

5TH EDITION JULY 14TH, 2020 GUY SHENNAN

Hope – a fundamental assumption

By scs_admin 14 July 2020

For almost 21 years, I have been asking people what their *best hopes* are from our work together. It is a question that fits many contexts, potentially any context in fact where someone has a role of working with an individual, family, group, organisation or community towards some desired outcome. I first asked a version of this question as a social worker in a children and families duty team in the mid-1990s. I believe that it has become a radical question, a question that a radical social worker might now want to ask, as the boundaries of radical social work have shifted to include within them “retaining a commitment to good practice” (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009, p153). I do not believe it should be radical for social workers to be led, at least in part, by the hopes of the people they are serving. However, social work and the context in which it is practised have developed in such a way over the past forty years or more.

It was after attending a course on solution-focused brief therapy that I started to ask families this question, or rather the version, “What needs to happen for our meetings to be useful for you?” This was a little ambiguous, as it could be taken to refer to the *process* of the meetings – what needed to happen during them so that they became useful – rather than to the desired *outcome* of our meetings – what needed to happen in the families’ lives afterwards – as intended. It was not only in solution-focused practice that this process-outcome, or means and ends, distinction needed to be sharpened, with attention being given more clearly to outcomes. Child protection plans have often been criticised for focusing on means – services to be brought in – rather than ends – how it would be seen that services were contributing to a child’s safety.

When I first heard my solution-focused mentor, Chris Iveson, ask someone what their “best hopes” were, on a videotape at a training course in 1999, my first thought was how odd this sounded. I soon started using the question myself, however, and found it a clearer way to start my work with people, to focus on their hopes from this. By this time I was running a therapeutic social work service within a Family Service Unit (Shennan, 2003), an organisation now sadly no longer with us, a context in which it was more straightforward to begin with the hopes of the people we were seeing.

It is a question that has gradually travelled around the world. In a late-night conversation during a conference in Salamanca, Spain, in 2005, Jörgen, a Swedish social worker, told me he liked this question we asked at BRIEF (by this time I was working, alongside Chris and his colleagues, at the solution-focused centre they had founded), but that it sounded odd translated into Swedish. I told him it sounded odd in English too. Some time after the conference, Jörgen emailed me to say that since our conversation he had been using the question translated directly, and it had been working fine.

In my book on solution-focused practice (Shennan, 2019), I write about what I call its “fundamental assumption”, which is that if someone is talking with me while I am in my role as a helping professional, then they must have some hope that something will come from this. This assumption is what leads me to be able to ask: “What are your best hopes from our work together?” with some confidence. I think it is more common for a helper to begin with a question based on the flipside assumption, that if someone has gone to see them, they must have a problem, leading to something like: “So, what’s the problem?”

The solution-focused assumption came to my aid at a fringe meeting the evening before last year’s Social Workers Union conference in Manchester. I was among a panel of speakers who had been asked to talk about combating austerity. I considered how solution-focused ideas and practices could be used in this endeavour, and talked about hope. In the panel discussion that followed, when we were in danger of being weighed down by stories of austerity’s impact, the panel chair turned to me and said, “You’re the hope expert, give us some hope!” I said I did not need to give the people there hope, as they must already have it. I explained the fundamental assumption of solution-focused practice, which suggested that social workers who turned up at a fringe meeting about combating austerity must have some hope that such an activity is both doable and potentially worthwhile. So the most useful role that I could play was not to give people hope but to ask them about their own.

The same idea can be applied here. As you are reading this wonderful online magazine, and this post in particular, my assumption is that you must have some hope that something will come from your activity. What might that be? Suppose that reading the fifth and final edition of *Social Work 2020 under Covid-19* turns out to have been a good use of your time. What will it lead to that will tell you this? What will be different?

Or more generally, with regard to other activity you are engaged in, which might be working as a social worker, or in some other role, or a project you have on the go – what are your best hopes for this, at the present time?

And what tells you that your hopes could be realised? What do you know about yourself or others involved that suggests this is possible?

What else keeps you going?

References

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Guy Shennan is an independent social worker and a therapist, consultant and trainer specialising in solution-focused practice. He was the Chair of the British Association of Social Workers, 2014-2018. Two projects he is currently involved with are the [Solution-Focused Collective](#), which hopes to use solution-focused ideas for social change, and the [ReFrame Collective](#), which hopes to transform the child protection system. More information about these and other activities that Guy is currently involved in hopefully can be found at [guyshennan.com](#).

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Best wishes, good health and solidarity.

The SW2020 Covid-19 Editorial Collective.