions to create new and better constructs" (from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Vaihinger)."

Does it sound familiar within our SF tradition? Can we observe such attitude through the years into SF developments, practices and descriptions? On another

desktop, this time in my home, there're four books waiting for me, all of them written by Steve de Shazer. My intention is to reread them, and to be reconnected to Steve's ongoing change about his practice through the years. Can I say that Steve never really knew the underlying reality of his work with clients, and as a result he constructed year by year, session by session new systems of thought and assumed that these matched the reality? Can I say that Steve used observations based on his SF assumptions to create new and better constructs about SF? Can I say, that the basic idea from BFTC in creating SF practice was asking clients about what works, from client to client with open-minded attitude to find out more, to redefine by relying on clients' suggestions and feedback? Can I think that in Milwaukee, all parties involved in the therapeutic experience – client, therapist and the team – cooperated on creating systems of thought about usefulness, basically grounded in clients' suggestions?

Such implementation of the “as if philosophy” leads me, at least “here and now” toward the idea that the only reasonable choice for me, as SF practitioner, is to build “semi-fiction” systems of thought about SF theory and practice, which will be evolving from time to time, from place to place, from client to client as an ongoing process of co-creating useful systems of thought about personal SF practice. It leads me to the idea that any attempt to define SF approach in terms of “What is SF?”, can be replaced by the attempts to describe SF approach in different contexts in terms of “How do I perform that unique SF?” (Lewinski, A., Szczepkowski, J., Switek, T., 2012). Possibly it would fit some of our assumptions like: mind the context, mind the language, mind the client. Peter Sundman and the team, within EBTA task group, made a terrific attempt to describe a wide range of practice within the SF approach, and put it into a kind of practice definition. We can see that, at least in this work, authors followed rather inclusion of many practices, than exclusion of some explorations (Sundman, P., and team in: Switek, T., Panayotov, P., Strahilov, B., 2018)

Having in mind Vaihinger's “as if” concept I can eagerly resign from attempts to define SF approach by using modernistic perspective, which anticipate the possibility to define things in objective and constant way, or even in real way. Instead, I can decide that real description of SF approach lies beyond our possibilities, thus I can co-create only fictional, semi-fictional systems of thought, which allow us to use SF approach in a useful way, without a claim that such

description defines real nature of the SF approach. In my opinion such attitude would be rooted much more in postmodern tradition. It's quite popular within our SF world to refer to Steve de Shazer's "semi-fiction" statement: "Don't think, observe!" (de Shazer, S.,2005), which served me as an inspiration for me to create another "semi-fiction" statement for my practice "Experience, observe, think, co-construct!" (Switek, T., Panayotov, P., Strahilov, B., 2018).

I feel privileged to be a part of SF community for such a long time and I've experienced many attempts to describe SF approaches, which were created in particular contexts. I've observed and studied so many thought systems, like work of Luc Isebaert about Bruges model (Isebaert, L., & Cabié, M. C., 1997; Isebaert, L.,2017) , like Eve Lipchik SF style beyond technique (Lipchik, E.,2002), like Frank Thomas and his "Frank's therapy" (Thomas, F. Cockburn, J.,1998; Thomas, F., 2013), like Thorana Nelson and her connections to systemic thinking (Nelson, T., Thomas, F., 2007), like London's Brief best hopes and minimalism style (George, E., Iveson, C., & Ratner, H.,1999; Iveson, Chris, George, Evan and Ratner, Harvey, 2012), like Plamen Panayotov and his Conversations Led by Clients (CoLeC) (Switek, T., Panayotov, P., Strahilov, B., 2018), known before as Simple Therapy (Panayotov, P., 2011), like Michael Hjerth's resource oriented approach (Switek, T., Panayotov, P., Strahilov, B., 2018), like Tomasz Switek Situations Focused Model, as an open system of helping clients (Switek, T., 2014). I could quote many more example or development, which illustrate the adaptations of SF approach into particular contexts – depending on culture, client, language, time frame, issue (Macdonald, A.J.,2011). After even more than 40 years of SF developments we've achieved the richness of SF approach tastes, styles, practices and definitions, which show us how "true" Vaihinger's concept appeared to be. Our focus on recognizing the difference that makes a difference can also be seen as a direction indicator which allows us to value the richness of SF systems of thought and practices (eg. Sharry, J., Madden, B., Darmody, M. 2001; O'Hanlon, B., Weiner-Davis, M., 2003; Pichot, T., Dolan, Y., 2003). None of them appeared to be the real one, including the works of Steve and Insoo. Each of them can be seen as an attempt to describe particular author's systems of thought, even somehow semi-fictional, yet hopefully useful in maneuvering through the practice land, at least for that author, and possibly for some others who can see some kind of creativity in establishing their own SF systems of thought.

The idea of trusting the model (from “as if philosophy” perspective, trusting one’s own systems of thought) became quite popular in some of the SF discussions during conferences, workshops. Trusting the model sometimes was suggested as the strategy to overcome some challenges within the cooperation with clients. As I stated in the last year EBTA conference book published for Sofia, 2018 EBTA conference:

“The premise of purpose is connected in our method with another assumption concerning the search for usefulness. Usefulness in a solution-focused approach seems to be one of the basic building blocks of this method (Sharry, J., Madden, B., Darmody, M. 2001). The search for what works: within the framework of therapy and in the client's life, in a romantic description of the history of SFBT formation, could be compared to the history of St. Graal's search. Strong focus on usefulness is also well presented by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg in their short article, where they summarize and show efforts in brief family tradition to focus on what is useful from Milton Erickson, through works of MRI up to BFTC experiences (de Shazer, S., Berg, I.K., 1995, pp. 249-252). At the same article they presented little bit different line of thinking to MRI ideas, which in BFTC goes:

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

When I refer these words to the method itself, it instantly encourages me to go beyond the rules of the method in every situation where they do not work. This, however, is striking with the idea that was created later on – idea of trusting the model: “Trust the model!”. Although it’s quite challenging to find out who introduced that idea into SFBT field, I’ve heard it so many times during conversations at the conferences and workshops. At least at some cases I’d impression that words “Trust the model” means give priority to the gps navigation than to your experience of the territory. One of the practical aspects in SFBT applications lies precisely in solving the above outlined dilemma. Practitioners who are guided by the useful purposefulness principle easier find flexibility in creating the forms and content offered to the client during the SFBT application process. For the purpose of my practice I decided that one of the principles of the SFBT consists in exceeding its principles in the name of useful purposefulness. In other words, the value of looking

for what is useful to the client is more valuable than the value of any SFBT rule being implemented in a rigid way. Looking for other words, I am willing to say that I have to trust the model, that is, to show distrust to the model, because it is only a map and not a reality. A map created "somewhere and once "and applied "here and now"." (Switek, T., Panayotov, P., Strahilov, B., 2018)

Now, one year later from that publication, I realize that Vaihinger's "as if philosophy" gives a strong support to such attitude, where at the same time we're somehow inspired by the already established systems of thought, and we verify those systems to discover their more relevant versions.

"As if" spirit of Milwaukee exists in here and now

I had a great opportunity to meet with Steve and Insoo during their workshops here in Poland, as well as, to listen to them during EBTA conferences. Both of them (as far as I can remember it precisely) used to describe BFTC methodology of finding out what works in a very similar way (author's personal notes). Also books from BFTC refer to such tradition (Berg, I. K., & Miller, S. D., 1992; De Jong, P., & Berg, I. K., 2013). On that basis I imagined a client and a therapist, being assisted by a team behind a mirror, having conversation, and checking out with the client what works for that particular client. Gathering such data from many clients, allowed them to build systems of thought known as Solution Focused Brief Therapy, yet each BFTC team member developed their own, unique systems of thought about SFBT. What was somehow obvious in Steve and Insoo's presentations, was that the final point of reference was still located by the side of the client rather, than by the side of any theory (de Shazer, S. 1985; de Shazer, S., 1988; de Shazer, S., 1994)

Last year, when I was having presentation during SFBTA, 2018 conference in Boulder, Colorado, USA I was honored by having there in audience Peter de Jong from BFTC Team. Having such possibility I asked Peter, whether my memories about BFTC tradition presented by Steve and Insoo, are somehow real. Peter's answer was positive and by using paraphrase it goes like that: "Yes, it's true, the client was always both initial and final reference to define something both workable and useful".

We can ponder somehow what there is in common, and what differences there are between our clients, and clients from BFTC. On the one hand, all of them can be

described as “homo sapiens” with all possible similarities and, on the other hand, each of them was a unique individual, as all our clients are. Following such assumption about clients, I can ask myself questions: “What would be different in your practice of “as if” when you assume that spirit of BFTC is still pervasive in your practice in here and now? What would be different in your practice of “as if” when you assume that your room is just BFTC room, during times when they were talking to clients and finding out what works for them?”

One of the possible answers came to my mind a year ago, when asking myself the questions above:

“... clients need unique and tailored ways to achieve what’s more wanted and the same refers to ways of supporting them on this quest! The only moment to know what to do, how to react is in now! In now you redefine again and again your approach! So please! Just challenge!!! Challenge every assumption created there & then, while you use it here & now! Work beyond any approach name, try to go with the flow of the meeting, never trust the model without distrust! Each assumption you do implement in your practice requires alternative one, in case the first one will not work!” (Switek, T., Panayotov, P., Strahilov, B., 2018)

“As if” in my practice circles

My personal journey into and through the SF land started about 22 years ago, and at the very beginning I met not only Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg by reading their articles and books, but I personally met Luc Isebaert, Michael Hjerth and Frank Thomas via e-mail. From today's perspective, I had no chance to even start thinking that there was one SF description, one SF tradition, one somehow common SF way of understanding the approach. Vaihinger's “as if” concept helps me today in understanding how vivid SF atmosphere I had experienced in terms of developing clinical work with clients, by meeting such a wide range of SF practitioners with their unique SF thought systems.

Now, after 22 years of applying SF “semi-fictional” systems of thought into my practice I still do try to explore some new possibilities which I’m facing day by day, and which are so often brought by clients. I’ll try to express them through some points which indicate the directions of my “as if” explorations.

1. As if it was the client, who asks questions and me who tries to give the answer... and as a result of that I do answer each question my clients ask me, as long as, it's something I choose to do...
2. As if SF could be performed without asking questions, just by introducing some specific themes, content... and as a result of that I have conversations, where the topic is introduced and explored by creating the content rather than asking questions ...
3. As if I could share my perceptions with clients, especially when they ask for it... as a result of that I do introduce my thoughts, impressions, explanations, perspectives, knowledge (always with a tentative stance) to the clients ...since we had that tradition of describing a client as someone who can choose what she/he wants, so client can hear my story in reaction to her/his story...
4. As if performing SF could be focused on behaviors, and also on thoughts, words, emotions, relations, outlook, material word, context - so called by me "change colors" - or anything else, without precise definition of what is more important,, and as a result of that while we describe the current situation, or we explore exceptions, or we co-create the descriptions of wanted situations, I encourage people to implement into those descriptions rather wider set of "change colors", than just behaviors...
5. As if describing SF could be done by focusing on what is not wanted or less wanted, and what is more wanted or just wanted, instead of using problems-solutions dichotomy... and as a result of that I've sent the concept of problems and solutions for retirement. This resulted in creating much more space in my mind to talk with people about wide range of their experiences from unwanted or less wanted toward more wanted or just wanted ones...
6. As if external sources of inspiration could be equally important for the client, as are his own... and as a result of that during my sessions we combine unique mixture of "efficiency drink", by utilizing different sources of inspiration – any necessary - tailored to that specific client, including so called knowledge, theories, research data...
7. As if the client's autonomy might be used by sharing that particular autonomy with others, by proposing some part of that autonomy to others, at least for some time... and as a result of that sometimes I do something, what typically

is located within the area of client's autonomy, e.g. I tell the client what she/he will do after having come back home...

8. As if complimenting clients required using dynamic language, which is located totally beyond the validation of human being...and as a result of that, I've stopped to define people in terms "you're such a skillful person..." and I've started to compliment clients by focusing solely on their abilities, skills, knowledge, values and so on...
9. As if talking about things was just one of many possible SF performances, and doing things was another one to explore much more... and as a result of that, instead of talking we do things like role playing, or I do things to create experimental situation for the client and myself, remembering that during the session we might cooperate as a team...
10. As if the name Solution Focused could be seen as a trap for the practice, and the name Something Focused opened some possibilities... and as a result of that I remind myself Steve de Shazer's tendency to describe his way of work by saying "I do it!" (personal notes from the training with Steve de Shazer) ...and no more names are required to define my approach...

Final remarks about "as if"

What would be different in my, your, our "as if" practice if we follow sometimes, more or less often, Hans Vaihinger's "as if philosophy"? My feelings are quite friendly toward such a prospect. We're so rooted in the importance of language, and at least Bruges Model refers to Alfred Korzybski works and "The map is not the territory". Social constructionism seems to play important role in giving background to our approach. Luc Isebaert's ideas about creating useful meanings (eusemie) and useful choices (euheresis) invite us to consider with clients the aspects of usefulness. So my guess is that "as if philosophy" could stimulate our innovations in creating next and next systems of thought, tailored to situations in here and now.

Steve de Shazer once said in response to John Weakland's statement about getting to the Ericksonian essence (Hoyt, M. F., 2001):

"When you start to look for the essence of the Erickson's work or brief therapy, you're always in danger of forgetting the "nonessential" stuff. You automatically point

to something that is nonessential when you say something is essential. Automatically. And you're in danger than of sticking something into the "nonessential" box that will prove, in the long run, to be just essential as anything else has been."

Can you sense Steve's openness in this statement? Can you draw some suggestions for your/our Something Focused practice? Let's take a long run and mind the client, language, context and systems of thought we introduce into sessions. I strongly suggest such direction of thinking and practicing, even though I am pretty aware of establishing more "semi-fictional" systems of thought this way.

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