

# CLIENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF THE SUMMATION MESSAGE IN SOLUTION-FOCUSED BRIEF COUNSELLING

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## Abstract

Solution-focused brief therapy is a client-focused and strengths based counselling approach aimed at helping clients identify and build on their own resources to achieve change and live the life they want. Part of this approach includes using feedback as an intervention. This feedback, discussed by the counsellor and client at the end of a counselling session, aims to highlight and validate clients' strengths and resources and encourages the client to use these (to construct a task) and help achieve the change s/he wants. The semi-formal structure of the feedback is termed the summation message. While it is considered an essential part of solution-focused brief therapy, little research on its use is available, particularly from the client's perspective. This thesis addresses this gap in the research. I conducted solution-focused counselling with three clients and, using qualitative research methods, gathered their perspectives on what they experienced as helpful from the summation messages. I also explored how engaging in the research informed my own solution-focused practice. Research data consisted of transcribed counselling interviews, observation notes, counselling notes, analytic and reflexive memos. I used a thematic analysis approach, informed by the interpretive paradigm, to analyse the data and generate four major themes on clients' perspectives of the feedback technique. Excerpts of client responses highlight the following themes: the break time helped clients to recognise their own resources and enabled the development of client-chosen tasks; feedback encouraged clients to describe their own tasks; feedback encouraged a deeper awareness about resources identified in the counselling session and reflecting on the co-construction of their own solutions enabled clients to feel empowered by their summation messages. These findings are a valuable addition to practice-based research on solution-focused counselling and, particularly on the importance of using the summation message to encourage client agency.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract . . . . .	2
Acknowledgements . . . . .	3
Position Statement . . . . .	7
Introduction . . . . .	8
<b>CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW . . . . .</b>	<b>12</b>
Positivist Origins of Traditional Counselling . . . . .	12
Social constructionism . . . . .	14
Solution-Focused Brief Model and Social Constructionism . . . . .	14
Development of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy . . . . .	15
Overview of the Model . . . . .	16
Main Principles Underpinning Solution-Focused . . . . .	16
Techniques Used in Solution-Focused Approach . . . . .	17
Consultation Break and Feedback Technique . . . . .	20
Feedback in Psychology . . . . .	23
Feedback in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy . . . . .	24
The Summation Message . . . . .	27
Differences to the Summation Message . . . . .	28
Effects of the Literature on My Practice . . . . .	30
Clients' Perspectives on 'What Helps' in Counselling and Psychotherapy . . . . .	31
Clients' Perspectives on 'What's Helpful' in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy . . . . .	34
Clients' Perspectives on the Solution-Focused Feedback Technique . . . . .	35
<b>CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY . . . . .</b>	<b>38</b>
Theoretical Approaches . . . . .	38
Positivism . . . . .	38

Interpretivism.....	39
Qualitative Methodology.....	39
Research Approach.....	41
Thematic Analysis.....	43
Reflexivity.....	45
Rigour and Reliability.....	46
Ethical Consideration.....	47
Method: Design.....	50
Setting.....	51
Recruitment.....	51
Participants.....	51
The Feedback Technique.....	52
Client-Break and Summation Message.....	53
THE DATA: Data Gathering.....	54
Research Interviews.....	54
Participant Observation.....	55
Data Analysis.....	55
<b>CHAPTER THREE: CLIENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUMMATION MESSAGE.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Theme 1: Thinking Time Empowers the Recognition of Resources.....	60
Theme 2: Feedback Encourages Descriptions on Task Progression.....	63
Theme 3: Feedback Encourages Awareness on Self-Resources.....	65
Theme 4: Feedback Empowers Clients' Clarity of Thinking.....	67
Theme 5: The Impact of Clients' Perspectives on My Counselling Practice.....	68
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>73</b>
Implications.....	77
Recommendations/Limitations.....	78

Conclusion.....	79
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>89</b>
Appendix A: UC Ethics Approval.....	89
Appendix B: Client Consent Form.....	90
Appendix C: Client Information Sheet.....	92
Appendix D: Research Recruitment Flyer.....	94
Appendix E: Theme 6.....	95
Appendix F: Unstructured Interview Questions.....	96

### *Position Statement*

In 2012, I was introduced to the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy model for counselling. Having trained in and used this approach for the past few years, I have become interested in the feedback technique, particularly, the consultation break and feedback aspect of the model. For this reason, I chose to explore the aspect of feedback in solution-focused brief therapy and my counsellor practice. I also wanted to provide some practice-based evidence that supported, or not, the effectiveness of this technique for clients.

My interest in feedback derived from past teaching experiences where feedback was used to facilitate students towards their learning goals. What I particularly wanted to explore about feedback was its perceived value for enhancing performance towards achievement. Initially, the assumptions I held about feedback were different in principle when applying feedback as a technique in counselling. The purpose of feedback in teaching is considerably different to the role it has in counselling. Remarkable differences are noted with goals and the purpose for developing these. In the classroom, teachers guide the development of learning goals, enabling students to meet national curriculum requirements. In solution-focused brief therapy, clients develop their own therapy and session goals in a collaborative process with their therapist.

My research question, which is discussed in the next section, developed from a desire to strengthen my counsellor practice while challenging predispositions relative to limited theoretical knowledge on feedback. The knowledge I previously held only related to prior teaching and work related experiences. Essentially, I wanted to find out what clients thought about this technique - particularly about receiving messages as part of a client-centred model. I also wanted to learn more about how the summation message helps by understanding, theoretically, how this helps clients. I expected the literature search to show compliments are the most powerful tool for making summation messages effective.

## *Introduction*

In 1978, at the Brief Family Centre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg developed an approach to counselling which they termed Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. They developed this model between 1978 and 1985 and while a full account of this approach will be described in the literature review, here it is important to note that the main principles of the approach which are 'collaborative, goal-focused, client-focused and brief' stood in contrast to a number of therapeutic models used by therapists at that time. One client and goal-focused 'technique' used as part of the model is the focus of this research project. This technique is called the 'the consultation break' and feedback technique. Designed as a structured intervention to use at the end of counselling sessions, the purpose of this technique is for clients and therapists, to reflect on the information shared over the session. Subsequently, therapists use the information and translate back a message designed to help the client. The purpose, mainly, is to encourage and support movements towards the client's goals, by identifying relevant steps towards this and living a more satisfying life (Berg & De Jong, 2013; Lipchik, 2011).

A considerable amount of literature is available on the Solution-focused brief model particularly on theoretical orientation, effectiveness with a wide range of client issues and populations, best practice and effective application of the techniques used (MacDonald, 2007; De Jong & Berg, 2013a). There is limited practice based research available, when looking in depth at counsellors' and clients' experiences of the application of the model. In particular, and in relation to my interest here, there is limited research on the how clients' perceive the feedback technique. Identifying how clients perceive the messages given to them as part of this model have been difficult to obtain. Furthermore, this has exposed an undeveloped area for research. As clients' perspectives on this technique are the main foci for this research, I will attempt to provide critical evidence on what is available, as an impetus for this research project.



As part of the literature review I looked at the theoretical constructs suggested in principle, for the customary structure an application of this technique. As part of this research project, I present my own qualitative study on my counselling clients regarding this technique and for gaining more insight into how the technique is received. The intention for conducting a qualitative study was purposely to gain a deeper understanding of clients' perspectives (Creswell, 2013) while developing theoretical insights on how the summation message helps, or not, in Solution-focused brief therapy. Data for this research was gathered from a small sample of real life counselling clients and their experiences. Evidence is presented on my developing approach and formulation of the summation message as a result of the literature reviewed and my reflexive process. My hope for conducting a qualitative study on this technique, from a New Zealand perspective, was to add to the wider pool of knowledge on Solution-focused practice-based research, and assist others training in this model for counselling.

I begin with a brief outline on how my research question/s developed. Initially, I was interested in exploring client views on the summation message because I wanted to learn more about how the messages helped. After pursuing the Solution-focused literature and observing that most of the research available is from therapists' perspectives I decided that rather than accepting therapist interpretations only, I wanted to know more about the summation message and what clients found most helpful. I particularly wanted to explore their views and perceptions about this and refined my focus, recognising the key area I wanted to explore were their perspectives. My main research question asked '*What are clients' perspectives of the summation message in Solution-focused brief counselling?*' I approached the literature search open to explore as much as I could that was available on this technique.

While searching through relevant internet sites, book chapters and journal articles, I noticed a considerable gap in the literature from clients' perspectives. I refined my search to include research related to clients' experiences and perspectives, and research on the 'consultation break'. What I found were a surprising range of differences in opinion about how to best deliver messages when using this technique. Furthermore, some practitioners suggested the 'consultation break' be termed the 'client-break'. In contrast to the customary structure of the technique (De Shazer & Berg, 1997) I found a range of alternatives suggesting different structures for the messages delivered to clients.

Each approach considered the effectiveness of the messages but stood in contrast to the original formulaic suggestion for this technique. This is covered throughout the literature review. At the beginning of this research I noticed my perspective began to change, particularly around how best to deliver effective messages to clients. After reviewing all of the literature during the research, my practice began to change. I felt inspired by the literature and experimented with other approaches that discussed more client-directed approaches to this technique. This enabled me to develop confidence in my practice and provided congruency in my approach. This is discussed in depth, where relevant in the literature review.

The literature review proceeding will be presented in two parts. The main topic areas focus on the Solution-focused brief therapy model and literature pertaining to the focus of this research project, client perspectives on the client-break feedback technique. The first part of the review presents a discussion on positivist origins of traditional counselling. This is to introduce the alternative, social constructionism which underpins the Solution-focused model. Subsequently, a brief overview of this model will be given in relation to the development, main principles and techniques used in this approach with an outline on the customary structure of this technique.

Theoretical principles of feedback, used more broadly in counselling, will be discussed alongside traditional approaches for feedback delivery prior to highlighting the aim, importance, relevance and use of feedback in Solution-focused brief therapy. The second part of the review will discuss major differences in opinion and approaches suggested by other prominent Solution-focused practitioners. Following this a brief reflective discussion is presented with reference to how the literature inspired a new approach in my delivery of the summation message. Finally, evidence of a critical debate about my main research thesis - the summation message - will be presented in accordance with the literature found on clients' perspectives in counselling, their perspectives pertaining to this model for counselling and the 'consultation break' and feedback technique. This concludes with a discussion on how an undeveloped gap in the literature was found regarding this technique in the field of Solution-focused, which provided a great deal of impetus for this research project.

## CHAPTER ONE

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Positivist Origins of Traditional Counselling*

Traditional counselling emerged early in the twentieth century with the development of the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic schools of therapy. Psychoanalysis, considers that human behaviour is influenced by the unconscious mind, whereas psychodynamic is more focused on interpersonal conflicts within the self, and conflicts between people (Jones-Smith, 2012). Most psychotherapy, 'the talking cure', was based on the psychoanalytic treatment approach that Sigmund Freud not only developed, but popularized. The behavioural and cognitive schools of therapy emerged after this period, and hold a dominant position as they are supported by a large evidence base in psychotherapy research (Jones-Smith, 2012). The behavioural tradition emphasised behaviour modification and gaining control over unwanted behaviour; whereas the cognitive tradition focused more on addressing unhelpful and distorted thinking and changing dysfunctional behaviour. The positivist traditions were central for counselling in modernity and paid more attention to therapeutic practice over client knowledge or strengths. Therapists working within this tradition viewed people as patients who required intervention by an 'expert' therapist.

Existentialism and Humanism preceded modernity and part of the major shift to post-modernity. Existentialism was a philosophical tradition rather than a treatment approach and had major differences in views to positivist traditions. Those who took an existential approach in counselling viewed people as clients; encouraged choice, emphasized values, reflection and the recognition of decision making towards personal freedom (Jones-Smith, 2012). The philosophy underpinning humanism recognised people could be treated for issues with living, and viewed that people have an inherent capacity for growth.

Rogers (1957) as cited in Jones-Smith, (2012) was influenced by humanist philosophy and developed a client-centred approach to counselling called person-centred therapy. The main goal for therapists working within the humanist movement was to provide an environment, as part of the approach, that helped clients choose to help themselves rather than rely on expert techniques from a therapist. Furthermore, therapists viewed people as both creators of growth and maintainers of their own problems. This shift in philosophy impacted our understanding as humans of 'reality' and knowledge in a variety of disciplines. In counselling, the humanist philosophy emphasised client mental wellness by considering the importance of a client's reality in the therapeutic process.

The main principle posited that to first understand people, therapists should get to know the worldview of their clients rather than treat them from their own frame of reference. Distinctions between modernism and postmodernism can be defined within the constructivist era as the major shift in views from an objective to a subjective reality which influenced a new way of working with people in a counselling context. This stood in contrast to positivist and medical model traditions and problem based approaches and required getting to know clients own views of reality. Modernists viewed that objective reality was observable and one which could be investigated systematically. Post-modernists, however, believed truth and reality were points of view inherently influenced by history and context (Jones-Smith, 2012).

Relevant here, within post modernism, has been the development of social constructionism. Social constructionism is relativistic because of its relational, contextual and linguistic factors (Burr, 1998). This means we co-construct meanings and develop knowledge in relationship with others, from the language used in our relationships. Social constructionism provides the main foundation for Solution-focused brief therapy. The next section discusses social constructionism, how social reality is mediated through language and the fundamental underpinning it offers the Solution-focused therapy model. Subsequently, the Solution-focused

model, principles and techniques used will be briefly presented, prior to a discussion on the focus of this research, the feedback technique and summation message.

### *Social constructionism*

Social constructionism is about knowledge and relationships between people and the cooperative development and implementation of shared functional meanings, which occurs when two or more people interact with one another (Jones-Smith, 2012). Although the self is understood interpersonally, social constructionists recognise it is interrelationally, through our thoughts, emotions and interactions with others, which enables us to redefine ourselves moment by moment (Neimeyer, 1998 as cited in Wong, 2006; Jones-Smith, 2012). As a result of the paradigm shift to post-modernity and focusing on human participation for the construction of knowledge, social constructionists considered the nature of our realities to be subjective. This is mainly because we are constantly co-creating and constructing the way in which we view the world within specific cultural contexts, rather than just interpreting one world through one lens for reality. With a dual emphasis on the social and linguistic aspects to knowledge construction, social constructionism allows us the unique ability to use language for recreating existing realities, and developing new ones from the meanings we attach to our experiences (Wong, 2006).

### *Solution-Focused Brief Model and Social Constructionism*

Intrinsic links exist between the Solution-focused brief model and social constructionism as the style of language used in this approach which allows clients to construct, plan and achieve what is best for them (Jones-Smith, 2012). Therapists using the Solution-focused brief therapy model informed by social constructionism view their clients as experts; hold a collaborative view in relationship, use language to seek understanding or insight and try to view client problems through the client's view of the world. Language

provides a key to both understanding and connecting. Solution-focused brief therapists influenced by social constructionism, consider how clients exist in subjective realities. It is seen that clients intrinsically possess the resources needed to solve their own problems within their realities. As such, solutions to their perceived problems may exist within their reality but be unnoticed as a resource (Lipchik, Becker, Brasher, and Delves & Volkman, 2005).

As part of using a constructionist approach, therapists co-construct alternative paths to solutions with their clients, (Simon, Murphy, Smith, 2005). Conversations between the therapist and client hold a problem-free future focus, with the therapist using presuppositional questioning techniques, encouraging and enabling the client to shift their focus from problem formulation toward the solution. As a result this allows clients to transform their descriptions to co-constructing new realities, and focus on a life without the problem. Because social constructionism invites a focus on the co-creation and co-construction of more desirable realities, an expectation of change is inherent to the Solution-focused approach. Solution focused therapists thus elicit details about pragmatic steps towards a solution. Solution-building conversations allow clients to explore, identify, develop and plan for what is best for them (Jones-Smith, 2012).

#### *Development of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*

Solution-focused brief therapy developed in the post-modern era after Insoo Kim Berg and Steve De Shazer met at the Mental Research Institute. Based on work by Milton Erickson and brief therapy models developed at the Mental Research Institute, Insoo Kim Berg and Steve De Shazer (1985) created their own brief approach to therapy which focused more on client hope and possibilities (Visser, 2013; Huber & Durrant, 2014; Lipchik, 2014; Manthei & Miller, 2000).

## *Overview of the Model*

The Solution-focused brief model is a positive goal and client-focused approach to counselling. The model promotes a shift in thinking for clients by moving away from problem deficits and problem talk to noticing solutions. By exploring what is working, clients are encouraged to cultivate more of what they want and to notice solutions to their perceived problems and live a more desirable reality (Lipchik et al., 2005). A major part to the use of this model involves relational aspects of social constructionism alongside the formulation of goals. Developing session and therapeutic goals aim to identify what clients want, for a better life. As this model has a positive future focus, clients are invited to visualise life without the problem, by instead focusing on what life will be like when the change they seek occurs (De Jong & Berg, 2013a; Hanton, 2011; Jones-Smith, 2012). During the counselling session therapists work on eliciting individual strengths and promote these as resources so clients can achieve the change they want. Clients are encouraged, as part of this approach, to also explore previous solutions to problems when exploring the change they say they want.

### *Main Principles Underpinning Solution-Focused*

At the core of this approach, client strengths and resources are highly valued. The principles inherently centre on client-focused practices with a shift from problems to building solutions. The core principles underpinning this model suggest therapists, rather than making assumptions about client lives or problems, instead take the role as 'learner of the client' rather than as 'expert to client' problems. In place of assuming client realities, Solution-focused brief therapists elicit detailed descriptions on what life will actually be like when a client is living without the problem (Smith, Adam, Kirkpatrick, 2011). This process aims to develop and enhance a client's sense of agency (self-mastery). Descriptions are then reframed as resources and strengths for use towards achieving the desired goal (Lipchik, 2011; De Shazer, 1988; De Jong & Berg, 2013a; MacDonald, 2007; Guterman, 2006; Hanton, 2011;



Jones-Smith, 2012). The main principles of the model suggest: *if it ain't broke - don't fix it*, (Bannink, 2007) *notice small changes - these can have a ripple effect*, (Picot & Dolan, 2003) *change is a constant and continuous process*, (Jones-Smith, 2012) *client problems do not occur all of the time with clients possessing various ways of coping*, (Visser, 2013) *reality is observer-define*, (Lipchik, 2011) *clients and therapists both work within a language system of co-creating*, (Guterman, 2006) *and there are many ways to view a situation, all which may be correct* (De Shazer, 1988; De Jong & Berg, 2013a). The principles underpinning this model act as a philosophical guide for therapists to hold in their work with clients, and essentially by recognising each client is unique, resourceful and an expert on their own life. Each brings with them the unique ability to contribute to the success of their counselling goals and should be seen as having the best knowledge for solving their own problems, from knowing the resources available to them (Lipchik 2011; Jones-Smith, 2012; De Jong & Berg, 2013a).

#### *Techniques Used In Solution-Focused Approach*

Techniques developed as part of the approach involve a pre-session change question; goal clarification, scaling techniques, exception questions, a miracle question and an inter-session or 'consultation break' followed by the delivery of feedback (De Jong & Berg, 2013a). As each client's life and presenting problems are considerably different to the next, it is suggested client problems be examined in terms of each individual's ideals towards a solution (Jones-Smith, 2012). Solution-focused brief therapists would ideally use the techniques contextually in order to be more effective at helping individuals to meet their therapy goals. The contextual use of the techniques help guide the therapy process around the unique resources each client presents with.

Pre-session change questions aim to identify, prior to beginning therapy, what is already better for the client or helpful in finding a solution. Pre-session questions inquire into clients noticing small changes, and seek to identify what has helped or what may be helping

but is unnoticed, toward a solution. Exploring pre-session change provides an insight on client strengths prior to therapy which can also be built upon as exceptions to the problem (De Jong & Berg, 2013a). Benefits for clients, when exploring pre session change, is that it allows clients to start noticing or continue doing what currently works for them. There is a distinct opportunity to further promote client strengths by enhancing their sense of self-mastery. Pre-session change questions only occur in the first session with therapists presupposing, in subsequent sessions, things are getting better.

Goal clarification seeks client hopes for each session and clarification on the overall therapy goal. Prior to co-constructing with clients their future desires, therapists aim to elicit brief client views of the problem in order to explore what is wanted instead. Clarifying the client's goal assists with moving away from problem talk and problem solving and shifting to solution talk. From here, the focus remains on what is wanted instead. This process helps clients explore and identify a more desirable and concrete picture which they wish to move towards, with a therapist's healthy curiosity playing an important part in the process of goal development (Walter & Peller, 1993). The benefit for clients with goal clarification is that it enhances a noticing, both in and outside of therapy, of specific client focused goals.

Scaling questions are used to identify a client's position in relation to the goal. Scaling assists with the formulation of concrete steps as it provides clients with tangible evidence about their position, progress, and the movements that are needed to make their goal a reality. The process involves exploring a client's view of their current position, on a continuum from 0-10, in relation to where they hope to be. Using this technique requires no right or correct score. Subsequently, therapists use the information to collaboratively explore how clients will know when they are where they want to be. This involves gathering detailed information about what will be happening in the client's life and asking who else will notice the desired result. Additional benefits for scaling are that it can be used to measure client

confidence, motivation and progress toward achieving goals. Scaling in subsequent sessions helps to identify how much or whether change has occurred, enabling clients to recognise their own progress or explore what might be holding them back (De Jong & Berg, 2013a). Exploring clients' ideas and progress towards change can further their growth and empowerment by experiencing more control over their lives.

Exception questions explore past success and ways of coping. Exception questions ask about past ways of coping so resources can be brought forth to the present and used to help. Often reframed as previous solutions, exploring potential or past resources are worthwhile as clients can build upon these. Additional benefits for exploring past exceptions and potential resources are that they uncover small differences which could be unnoticed solutions. Exploring past exceptions assists therapists with finding out how clients cope in spite of problems while aiming to empower clients further by acknowledging their existing use of resources.

The miracle question enables clients to begin imagining, beyond their wildest dreams, life without the problem. Generally, the miracle question helps clients create and co-construct a more desired reality to living the life they truly want. It invites clients to be creative about the possibilities available to them while initiating the mental process to begin envisioning everyday life when the miracle has occurred. In practice, therapists ask clients to 'suppose when you went to sleep tonight a miracle happened but you do not know this occurred until you woke and started noticing things, what would be the first thing you would notice that would tell you a miracle had occurred? What would be different?' (De Jong & Berg, 2013a) This process requires clients to be specific in identifying even mundane details of everyday life. The purpose is so clients can begin observing, in everyday life, how and when these things are already happening. For those who find the word 'miracle' incomprehensible, moderations can be made by using the word 'wonderful' instead. Iveson, (2013) suggest the alternative 'at your

best' instead of either terms abovementioned. When using the term 'at your best' clients are asked to describe explicit details of their preferred future and explore their future desires for when they are 'at their best'. The process continues similarly to the miracle question as clients are encouraged to provide details about how things will be for the client when the desired result occurs.

### *Consultation Break and Feedback Technique*

The consultation break and feedback technique were designed for therapists to show they have been listening to the client, heard their view of the problem, what is wanted and any steps identified toward finding a solution. This technique requires therapists to deliver feedback in the form of a summary message to clients at the end of each session. The message aims to affirm and validate clients by acknowledging their position with displays of empathy. The purpose of the message is to best help clients move closer to their goal, therefore any feedback provided is based upon the information shared over each session. The formulaic structure of the feedback technique originally developed by Steve De Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (1997) consists of a consultation break, compliments, a bridging statement and a clue for a task (De Shazer, 1988; De Jong & Berg, 2013a; Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). The consultation break occurs towards the close of the session before a feedback message is delivered, is short, lasting only five to ten minutes long and is considered an essential part of a solution-focused therapy session.

The break originated in Brief Family Therapy as a reflecting team process, from the work of Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick and Bodin (1974) as cited in Huber & Durrant (2014). Reflecting teams observed one another working with clients behind a one way mirror and 'the break' consequently developed out of the need to consult with the team members on what had been observed. Considered also, as an interruption to client patterns and ways of behaving, (Weakland et al., 1974) the reflecting team approach and break were early parts to

the development of the feedback technique. The consultation break became common place in solution-focused practice because it provided clients with valuable time for reflection and allowed therapists (working individually) to reflect on the session while collating their notes and formulating a carefully thought out message. The structure of the message is comprised of three parts and designed, as an intervention, to help clients achieve therapeutic shifts (Turner and Hopwood, 1994; Macdonald 2007; De Jong & Berg, 2013; Hanton, 2011; Lipchik, 2011; Quick, 2008).

The first part of the message suggests therapists begin with a validating statement aiming to acknowledge and affirm the client's story. Achieving this requires therapists to affirm the client's perspective by responding to their view of the problem. The second part of the message focuses on complimenting the client's strengths. Positive messages are given to display admiration and respect to clients' existing strengths and resources, or for identifying any potential exceptions during the session (Nichols, 2009; Quick, 2008; O'Connell, 2005).

The third part aims at amplifying client strengths while using a bridging statement to assign a homework task. Homework tasks are either behavioural (doing) or cognitive (noticing). However, these are designed to encourage clients to continue doing something for themselves in-between sessions toward their goal (Campbell, Elder, Gallagher, Simon & Taylor, 1999). A bridging statement acts as a rationale for suggesting the homework task, this is most powerful at displaying support if the bridging statement uses the client's own language as it connects to their ideas and promotes their resources (MacDonald, 2007, Hanton; 2011, Lipchik, 2011). An example of the structure of feedback and how this is delivered in practice by giving compliments, using a bridge and offering a suggestion, is provided as follows:

## Compliments

*Kristin: Well, Melissa, so many things, positive things have happened to you and you've experienced so many positive things since the last time we've talked.*

*Melissa: Mm-hmm.*

*K Sounds like the brainstorming we did the last time we talked has really been helpful for you.*

*M Mm-hmm.*

*K And I wanna compliment you on how you are continuing to balancing these things in your life.*

*M Well, thanks.*

*K How even just doing one little thing in the mornings or spending an afternoon with your children or a morning at school with them has been helpful for you and you've taken the motivation to do that.*

*M Ya, ya, it's nice to especially do things outside of the house like going camping and going to their school. That helps a lot cuz it just gets me out of the mind set of, "Oh, look at all these chores." You know? House work is not my most favourite thing to do. It just, you know.*

## Bridge

*K And you're dealing with that fact in your life right now by considering the importance it has in your life right now.*

*M Mm-hmm.*

## Suggestion(s)

*K Well, you know, you've made so much progress since last time we talked and I would just encourage you to keep doing what you're doing that you find helpful.*

*M Oh thanks.*

*K And keep looking forward to the summer when you can have some time off to concentrate on things that are important to you.*

*M Yup.*

*K But I just wanna thank you for coming in again today and if you'd like we can set up another appointment to talk (De Jong & Berg, 2013b, p.186).*

## *Feedback in Psychology*

In psychology, feedback is typically conceptualised as information on results pertaining to behaviour which influences or assists with modification towards enhancing performance. Feedback can be provided by a peer, colleague, an agent, or the self, with an aim to provide new knowledge or understanding (Jones-Smith 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Essentially, it serves to reinforce or strengthen an individual's behaviour towards more desirable behaviour. Bandura, Adams & Beyer (1977) state our explanations for behavioural change are heavily reliant upon our cognitive mechanisms, as this is where our perceptive reasoning occurs. According to Butler & Winne, (1995) feedback enriches our (cognitive) thought processes and triggers new thoughts, knowledge or beliefs to the specifics being monitored.

In educational psychology, Kluger and DeNisi (1998) discuss how feedback has been widely applied as an intervention but has some variable effects for improving performance. Feedback interventions combined with goal setting show more attention has been paid to task achievement rather than to 'the self'. Without clear goals there are increased risks associated with feedback that can prove ineffective for reaching its intended recipients. According to Kulik & Kulik, (1988) the timing of feedback is an important factor for it to be effective and if delayed, can hinder learning. Immediate feedback is recommended for producing better results for intended recipients. In psychological contexts, performance based treatments focused on mastery experiences prove more powerful for producing effective attitudinal or behavioural changes. This is mainly because feedback helps initiate assessment and monitoring of newly learned information. Results from the construction of new knowledge monitor the nature and quality of cognitive processes leading to the desired state (Butler & Winne, 1995). The differences to feedback delivered in positivist based traditions of psychotherapy are that therapists inform patients and give instruction to them as patient knowledge is not a priority to assisting with patient needs (Jones-Smith 2012).

### *Feedback in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*

In Solution-focused brief therapy, feedback is used to reflect back to the client what is wanted for change, encouraging the use of client resources and, rather than offering advice or instruction, reflect each client's ideas and movements toward a solution. The original developers of the model, De Shazer & Berg (1997) asserted feedback should serve to validate clients by communicating they have been listened to, while offering a more positive perspective on their experience. The purpose is mainly to reflect back an understanding of the client's competencies, elicited over the session, and help clients use their resources for finding a solution (Campbell, et al., 1999; Simon & Berg, 1997; De Jong & Berg, 2013a; Jones-smith, 2012; Nichols, 2009; Lipchik, 2011; Quick, 2008). Accordingly, many practitioners and researchers of this model assert validating clients is the main purpose for delivering feedback, even for simply coming to therapy and seeking help (Hanton, 2011; Lipchik, 2011; De Shazer & Berg, 1997; Lethem, 2002; Johnson, Waters, Webster & Goldman 1997; Lloyd & Dallos, 2008). However, some practitioners slightly differ in their views on the importance and structure for delivering feedback.

Guterman, (2006) states how it is important to provide feedback but suggests it is best given only as a summary in relation to the goal constructed. Additionally, any task assigned should be designed to help clients carry the momentum of the goal or, to build upon potential exceptions. Guterman (2006) recommends compliments are used throughout the counselling process, instead of at the end as part of the customary structure. De Jong & Berg (2013a) and Sharry, Madden, Darmody and Miller (2001) also note how all that may be required for the feedback process is to reinforce the client's own ideas by summarising and suggesting they continue doing what is currently working for them.



Hackett (2006) recommends a tone of simplicity for the feedback message and designed the acronym 'ACES'. Comprised of three parts: A - acknowledges the client C - compliments them E - provides an example of the task before S - offering a task or suggestion. He suggests therapists use the acronym as a guide for formulating simple feedback messages, echoing De Shazer (1988), with simplicity being an important part of the feedback process. Hackett (2006) suggests, for providing feedback in a solution-focused, that compliments be interweaved into the feedback process. This way feedback can be simply phrased, use the client's words and would provide an example of their ideas before offering a homework task.

Campbell, et al., (1999) view compliments differently as part of the feedback structure and designed a template specifically dedicated for therapists to use for feedback delivery and complimenting clients. According to Campbell et al., (1999) compliments are a central therapeutic tool and are important as part of the intervention, for helping people move toward a solution. This is mainly because compliments affirm and validate clients in the positive, also considered is that many clients have not experienced positive feedback or any recognition paid to their strengths. Validating client competencies and complimenting them, using this template, requires normalizing feelings, restructuring statements by reframing, affirming client perceptions and using bridging statements prior to assigning a homework task.

Turner and Hopwood, (1994) consider the contextual use of feedback important and view how worthwhile it is to a client's progress and the change process. They assert how feedback and the tasks assigned serve to reinforce or influence client desires or willingness to change. They distinctly point out however, that a Solution-focused brief therapist will generally not ask about previous tasks assigned to avoid any back peddling or negativity if they are not carried out (Quick, 2008; Berg & De Jong, 2013; Hanton, 2011; Hackett, 2006; Lipchik, 2011). According to Trepper, McCollum, De Jong, Korman, Gingerich, & Franklin (2010) the contextual use of feedback is particularly important for task suggestions especially when homework tasks

are designed by the client. Their basic philosophy is, that which “emanates from the client is far better than if it were to come from the therapist” (Trepper et al., 2010, p.12). What clients suggest is far more familiar as they generally assign tasks which they know already work and which are punctuated by the current goal. Furthermore, this reduces any tendency to resist outside interventions (therapist designed tasks) as the tasks designs are based upon individual knowledge, resources and views on what works. A reduction in resistance, to outside interventions, holds also more conviction to the likelihood of success (Trepper et al., 2010). According to MacDonald, (2007) matching the client’s language to their ideas is an important part of the feedback process but he also asserts therapist suggestions are helpful for clients who are unable to reflect or develop ideas for themselves.

The core elements suggested by these practitioners for delivering feedback essentially align with the customary structure developed, and posit a strong alliance to cultivating validating client-focused feedback messages. There are a wide range of generic and creative suggested messages available in the literature suggesting suitable application to a wide range of client problems and populations (Turner & Hopwood, 1994, Lipchik, 2011; Hanton, 2011; De Jong & Berg, 2013a). However, although many researchers and practitioners of Solution-focused have written about effective application, best clinical practice, and agree on the importance or benefit to clients receiving feedback, there are critical differences in opinion about the best manner in which to formulate feedback messages and use of the consultation break (MacDonald, 2007; Iveson, 2002; O’Connell, 2008; De Jong & Berg, 2013a; Quick, 2008; Hackett, 2008; Lipchik, 2011; Sharry et al., 2001; Hanton, 2011).

The next section examines critical differences pertaining to the structure, application and delivery of the client-break and feedback technique. I will begin by introducing Eve Lipchik (2002, 2011) and her view for formulating the feedback message, as this initially inspired the formulation of my approach to feedback messages. In contrast to the customary structure of

the feedback message, views from other practitioners in the field of Solution-focused will also be discussed. After which, I will present a brief discussion on my experiences for developing congruency with this technique, prior to examining the literature available on clients' perspectives in Solution focused brief therapy.

### *The Summation Message*

The term 'summation message' is a phrase coined by Eve Lipchik (2011) in place of the term 'feedback'. Lipchik (2011) was one of the original practicing members working alongside Steve De Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg at the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee, and viewed the entire client interview as the primary agent for change, rather than just the feedback message. Against the customary structure of this technique, Lipchik viewed the term 'summation message' more appropriate for a few reasons. First, she viewed the question and response pattern to client interviews as imperative parts that should be reflected back as part of the message. Although the 'consultation break' was originally designed as part of the intervention it is 'the interview' which is the primary agent for change (Lipchik, 2011). The summation message "was designed to make the message at the end of the session reflect the question/response pattern of the interview" (Lipchik, 2011, p.108).

Lipchik (2011) suggested structuring the summation message in a conversational tone and including all of the client's information, but specifically, elements of the interview's content and process. This requires formulating messages which reinforce client statements but also address client behaviours throughout the interview process. Content includes what the client has stated they want during the session. Process focuses on their willingness for change and observes non-verbal behaviour when discussing the change they want. Including these two factors serves to further validate clients because it acknowledges their story, expressions of emotions and non-verbal behaviour. Lipchik (2011) considered the use of emotions an

important factor in finding solutions, suggesting emotions also help motivate client actions or decisions towards a solution.

### *Differences to the Summation Message*

What Lipchik (2002, 2011), did differently, in contrast to the original structure suggested by De Shazer & Berg (1997), when formulating the summation message was begin with 'what I heard you say', rather than starting with a validating statement. Lipchik (2011) viewed it more congruent to begin with reflecting and clarifying with the client, their story. Compliments then seemed more natural and were interwoven into the message rather than purposely structured as a second part to the message. Lipchik (2011) suggested also that therapists pay recognition to their clients' strengths by reinforcing their resources and offering new information on these from the therapist's perspective. Providing the therapist perspective aims to further validate clients because it acknowledges the emotional impact expressed. Finally, Lipchik (2011) viewed suggestions a more appropriate term in place of homework tasks. Keeping in with the model's principles, suggestions allow clients to choose to help themselves and provide clients with more opportunity to act, adapt, or leave out the suggestion altogether. Essentially, Lipchik (2011) viewed the emotional climate a significant part of client interviews and the change process. Rather than simply complimenting clients and providing clues or homework tasks, Lipchik (2011) suggested that reflecting the entire interview was an important part to the summation message.

Sharry et al., (2001) have more of a radical approach to the feedback technique and termed the 'consultation break' a 'client break'. Furthermore, they developed a client-break prompt to use before the break. Accordingly, to Sharry et al., (2001) a client-directed approach to the break is considerably more suitable, by using the client's voice for assigning an in-between-session task. Aligning with the original principles of the feedback technique suggested by De Shazer and Berg, (1997), Sharry et al., (2001) agree on the importance of 'the

break' and ensuing feedback message essential to Solution-focused therapy sessions. However, in contrast to the customary structure of 'the break', where therapists leave the room, formulate a message and return to deliver a message and homework task, Sharry et al., (2001) viewed the responsibility as best shared within the client-therapist relationship. Perhaps because therapist generated tasks were viewed as being less central for client change than was originally first thought.

Sharry et al., (2001) discovered the value of a client-directed prompt by accident when clients were left alone one afternoon, at the point of the consultation break due to an emergency. Next session, the same clients reported a positive outcome as they had made their own decisions about the best way forward. This showed clients often come up with their own ideas during 'the break' which consequently prompted them to approach 'the break' with a client-break prompt. How they construct the client-break prompt as part of the feedback technique is demonstrated in detail below. It shows how to set up a collaborative feedback approach while reflecting the principles of Solution-focused brief therapy, in what may be a client's only or last session. This example is applicable for individual therapists or reflective team settings.

*Client-break prompt:*

*"We're nearing the end of the session and I'd like to take a five-minute break. This is to give you time to think and reflect about what we have discussed; to pick out any important ideas that came up, or to make any decisions or plans. You might also like to think about whether this session has been useful and how you would like us to be further involved. While you're thinking, I will consult with my team for their thoughts. We will think together about what you said. When we get back together, I'll be interested to hear what stood out for you today. I'll also share the team's thoughts with you. Together, then, we can we can put something together that will be helpful"*  
(Sharry et al., 2001, pg.71).

When the session reconvenes the therapist listens carefully to the client's ideas before offering any feedback. When they do, it is suggested feedback is offered with a collaborative mind set. Research by Hubble, Duncan & Miller, (1999) and Duncan & Miller (2000) as cited in Sharry et al., (2001) suggests plans for change generated and implemented by the client are more likely to occur. According to Sharry et al., (2001) "whether the therapist leaves the room or stays and reflects with the client, the essential point in a collaborative or client-directed session break is that the therapist first seeks the views and thoughts of the client in evaluating the session and constructing a plan of action" (Sharry et al., 2001, pg. 74).

What they suggest and promote, in contrast to the customary structure (De Shazer & Berg, 1997), is a collaborative representation from therapists and clients, blending clients' suggestions, reflected upon during the break, into the therapist's feedback message. In contrast to Sharry et al., (2001) and the customary structure developed by De Shazer & Berg, (1997) Iveson (2012) as cited in Huber & Durrant (2014) differs considerably. Iveson deliberately no longer takes breaks unless being observed by others. Instead, feedback is provided after a thinking pause and reflecting on the session information. Sharry et al., (2001) argue however, acting as collaborator with the client's voice helps them with being the overall decider of the task assigned, and further supports the principles of a client-centred model.

### *Effects of the Literature on My Practice*

From reading this literature I decided to change my approach to this technique. Initially, I was prompted to use only the structure suggested by Lipchik (2011) for formulating the summation message. I valued her stance which encompassed the entire interview process, client content and acknowledged clients' emotions. In my client work, noticing emotions is an interest area and it is important for my learning to display genuine empathy to clients. After reading the article by Sharry et al., (2001) however, I decided to develop my approach even further and experimented with the client-directed prompt.

I began developing a more collaborative mind-set and worked on incorporating what I valued from Lipchik (2011) and Sharry et al., (2001). The literature from Lipchik (2011) on the summation message allowed me to use all of the information by including the interview process. The literature by Sharry et al., (2001) encouraged me to experiment and experience a different mind-set, which helped with encouraging clients to develop and choose their own tasks. The customary structure developed by De Shazer & Berg, (1997) was initially a foundational guide in my approach to this technique. However, throughout the review of literature on the research available on this technique, other practitioners highlighted the importance of finding ownership and congruency over the techniques, by aligning one's own practice to their beliefs.

What I started noticing as a result of this was that I wanted a more congruent approach in my style and delivery of the summation message, one which focused on enabling clients to choose their resources rather than offering my own ideas. What I started doing differently as a result, was to listen out more for clients' own ideas on task suggestions before offering my summation message. I recorded clients' own task ideas and reflected them back as a rationale which considered and reinforced their own suggestions. According to Watzlawick (1987) as cited in Quick (2008) using one's own argument is considered the best convincer for a rationale. This seemed to help clients and provided more support to their ideas. It also felt more congruent to my approach using this technique as a Solution-focused brief counsellor. I sensed clients felt it more worthwhile to them as the task suggestions emanated from their reflections on their own resources.

#### *Clients' Perspectives on 'What Helps' in Counselling and Psychotherapy*

The focus for this research is on clients' perspectives of the summation message in Solution-focused brief therapy. However, as the research appeared relatively limited I decided to extend my literature search to include also clients' perspectives in counselling and

psychotherapy and in general, their perspectives in Solution-focused brief therapy, hoping more critical evidence might emerge about feedback from clients' perspectives. This section highlights this literature and how most of it is focused from therapist perspectives. After which I present the latest research I found on clients' perspectives relevant to this technique in Solution-focused brief therapy. Exploring the literature on clients' perspectives identified limited research in the field of counselling.

According to Elliot & Williams, (2003) there is a considerable lack of research conducted on clients' perspectives or experiences in counselling, as much of the literature available is focused on the way therapists work with clients for change outcomes. Researcher views reflect the theoretical perspectives of therapists rather than those of their clients (Elliot & Williams, 2003).

Manthei, (2005) states this also, noting research which explores the client's perspective is far less familiar compared to the quantity available on the process from counsellors' views. He highlights how qualitative research methods have been an alternative way to address this issue, and how client perspectives are a useful guide for both clients and therapists. According to Manthei (2005) exploring clients perspectives in counselling helps them express and control the meaning of their experiences. Furthermore a good relationship, new insight, encouragement and feelings of support are attributed by clients' as helpful aspects of counselling which contribute to therapeutic change.

Paulson, Truscott and Stuart (1999) highlight in counselling in general, that although clients' views differ from their counsellor's, feedback has been found helpful overall to clients' counselling experiences. As such, the feedback given has been attributed to helping clients achieve with new learning about themselves because it allowed them to gain more insight on themselves. A study by Gershefski et al., (1996) as cited in Paulson et al., (1999) found also that clients view insight and self-exploration as helpful outcome factors from the therapeutic



process. Elliot & Williams, (2003) noted from clients experiences in counselling that accurate insight from a therapist's perspective is a key ingredient, alongside the therapeutic relationship. Feifal & Ellis (1963) as cited in Elliot & Williams (2003) noted therapist feedback as 'important' for delivering effective practice. A special research report from six different studies conducted by Elliot, (2008) identifying common findings on helpfulness from clients' experiences in counselling, found the therapeutic relationship, empathic listening and affirming with validating techniques, the most helpful factors regardless of gender or population.

However, according to Duncan & Miller, (2008) and Elliot & Williams, (2003) clients show minimal regard for theory or technique as it is who the therapist is, and the quality of the relationship which carries the most weight towards therapeutic gain. Furthermore, they assert the significance of the therapist-client relationship is highly regarded as a main factor for client outcomes and success in counselling (Duncan & Miller, 2008). In support of these findings, an empirical study that was conducted by Lambert (1992) Asay & Lambert (1999) as cited in Hubble, Duncan & Miller (1999) identified 40% of client outcomes were due to extra-therapeutic factors whereas 30% were directly attributable to the therapeutic relationship, regardless of the techniques used.

What was found most when exploring the literature on what clients' find helpful in counselling, in general, is that there is limited attention given to the various techniques used, including feedback. The view from clients' perspectives on what they find most helpful, is attributable to the therapeutic relationship. The literature on clients' perspectives in Solution-focused therapy revealed similar findings pertaining to helpful aspects of the counselling process, relationship and use of techniques. The next section highlights what clients find helpful in Solution-focused brief counselling, and is focused on the clients' perspectives.

### *Clients' Perspectives on 'What's Helpful' in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*

A study conducted by Metcalf and Thomas (1994), aimed at providing therapists with more understanding on client perceptions of helpfulness from their experiences in the Solution-focused brief therapy. The results revealed themes from clients' first hand experiences and provided a range of descriptions on helpfulness from both therapists' and clients' views. A major limitation of the research however, indicated that the therapist who participated in the project took a more active role, which is not that of a traditional Solution-focused practitioner. Outcomes from this study identified that: feeling listened to, having strengths and resources amplified, and being validated and praised as helpful overall to the counselling process. Other findings indicated practitioners using this model need to utilize specific questioning techniques for clarifying clients' reasons for attending therapy.

Lee (1997) conducted a study which explored outcomes and issues in Solution-focused brief therapy for a wide range of families from diverse backgrounds. Accordingly, Lee (1997) found 83% of respondents reported solution-focused counselling was helpful and attributed the focus on goal attainment as most helpful overall. Clients reported validation was the most useful and helpful element alongside talking and support, known as the therapeutic relationship. Inferences could be made from clients' receiving feedback however these were not directly discussed as an outcome factor. Lee (1997) highlights the attributes of the therapeutic relationship as being consistent in many studies on what clients find helpful Rounsaville as cited in Lee (1997). Other findings from this study noted that questioning techniques, which enable clients to explore their thinking towards positive goal attainment and practices supported by the principles of Solution-focused model, had positive outcomes for client change (Lee, 1997).

A study by Lloyd and Dallos, (2008) looking at clients' first hand experiences in Solution-focused brief therapy, reported the collaborative approach most helpful overall. The

processes of the Solution-focused brief model and techniques were used including the 'consultation break' in the feedback technique. Clients reported the eliciting, highlighting and validating of their strengths, with a positive focus and support, were all helpful aspects of a strengths-based approach.

#### *Clients' Perspectives on the Solution-Focused Feedback Technique*

Inferences are only made about feedback through the literature on clients' perspectives pertaining to the Solution focused model. Research identifying clients' experiences of feedback are considerably limited, with clients' perspectives even harder to obtain. Examples in the literature representing clients' perspectives on helpfulness or value of the feedback technique, as part of this model, are considerably sparse and appear to be an area unexplored in research. The quantity and range of literature available on Solution-focused brief therapy, from therapist perspectives, stands in stark contrast to what is available on clients' perspectives. This has provided impetus for this research project on client perspectives, with the most recent research available and relevant to this topic presented below.

Research on 'the break' and summary message by Huber and Durrant, (2014) highlights the importance of the primacy and recency effect relevant to delivering feedback messages. A concept originally coined by Hermann Ebbinghaus (Crowder, 1976 as cited in Huber and Durrant 2014), the recency effect is where the items which were the last items given at the end of a conversation, are the most easily and reliably recalled. The primacy effect is where the next items recalled are in fact items which were given first. Essentially, verbal presentations see one likely remembering the last items first and the first items given, next. According to Huber & Durrant, (2014) how Solution-focused brief therapy sessions begin and end with clients is important, as the final minutes of a session are likely to be remembered. Furthermore, they suggest moving away from prescriptive tasks as clients are

no longer required to recall specific details of the tasks prescribed. This is mainly because the things presented last are more likely to have an impact on clients (Panagopoulos, 2011 as cited in Huber & Durrant, 2014). Results from this qualitative study conducted by Huber & Durrant (2014) asking for clients' views about their therapist leaving the room and returning with a summary message after the break, identified six themes pertaining to aspects of helpfulness relative to the break and each client's counselling experience.

Numerical data scaling views on helpfulness out of 0-10 rated the client-break an 8.6 out of 10 and themes on personal and practical benefits of the break and summary, in particular, for increasing the confidence of clients in therapy. The therapist taking a break and returning with a summary message was viewed as positive and helpful, along with the reflection time provided. Compliments were seen central to message summaries (Campbell et al., 1999) with many clients reporting that the messages affirmed them. Other outcomes indicated clients often anticipate feedback however reflection time assists with a re-focused mental alertness. The main impact reported about this technique overall was that clients benefited from feeling heard, valued, and validated by their therapist's perspective (Huber & Durrant, 2014). Validating and complimenting are core principles of the customary structure developed as part of the Solution focused model's feedback technique.

While a number of practitioners have written about the Solution-focused brief model, it has remained consistently evident throughout this review that much of the research is based on the therapist perspective, with the exception of a few articles exploring client views on the helpfulness of the model. Huber & Durrant's (2014) research is the only article which has provided, to date, further insight on the feedback technique from clients' perspectives. However, this and other research which has looked at clients' experiences of this technique (Huber & Durrant, 2014), has only looked at the end-of-session feedback and the break rather than exploring with clients, at the beginning of the next session, how the feedback helps them

in-between-sessions. Possibly, as Turner & Hopwood (1994) have highlighted, most Solution-focused therapists will not ask about previous tasks assigned as this could be perceived negatively by the client if the tasks have not been completed or have not gone well. Furthermore, asking about the perceived effects of 'feedback' noticed in-between-sessions is quite different to asking directly about tasks. This research project therefore aims to explore this process with clients while addressing the identified gap in the literature and finding out more from clients' perspectives regarding what is helpful, or not, about receiving feedback messages as part of their experiences with Solution-focused brief therapy.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY

Methodology refers to the preferred theoretical approach chosen for gaining knowledge and collecting research data when seeking answers to problems about our world (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). The two dominant paradigms which underlie the social sciences are positivism and interpretivism (Ferguson, Ferguson and Taylor, 1992 as cited in Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Paradigms are frameworks or perspectives which researchers use to observe and understand the world. The paradigm we use shapes how we see things. The following section briefly outlines the assumptions and methods used within the positivist and interpretive paradigms, and concludes with a rationale for the use of interpretivism in this research project.

#### THEORETICAL APPROACHES

##### *Positivism*

The first major theoretical perspective, positivism, is concerned with “seeking facts or causes of social phenomena apart from the subjective states of individuals” (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p.3). Researchers using this paradigm use research methods which produce statistical data. This is more commonly known as quantitative research. Those using it aim to, at best stand outside a study, focus on facts or observable causes and use statistical analysis to interpret findings. Durkheim (1938) as cited in Taylor and Bogdan (1998) noted that social phenomena be considered as something which has an external influence on people. Positivists using the quantitative paradigm to collect data mostly in numerical form and use techniques such as questionnaires, to study relationships between one set of facts to another (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998; Bell, 2010). Objective measurements emphasized in the data are obtained in large numbers and conclusions (Bell, 2010; Mutch, 2013; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

## *Interpretivism*

The second major theoretical approach is Interpretivism. Interpretivism is primarily concerned with understanding social phenomena from a person's own perspective and rather than seeking out specific facts, researchers exploring in the interpretive paradigm use methods which produce descriptive data on how people perceive the world (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). This approach is commonly known as qualitative research. Qualitative researchers are interested also in the social sciences and how people perceive or interpret certain behaviour and events. Methods used to collect data specific to this approach include descriptions from participants from in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observations. Methods can be mixed across the interpretive paradigm as fewer participants are required to achieve depth, rather than breadth, in a study (Hennink, et al., 2011). Observation and interpretation are emphasized in qualitative research and are integral components to the techniques used.

The main objective for researching within the interpretive paradigm is to "understand subjective meaningful experiences" (Hennink, et al., 2011, P.14) of a study's participants. Researchers recognise within this paradigm, that reality is socially constructed and specific to one's social contexts. Those using an interpretivist approach generally consider the subjective perspective of a person's reality as an inside perspective as they are primarily interested in what participants perceive to be important. The theoretical approach of Interpretivism is considered most appropriate here, given that the focus of this research is on clients' perspectives of the summation message in Solution-focused brief counselling.

## *Qualitative Methodology*

Qualitative research is a broad term to use as a method of inquiry within the interpretive paradigm. However, as an approach, it allows us to research the 'what' and 'how' of phenomena in detail and people's experiences in specific contexts (Bogden & Biklen, 2007;

Creswell, 2013; Bell, 2010; Hennink, et al., 2011; Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). One of the major features of qualitative research is that the approach allows researchers to identify issues from the perspectives of participants and understanding meanings on phenomena, from participants' interpretations. Adopting the qualitative approach requires participants and phenomena within a study, be explored in a naturalistic setting. A naturalistic approach is central for gaining a deeper understanding of participants' meanings (Tolich & Davidson, 1998). It is viewed that people's experiences and behaviours are shaped within the context in which they occur (Hennink, et al., 2011).

Researching my own counselling practice and clients aims to generate themes from clients' descriptions which best represents their perspectives of the summation messages. This technique is provided as part of Solution-focused brief therapy sessions. The main objective for using a qualitative approach is to identify, from clients' perspectives, how the summation message is perceived and more importantly, whether summation messages are helpful and if so, how? Key characteristics of qualitative research include a naturalistic setting and participant descriptions with a focus on process and inductive meanings. Integrating the research into the counselling setting will allow me to immerse myself in this study with clients and gain a deeper understanding by being the primary data collecting instrument and making use of an insider perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Qualitative researchers use an insider perspective for seeking understanding on phenomena from those experiencing what it is we want to know. "If we would like to do or know something about phenomena explored we need to identify this from people experiencing it themselves, about what it is like from their perspective" (Hennink, et al., 2011, p.18). Researching my counselling practice and clients allows me to enter the field appropriately to conduct this research. I will be able to do this in a trusting and unobtrusive manner. Both clients and I will be entwined in the research process and in context where



counselling and the summation messages occur (Creswell, 1994). The data collected will be analysed to generate themes which encompass or reflect the perspectives of clients experiencing the technique. The descriptions gathered will, hopefully, represent a range of themes showing their perspectives which could add value to others exploring the usefulness of this technique. Qualitative methodology informed by an interpretivist perspective has been chosen as the main theoretical foundation for this project because it is primarily concerned with understanding people within their own frames of reference.

### *Research Approach*

Deciding which approach to use within the interpretive paradigm was challenging because there are a range of analytic traditions used for data analysis. I considered the following four analytical approaches discussed below, for their appropriateness in this research. The phenomenological approach which uses IPA (interpretive phenomenological analysis) was considered for analysis. IPA was considered mainly because it aims to provide insight in specific contexts relative to certain phenomena.

However phenomenology and IPA are intrinsically linked to phenomenological epistemology, which is essentially theoretically bound. Ontologies and epistemologies are assumptions contained with a researcher's premise which inform qualitative methodology. Epistemology explores the relationship between the inquirer and the known, and how knowledge might be represented (Hennink et al., 2011). The main aim of this research project set out to purposefully explore the client's perspective of the summation message in the counselling session. My epistemology was based on constructionist principles that suggest knowledge is generated between us. Phenomenological epistemology seeks understanding by focusing on an individual's everyday life *experiences* relative to the phenomena explored (Charmaz, 2002). I felt this knowledge was not what I was aiming to identify or explore, and as such discounted IPA as an approach.

The case study method was considered as case studies can be a powerful research tool for seeking a greater understanding or conveying certain dimensions of social phenomena (Reinharz, 1992 as cited in Padula & Miller, 1999). However, in case study research, greater understanding is collected and achieved through a range of cases within a bounded system. My client cases were bounded only by their unit of analysis applicable to the sampling criteria, e.g. client participants, having Solution-focused brief counselling and experiencing three summation messages. This approach was considered but was inappropriate for two reasons; first, it is the preferred strategy when the investigator has little or no control over the events and second, it is best used when asking how or why questions (Yin 1994). This research is not investigating within a bounded system of events and is primarily focused on clients' overall perspectives. Case study method was not the best fit for the focus or main question in this research.

Grounded theory analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was considered because it uses methods which are useful for generating themes grounded within the data. The aim in using grounded theory analysis is to generate theory from within the data as this approach is specifically focused around theory building from certain phenomena. Considering the purpose and context of this research aimed to gather descriptive perceptual data from clients on the summation message, the aim of grounded theory analysis was not the right approach for this research.

What I did find however, was how closely linked grounded theory analysis is to thematic analysis as an analytic approach. Methods, like the ones aforementioned, share common characteristics in the search for themes across entire data sets as each, essentially overlaps with thematic analysis. Although they differ in certain aspects e.g. the use of analytic measures, each aims similarly, to identify and describe patterns found in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

## *Thematic Analysis*

This discovery added substantial weight to my choice for considering thematic analysis as a methodological approach. I was looking for an approach which would allow me to capture key aspects of clients' perspectives and descriptions found in the data compatible with a constructionist approach. The best way to gather a multitude of perspectives, key to understanding the summation message, is through rich descriptive data gathered from clients' already engaged in the counselling process. Thematic Analysis is a method used to identify, analyse and report patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). It is recognised that the core skills used in this approach for qualitative analysis can be applied across many forms of data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

According to Braun & Clark, (2006) thematic analysis is applicable to a range of theoretical approaches or epistemologies but it is often used as a method in its own right, and can be used independent of theory. Mutch (2013) states thematic analysis is one of the most common approaches used in qualitative research, as it allows researchers to look for key issues from their participants using their words to identify important themes from their perspective within a text. Themes capture key aspects in the data important to the research question.

I considered thematic analysis a more suitable approach for this research project because it is a good match theoretically with social constructionism which is the framework I work in for counselling. As the main aim for this research was to generate themes from clients' words present in the data on the summation message, this approach seemed most appropriate. A thematic approach is also applicable in addressing the overall research question which asks: *'What are clients' perspectives of the summation message in Solution-focused brief counselling?'*

Researching within the qualitative (interpretive) paradigm provides a flexible lens to gather clients' perspectives, however I wanted to use an analytic tradition which is both flexible and relevant to the qualitative paradigm. Flexibility is important as an introduction to qualitative research and in my counselling approach. I recognised a thematic approach would allow me to analyse data generated within the counselling context, by potentially providing a rich detailed account of the data similarly used in grounded theory analysis. This allows me to find out what it is I wanted to know while using analytical methods rigorous for analysis. As such, a clear account of how the data is analysed is documented by reporting what was done and why. Clarity around process and method is vital in qualitative research, as the assumptions used to inform the analysis can help others in evaluating research compared to similar studies on the same topic (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Thematic analysis is a compatible fit with a constructionist approach. Qualitative researchers and social constructionists are both interested in seeking understanding from the meanings constructed relative to a person's lived reality and perceptions. Furthermore, each considers the participant is the expert and uses tools to yield descriptive data (Braun & Clark, 2006; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Creswell, 2013; Mutch, 2005; Lipchik 2011; Jones-Smith, 2012; De Jong & Berg, 2013a). A constructionist approach is not only acknowledged as underpinning my practice but also in my approach to client perceptions by recognizing there are common building blocks that are part of the context where knowledge is created (Bager-Charleson, 2014). Rather than uncovering one objective truth about the summation message or viewing that a totally objective reality is able to be known, knowledge and meaning created in this research project is just that, knowledge created. How clients make meaning about the summation message, from a constructionist viewpoint, is best understood in the context in where meanings occur; through relationships and interactions which include also, the self (Morrow 2005; Berg & De Jong, 2013).

The premise social constructionism holds in my counselling practice is that it enables an exploration of local knowledge about the summation message while remaining aware that truth exists among a range of client realities (Bager-Charleson, 2014; Creswell, 2007, 2013; McCloud, 1999). With this research project primarily interested in clients' perspectives of the summation message, it is recognised their perspectives will be provided in a considerably subjective manner. Essentially, people are seen as meaning makers who construct their own sense of meanings while experiencing things. Thus clients' personal meaning and perspectives of the summation message constructed during this research will be based upon their own personal interpretations and experience. Thematic analysis is therefore seen as the best analytic fit for these reasons. This next section briefly highlights the need and purposes for reflexivity, rigorous methods and ethical consideration, to the research process when conducting qualitative research.

### *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity is important to the analytic process within the interpretive paradigm. Qualitative researchers are expected be aware of their internal processes and required to consistently be aware of their beliefs and review their actions, as these can influence their inquiry (Hennink et al., 2011; Creswell, 2007). Regularly engaging in a reflexive process helped identify any predispositions initially held about the summation message at the beginning of this research project. This is an important characteristic underpinning qualitative research because it allows the researcher to make explicit at the outset of their inquiry, what their underlying assumptions are (Creswell, 2013). Making any assumptions explicit enabled an opportunity to explore the summation message (as a phenomena) as if it were being viewed for the first time and ensured clients' perspectives were gathered as uncontaminated, as much as possible by my interpretation (McCloud, 2012; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Furthermore, the reflexive process helped with recognizing how the literature inspired and impacted upon my

counselling practice, and created a deeper awareness of the active role I had in the research process. Etherington (2004) states reflexivity is a process of interaction between and within oneself while operating on several levels at one time; with our participants, the data, our actions and interpretations throughout the research. A reflexive process makes a considerable contribution to how the themes generated are driven by each particular question asked. Being reflexive helped me tap into my own personal responses, holding an ethical awareness around the needs of each client and integrating the roles from counsellor to researcher. Maintaining my key focus as their counsellor was particularly important in this research as it ensured good counselling practice was adhered to throughout the course of the project.

### *Rigour and Reliability*

In thematic analysis, rigour is achieved by applying theory to the methods used and clearly documenting what has been done and why. The methods of analysis need to match what is done with how the subject matter is conceptualized (Reicher & Taylor as cited in Braun & Clark, 2006). Principles for increasing rigour in qualitative research involve collecting data from multiple sources. This includes audio tapes, transcripts, counselling notes, analytic memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and reflexive research journals. Data sources for this research include those aforementioned which provided a rich account of clients' perspectives on the summation message. A description of the context is included, however the focus is primarily on documenting how descriptive data is obtained by the research participants (Creswell, 2009) and analysed. Providing enough detail on this process intentionally aims to increase rigor by allowing readers to determine for themselves what the actual perspectives of clients' are on the summation message. Reflecting the accurate perspectives of participants alongside researcher interpretation demonstrates an ethical approach to qualitative research, and assures the interpretations of the findings are balanced (Mutch, 2013).

Trustworthiness is achieved by clearly documenting the research design, decisions and data gathering procedures for analysis. Reliability refers to the notion that a similar study might replicate the findings or at least yield similar results. Mutch (2013) states in qualitative research it is not entirely possible to achieve this. Parallels, however, may be identified by conducting a similar qualitative study on the summation message. Researching one's own practice and using a thematic approach could yield similar concepts on the summation message, however the findings would differ considerably due to the subjective and contextual nature of the messages provided, the therapeutic relationship and researcher interests. As such, relatability is considered for this research rather than generalizability (McCloud, 2010).

### *Ethical Consideration*

Ethical consideration and approval was required for this research project prior to gathering any data in my counselling practice. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Canterbury's UC Human Ethics Committee (see appendix a). Ethical issues considered were with respect to the five moral principles for research (McCloud, 2011). These are autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and fidelity.

Autonomy is pertinent to informed consent. This was adhered to by seeking approval from my client participants and respecting their rights as individuals, making sure they were fully informed with an information sheet (see appendix c) and the voluntary nature of being a client and research participant. The information sheet explained to participants the intentions and requirements for their involvement in this project. Potential participants were invited to ask any questions and to sign a consent sheet only once they felt fully informed (see appendix b). Ethical practices for research required by the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) (2012), involves protecting the privacy of all client participants and respecting the confidences of any potential participants, which includes the agency staff and other community users. Upholding the rights of all individuals involved in the agency where my

internship and the research took place is a requirement for maintaining privacy and fidelity while researching within the helping profession.

In respect to anonymity, care was taken to ensure the protection of all clients involved in this project and the agency. This involved removing all client names, demographics and identifying features and replacing them with alphabetised codes. These remained during the peer-reviewing process, and when seeking clarity on my interpretation of client perspectives from descriptions in the data previously analysed (Creswell, 2009). Care was taken to ensure anonymity and privacy of all client participants from the agency's many co-workers and only the agency's administrator, manager and my internship-supervisor knew which clients were research participants. Care has also been taken to not mention the agency's name throughout the research planning and dissertation process.

In qualitative research, ethical consideration strongly asserts that people being researched must not be treated or seen as a means to someone else's ends, but rather should be viewed as an end in themselves (Davidson & Tolich 1998). Non-maleficence refers to the notion that we must first, do no harm above all else. Engaging in self-reflexivity about our own position and that of our participants, is an important part of the research process (McCloud, 2012; Yin, 2011). As a counsellor researching my practice, I involved myself in a reflexive process and held a deeper awareness around my professional responsibilities by holding an ethical focus for remaining counsellor first and researcher second. As part of my professional responsibilities, regular clinical supervision was attended for one hour every fortnight.

Discussions with my supervisor throughout this research project were focused on counsellor development, and researching my own practice and researching according to NZAC requirements. Justice has been considered and adhered to by treating all individuals equally and fairly in this project. The principles of fairness and equal rights of all are not only paramount to qualitative methodology, but also fundamental to constructionist and Solution-



focused epistemology; viewing all individuals as experts in their own lives (De Jong & Berg, 2013a; Creswell, 2009; McCloud, 2012). This aligned naturally with principles inherent to my everyday practice, which respects the rights of all clients and their perspectives, as they discover them (Hanton, 2011).

Fairness is reflected in valuing each client's counselling outcomes, regardless of the research project, and adhering to my professional responsibilities in the relationship by identifying whether the therapist fit was right for each client participant. This allowed me to explore, with clients, that each was given an opportunity to experience better counselling for successful counselling outcomes.

Beneficence is about whether the research conducted contributes to the wider field of knowledge, in particular by informing the research pool of knowledge relevant to Solution-focused brief therapy. My hope for researching an area which has been relatively unexplored is that the findings will inform or benefit other practitioners or students using this model. Hopefully, an understanding on the summation message will be generated to help others consider how to design messages to best help clients they work with. Moreover, I hope this research provides value to the growing body of literature on Solution-focused brief therapy and helps to address the gap in the literature by adding new information from clients' perspectives.

## METHOD

### *Design*

The design of this research project required three clients to have three of their Solution-focused brief therapy counselling sessions recorded. While recording these, they were required also to answer a research question at the beginning of each session. In total, three consecutive sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. At the beginning of each session, subsequent to the first session, an unstructured but brief research interview was conducted. The research interviews then flowed naturally into clients' regular counselling sessions of which a full fifty minute session was provided. Research questions were confined to exploring clients' initial thoughts and perceptions about the summation message and whether these were helpful to clients' internal processes. Each participant had more than three sessions aside from this project. One had five, another had eight and the other had ten.

### *Setting*

The counselling office is where each counselling session and preceding research interview took place. This was in the agency where I was a counselling intern and the sessions occurred on a fortnightly basis. The research interviews were short in duration but prior to a regular Solution-focused counselling session. To protect the privacy and rights to confidentiality of all service users, including staff working in this agency, people's names or the type of service offered will not be included in this project.

### *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited with a poster, visibly posted on the agency walls (see appendix d). The administrator and my internship supervisor promoted this research to existing and new clients. Each was offered an information sheet and accompanying consent sheet. These were in close proximity to the flyers on the wall. Random selection is not

necessary to qualitative research, therefore no random selection was emphasised for this project. Sampling criteria were met by being a counselling client, having Solution-focused brief counselling and receiving summation messages. One potential participant expressed an interest for their involvement in this project, however their interest was for purposes other than that of the research. Ethical consideration was needed and addressed in clinical supervision, after which I respectfully declined their involvement.

### *Participants*

For this project three female (existing clients) opted to participate. These were counselling clients at the agency where my internship was. This completed the numbers required for my study. It was not deliberate to have women only in this project, as men can and do use this service, however at the time of recruitment clients who were interested and signed up for this were women. The women were broad in age range, from forty to seventy. Each participant was fully informed on the intention for this research project and what was required for their involvement. The information sheet explained these requirements (see appendix c).

Each signed a consent sheet and was informed via the information sheet of their right to withdrawal from this project at any stage, with the option to still continue with their counselling. Two participants promptly handed their consent sheets in. The third participant started three weeks later. Each client was invited to ask any questions prior to the research interviews beginning. I also checked at the beginning of each research session whether clients were happy to still be recorded. Seeking clarity displayed an unassuming and respectful manner to each participant's circumstances while considering the sensitive nature of counselling. I also aimed to promote an atmosphere which respected their right to involvement at each stage of the project.

### *The Feedback Technique*

Researchers within the interpretive paradigm posit that the views of their participants are the most important. Before presenting an analysis of themes generated it is important at this point in the research, to recap on the development of my approach and the differences discussed in the literature review on other practitioner approaches to the summation message. The purpose here is to outline how their perspectives inspired the development of my approach. Initially, my intention was to research the feedback technique based on the customary structure described by De Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (1997). For research purposes, the use of this technique was defined Solution-focused if it consisted of a 'consultation-break' validating statements (on client strengths), compliments and provided a clue for a homework task. I began incorporating elements of the summation message (Lipchik, 2011) which I liked. Based on differences from her suggestions, I incorporated all of the information provided in the session and considered the client's emotional perspective.

However, after reviewing all the literature on the summation message, I felt inspired to experiment with the client-break process and began using the client-break prompt recommended by Sharry et al., (2001) to help clients develop their own task suggestions. This article had a profound influence on my entire approach to this technique and my build up to the 'consultation break' and the ensuing offer of suggestions. I wanted to include this approach from the work of Sharry et al., (2001) to the structure of the summation message and 'the break' because they highlighted just how collaborative a client-break can be. The use of a client-break reflected to me core elements of the Solution-focused approach and is both client-focused and client-directed. How this looked in my practice, as a process of the technique, is that it aligned with the principles of the Solution-focused model, it allowed me to integrate aspects of the work from Lipchik (2011) on the summation message, and included the use of a client-break prompt suggested by Sharry et al., (2001). The next section describes

the process and what I did in counselling sessions with my research participants and how I used 'the client-break' prompt.

### *Client-Break and Summation Message*

I began modelling the client-break prompt to each client participant at the beginning of this project. I signalled the client-break towards the close of each session and used the same prompt which is provided in the example below:

*It's nearing the end of our session and time for us to take a short break so I can give you some feedback. I will leave you to reflect on today's session. I'm interested in hearing what has really stood out for you today and it would be great if you could tell me about any decisions or plans you have made about achieving... (Reiterating the client's session goal) When I get back we can talk about what you've come up with, sound good? (Adapted from Sharry et al., 2001).*

I left the room for five minutes to reflect upon the session information and collated my notes into a summation message. The notes focused on much of the information provided and on the clients' ideas, emotions and resources explored over the session. Upon my return I asked the client how they went (reflecting during the break) and listened to their ideas first before offering a summation message. While listening to their ideas I recorded these deliberately so they could be included in the summation message. It was important to collect their ideas first so I could promote any task suggestions and the resources identified over the session. What this process allowed me to do was to offer a much more contextually designed message by integrating clients' ideas into the summation message. This included reinforcing client-directed tasks shared that were relevant to their goal. Compliments were given to highlight clients' strengths and potential resources explored each session, however I particularly encouraged them to help themselves by reinforcing the use of their own resource ideas. I made every effort to promote their own suggestions using their language. Clients' reactions to the entire Summation process are the focus for this research.

## THE DATA

### *Data Gathering*

Data collected within the interpretive paradigm is often referred to as a data corpus. Each individual piece of data collected is called a data item (Braun & Clark, 2006). In this research project the data corpus, which is all the data collected, consisted of descriptive data from audio recordings, transcripts from these, participant observation notes, counselling session research notes, analytic memos, (while transcribing and coding) and my reflexive research journal memos. Although the summation message was the main foci for this research, a strong reflexive process was invaluable for observing and documenting changes to my practice. This is included in the data set. Creswell (2009) states that qualitative tools assist with providing a more descriptive and rich picture on the data collected. Tools and technique chosen for the data corpus in this project do make up a rich data set (Braun & Clark, 2006). This helped provide a more in-depth picture for data analysis. An inductive reviewing process for generating themes from the data collected is discussed in the results section, chapter three.

### *Research Interviews*

Descriptive data were collected through brief but unstructured research interviews prior to regular counselling sessions. Research interviews were five minutes in duration. Each client-participant had three of their counselling sessions recorded. The recording device provided a non-invasive tool for gathering purposeful data and as these were considered counselling research interviews, the entire counselling hour was recorded. This allowed me to gather relevant research data which were later transcribed for analysis. Specific questions were asked to explore clients' perspectives of the summation message, how helpful the messages were, or not, how clients felt receiving these and how sense was made from these (see appendix f).

### *Participant Observation*

Participant observation notes were taken from each research counselling interview session to include observations on this technique. Mutch, (2013) states how participant observation includes activities that are part of the observation. Formal participant observations were conducted on each client as part of the normal counselling process, prior to and after the client-break. As I was the main data collecting instrument, this position allowed me to gather specific data from my use of the client-break. This allowed me to observe and gather data relevant to clients' immediate reactions and my use of the 'client break' prompt. I was able to record these as natural observations which were normal practices in each client's session. Observation notes included clients' ideas on the resources explored over the session, their ideas after 'the break' and any decided upon task suggestions.

### *Data Analysis*

Tolich and Davidson (1999) state that data analysis is a search for patterns and regularities within the data collected. An inductive approach was employed in the analysis of transcripts collected for this research. The transcripts provided raw textual data from research interviews and transcribing these into textual data enabled familiarity with each transcript. This helped later for locating easily, specific data. Data was transcribed the same day it was collected which helped to manage all the data collected whilst also engaging in the process of immersion for analysis. Analytic memos were recorded while transcribing the interviews. According to Strauss & Corbin (1990) as cited in Morrow (2005), analytic memos are a useful tool for enhancing the analytic process. These formed part of the data corpus and allowed me to capture certain aspects of interest from clients' initial reactions about the summation message. This included any instances where the summation message was referred to from the previous session. The transcripts were examined a number of times prior to coding and closer reading, which helped me identify my initial thoughts while on the search for preliminary

codes and patterns within the data (Morrow, 2005). According to Braun & Clark, (2006), patterns within the data using thematic analysis can be identified in one of two ways. The first uses an inductive approach to analysis which is more commonly known as 'bottom up'. Bottom up identifies themes within the data that are strongly linked to the data themselves. Whereas a deductive approach commonly known as 'top down' enables certain aspects within the data collected to be recognised. Generally these are concepts or contextual references particular to the research. I began by developing both inductive and deductive codes as deductive codes were a helpful and logical starting point for recognising contextual issues or concepts within the research (Hennink et al., 2011).

Codes, which are descriptive words, summarize a specific aspect of the data collected. The process of coding identifies relevant features or basic elements of the raw data collected, (Braun & Clark, 2006) for example, the phrase "I can't remember" could be coded with 'memory' as this is a descriptive label which reflects the essence of the language featured. Categories develop from the coding process which, similarly, uses words or short phrases to describe specific segments of the data that are explicit. Themes are an outcome of the coding and categorization process and require deeper analytical reflection on the data corpus (Rossman and Rallis (2003) as cited in Saldana (2009)).

Inductive analysis enabled me to code the data without trying to fit it into any pre-existing coding framework. This process is referred to as being data driven (Braun & Clark, 2006). I read the transcripts closely a number of times and wrote down preliminary but descriptive codes by labelling this with the annotated salient views of each client. Salient views are prominent features in the text from the client's own words. Annotating data helped capture, in essence, what was present in the data collected and enabled transparency in the coding process. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) state that transparency during interpretation and analysis of the data needs to be justified to not look like we have simply suited ourselves.



Achieving transparency while developing codes allowed me to be clear about annotating only what was in transcripts from clients' actual words and I used this process too for further data analysis. This helped when formulating preliminary categories and later for further analysis and generating themes. Analytic memos recorded my interpretations of certain data extracts while annotating the data. Data extracts are individual coded chunks of data.

Capturing both my initial and developing interpretations throughout the analytic process helped make explicit my active role in the research process and influence on the data produced. This was evident as the data generated were specific to the interview questions asked. A similar process occurred in reverse as a reflexive process. I recorded personal thoughts and ideas in my reflexive journal which allowed me to observe, over time, the influence the research had on my practice. Recording personally throughout the research process contributed to identifying any changes in my practice and allowed me to track these as they occurred. This information was part of the data set for generating a theme on my practice.

I kept analytic notes also, next to examples of clients' descriptions on the summation message from the data throughout the coding and analysis process. Establishing a codebook helped organise, code and analyse the interview data collected as a cyclic and systematic process. I tracked the raw data collected, coded relevant extracts, added these to the initial codes established or established new ones. Using my code book throughout the analysis process was invaluable for identifying prevalence where codes overlapped or repeated and helped guide the process for establishing richer codes and generating preliminary themes. Once the initial coding process was complete I re-examined the codes established, recognised which codes overlapped, reflected on the deeper meanings developed from the coding process and grouped together those which shared the same or had similar characteristics.

As a result of merging codes I generated nine initial categories on the summation message.

Preliminary themes are presented below:

- 1) Clients' initial responses
- 2) Between sessions
- 3) Helpfulness
- 4) Clients' views on feedback
- 5) Clients' views of delivery
- 6) Task decisions
- 7) Task benefits
- 8) Task purposes
- 9) Therapist-client relationship
- 10) Impact of client views

Data pertaining to each of the categories were further analysed and clustered together in a similar manner, to identify prevalence and volume of the categories which overlapped or repeated. I went over the analytic process using my code book, reflected on relevant data in the corpus, further analysed individual session notes and re-examined participant observations. Subsequently I merged the categories with shared meanings to generate preliminary themes. Moving from categories to themes required a more tacit process of analysis and identifying unspoken but clearly expressed perspectives within the data corpus. Clients were not involved in the analysis of the research. Checking data and transcripts were not sought as part of the consent process. However, I did want to make sure, on deeper analysis of specific data, that my interpretations were based on clients' actual perspectives. Before completing the final theme process I made sure these were balanced by engaging the views of my colleagues as peer de-briefers. Two peer-reviewers were employed to collaboratively engage in the peer-reviewing process on two separate occasions. I presented them with rich descriptive data excerpts for the reviewing process.

I also had one meeting with both of my academic supervisors. I took my coding book along to this meeting and showed examples of my developing themes, alongside raw textual data from transcribed verbatim. This helped to help confirm or disconfirm my initial interpretations of the data and assessed the themes generated were actually based on clients' words in the data. My academic supervisors were invaluable for reflecting back instances where I found myself unaware of the impact I had on pre-existing categories. Using peer-reviewers helped ensure my interpretations were balanced during the analysis and reflected an accurate interpretation of clients' perspectives. This applied fairness to my interpretation and limited (individual) researcher bias (Morrow, 2005).

Coming to the data with a specific focus on summation message brought together five major themes from clients' perspectives of this technique. These strongly linked to the data (Braun & Clark, 2006) and answered the main research question that asked '*What are clients' perspectives of the summation message in Solution-focused brief counselling?*' Four of the themes generated were inductively derived that best represent clients' perspectives on the summation message. Theme one emerged from my analysis of the data theme and theme five, from the analysis of my reflexive process. The next section presents these themes along with rich excerpts from the raw data collected from clients and myself, in this project.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CLIENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUMMATION MESSAGE

In this chapter I have organised the data thematically. Themes generated from my analysis of the transcripts describe clients' perspectives of the summation message. The term 'feedback' is used interchangeably in this chapter as this was the term used in the research interviews with clients. The main findings presented within the themes are that; thinking time empowers the recognition of resources, feedback encourages descriptions of task progression, feedback encourages awareness of self-resources and feedback empowers clients' clarity of thinking. Theme five relates to counsellor research and the impact of clients' perspectives on my counselling practice. The first theme, thinking time empowers the recognition of resources, emerged from my analysis of participant observation notes and counselling session research notes. Below the themes generated are presented along with transcribed excerpts from the counselling sessions.

#### *Theme 1: Thinking Time Empowers the Recognition of Resources*

This theme relates specifically to what was continually noticed after the client-break, in clients' responses before delivering the summation message. In this research I found that when I returned to the room after the break and asked clients how they went, the client-break prompt had not only empowered them to recognise their own resources but enabled them to choose tasks which helped move them closer to their solution. Each client reported brief reflections about their view of the problem but were quick to follow these up with explanations about the decisions made during the break. Subsequently, I noted the tasks decided upon by clients were specific and concrete. Their 'solutions' were framed either as their desire to experiment with things they thought might work for them, or to further develop tasks they knew had helped in the past.

Clients mostly chose behavioural tasks which were identified as tangible resources from the session. Their choices for the tasks were not only self-directed but were based on their knowledge of internal and external resources. Clients often made explicit their resources by expressing what they could do or how they felt about things. What was interesting is that they often mentioned that, prior to exploring these in counselling, the resources expressed had been unnoticed. The most common responses referred to constructing tasks or making decisions about what they knew they could try. One client mentioned how “noticing” [during the break] a task which worked in one setting could really help in another area of life. This is represented in the excerpt below when I returned to the room after the client-break and asked her how she went while reflecting. Please note that some text is deliberately omitted from the excerpts provided to protect the anonymity of all clients involved in this project. The client states as follows:

*C: Good, I’m just thinking I need to actually write everything down cos I’m like not normally a list person but I think I’m floundering around in circles because I’m not retaining things in my brain or something.*

*T: you’re holding a lot?*

*C: yeah and I’m not, if I get it and write it down it’s probably better cos I’m a real person for notes at work to myself*

*T: yeah, and you said lists were a good idea last time*

*C: yeah and I’m definitely in my own personal life, disorganised. Like at work I’m really organised so I’m using my organisational energy for stuff that’s not really helpful to me so, maybe I need to be slacker at work or probably sort my own stuff out*

Here, the client’s noticing of resources during the break helped her see how she could transfer existing skills from one context to another. The recognition of resources in her professional world was a valuable resource for noticing and formulating a helpful task in her personal life. The time to reflect helped with noticing her internal resources as she was able to

think about what actually helped and was within her reach from exceptions explored in the session. Another client similarly responded by recognizing that her thinking and decision making processes were a solution. She highlights the recognition of self-talk as a positive solution stating:

*C: Yeah umm, stay standing back and make sure I recognise it's not in my control, remember my love solution, I tell her every, it doesn't matter what problem is we've got to, I'll keep trying to repeat it to her*

As a result of taking time to reflect during the break, this client recognised she knew what internal resources would help her move forward. She decided that the best way to deal with an issue in her life was to give it five minutes of her attention a day and see that she was able to give it loving attention. She termed this her 'love solution'. Another client reported how her self-directed task decisions developed from her reflections during the break and what had been shared over the session. She reported recognizing her resources as:

*C: Well I decided to write it so I could read it every day*

*T: nice, that's a good idea, like what?*

*C: well simply going over what we said really (her ideal solution) that's what I want to do for the next week or however long, fortnight, I want to, I think I can*

This theme highlights how a client-directed prompt, such as the one presented by Sharry, et al., (2001), can help the process for clients to construct more effective and achievable self-directed tasks. There was evidence that the client-break provided clients with valuable time to formulate their plan of action based on the resources explored over the session. Recognising their current and potential resources throughout the session helped them to make choices about the specific steps each wanted to take.

## *Theme 2: Feedback Encourages Descriptions of Task Progression*

This theme is based on clients' initial thoughts about receiving the summation message from their previous session. As part of the solution-focused model, therapists aim to empower their clients by asking them to notice inner-strengths and existing resources and highlighting what clients state helps with progress towards their goal. Prior to delivering a summation message, the client-directed prompt enabled clients to notice their own internal and external resources and use their own suggestions for a task to help themselves. Their suggestions allowed them to notice more control in their lives particularly by adjusting and monitoring their own progress towards their goal.

I noticed during data analysis, two distinct and interesting features about this theme. Firstly, when I asked clients initially about the summation message, they often needed to conduct a quick memory search for the content of the previous summation message. Secondly, their reports were often followed up with explanations about their engagement with the tasks and how they were monitoring task progression. Clients demonstrated self-awareness from this, as they were able to identify impeding obstacles and could make adjustments to continue progressing forward. I deliberately chose not to ask clients about their tasks for two reasons. I did not want to guide their responses on the summation message any further than I had already from the research questions and I had considered the possibility of negative implications arising for clients when the therapist asks directly about their tasks (Turner and Hopwood, 1994). The following excerpts demonstrate what clients said in their initial statements about the summation message. When I asked clients about their engagement with their messages some indicated it was not easy to recall, for example this client stated:

*C: What was the feedback last week?*

Others however, responded directly by recalling the task chosen and explaining their perception of its benefits, for example:

C: *Umm no, I wrote my little list, umm, yep no, it's doing a little list is definitely good for me, definitely and well I know that I've been reading heaps of books*

T: *good, like you've been doing stuff for yourself?*

When the summation message content was remembered there was a sense task progression was most important. This was interesting considering the final part of the summation message delivered to clients' reinforced their own task suggestions. When they did remember the content task achievement was of particular focus. Their explanations included discussions on their external factors and how these helped with making adjustments to continue moving forward, for example:

C: *This week was the worst week....And they couldn't go to ... so not a good week for my plan, I kind've started (trying out the client's task) and noticed a big difference*

Here, the client demonstrates her engagement with the task idea and how trying this out, despite a few distractions, helped her to notice a big difference. Sometimes, I would ask a slightly different question, however clients still responded with reference to task progression, for example:

T: *How did you feel about the feedback from last session? Do you remember?*

C: *Good, umm well I didn't get round to... (Complimenting the client's chosen task) because... (Something unforeseen happened that impeded her progress) .... But (She decided to follow up with someone else she knew could help her achieve the goal*

Here, she did not comment from memory on the previous task idea but was quick to highlight an obstacle which impeded progress towards her goal. She discussed how making an adjustment provided her with another avenue to pursue progress towards the same goal. When asking clients about the summation message, this theme highlights how clients' initial



responses refer to their memory of the previous task assigned and how this relates specifically to a self-monitoring process. These were followed up by explanations about task achievement and how adjustments made outside of therapy are based on what is accessible and within the client's reach.

### *Theme 3: Feedback Encourages Awareness of Self-Resources*

This theme refers to clients' responses on the helpfulness of receiving summation messages. During the counselling session I consistently worked on eliciting clients' resources so I could reflect back their strengths in the summation message. This allowed clients to notice more clarity in their thought processes and informed them of better decision making from their awareness about resources. Clients reported feeling enabled to explore their resources more fully which helped clarify their thinking before choosing any action. One client shared her perspective about the helpfulness of receiving the summation message stating:

*C: The feedback helps in the fact that I talk things through and it allows me to sort of sort things in my own mind, how I'm going to file them and how I'm going to, you know, deal with things or work with it. So it has helped in the sitting there and sorting out, you know what the issue is what the solution is. That's helped!*

Here, the client highlighted how her summation messages helped to sort things out in her own mind which helped identify her solution. Another client described the helpfulness of receiving summation messages as an enhancing process which enabled empowerment. She recognised how the messages helped to increase her confidence by being more knowledgeable about noticing what worked, for example:

*C: It is because I know that I am doing the right thing, I feel confident about it now and I know that what I was doing isn't working it's just that .... has other issues, I've decided to give ... one minute of happiness each day and I have succeeded in doing that. The time that ... takes to come down is very much less.*

By recognizing previous actions and noticing inner-resources clients noted how constructive summation messages helped them see what or where adjustments needed to be made, and how their own thinking processes enabled this. Another client shared her process about how the summation messages helped her with noticing her internal knowledge and provided clarity on what the issue was:

*C: Well what I talked about, the feedback in a sense is the whole session, it's just a summation of it isn't it? And so uh I still feel like what a week, it's just that it's a little bit clouded by some terrible issues that... had and I can't help but feel for her a lot of the time.*

Clients mentioned the summation messages provided clarity in their thinking processes which were informed by their internal knowledge about what worked towards their overall therapy goal. This theme identified how clients felt that their internal focus enabled more clarity and this was the result of receiving summation messages from a sympathetic counsellor. This is represented below where another client discusses how working with someone and receiving summation messages enabled this process for her, for example:

*C: I think it's helping me cos it's just a way of working through things with a sympathetic, do you know what I mean, someone that you can just talk to and umm work through things with that are eating at you a little and so, yeah, cos I mean I don't really understand how counselling and that works*

*T: so how do you think feedback helps with that?*

*C: it just makes, all you do is you actually make me focus and think*

This represents how clients found their summation messages were helpful and allowed them to gain more clarity in their thinking. They felt affirmed noticing organisation in their thinking, and the summation message enabled them the opportunity to recognise they were working towards their solution. All three participants referred to experiencing more clarity in

their thinking processes from receiving summation messages and that these helped to focus and further inform their own actions.

#### *Theme 4: Feedback Empowers Clients' Clarity of Thinking*

One of the aspects explored with this technique is how clients made sense of their summation messages in counselling. Clients were asked directly about their sense of the summation message and reported how knowledge about themselves helped them to recognise their internal resources. Internal resource was referred to as 'knowing and a result of solution-building and constructing their own solutions. Clients discussed how clarity in their thinking enabled them to feel more confident from the place of knowing. Clients' perceived their summation message as follows:

*C: It's a way of working through things with someone you can just talk to. It just makes, all you do is you actually make me focus and think, yeah and that's all you do, yeah that's basically it, thinking and just putting it into the box that it needs to be in*

Here, the client discussed that making sense of her summation messages derived from conversations where she was able to notice her thinking was more focused and clear from constructing her own solution. When I asked about what sense she had made of the summation messages she discussed her focused thought processes and personal knowledge, developed within the counselling process. Another client responded similarly about personal knowledge emerging from her summation messages by highlighting:

*C: It's easy making sense of the feedback because I know what I am going to do*

A further example for making sense of their own summation message is represented below in this client's reflection on the solution-building process:

C: *You do a constructive thing which leads me around to my own solutions rather than offering me advice*

This client explains how reflecting on the solution-building process empowered her to notice her own ideas and how her solutions were in fact a result of her own constructs. Collaborating with clients is important to the Solution-focused approach and integral to the solution-building process. Clients often made explicit their resources by knowing what to do and how they felt about things, however these were often not noticed as resources. I had the opportunity to further highlight these in my delivery of the summation message. I promote their own ideas and suggestions, encouraging them to use their own resources. Clients highlighted their thinking based on personal knowledge and the specifics of the summation messages they received. When clients reported making sense of their summation messages from a place of 'knowing' and noticing how their focused thought processes helped in the development of solutions about the best way forward, I sensed clients were acknowledging and noticing which inner-resources to use and were empowered also by a supportive and constructive approach.

#### *Theme 5: The Impact of Clients' Perspectives on My Counselling Practice*

Theme five highlights the impact of this research on my counselling practice and how clients' perspectives added value to my practice. This theme emerged from my analytic memos and reflexive journal notes. The outcomes of the research had a major impact on my practice particularly with my discovery of valuing and promoting clients' strengths. When I first started researching and focusing more on the summation technique, I noticed I felt too prescriptive when suggesting tasks to clients. I was unaware initially what my beliefs were about client strengths and did not realize just how, intrinsically, I believed in and valued that clients know what to do and can do what is best for them.

Suggesting tasks to them did not feel collaborative or congruent in my approach. I started observing my thoughts and noticing what was happening in my practice. An important part of conducting research is to engage in reflexive practice and, as such, I recorded my own reflections as part of the research process. I observed my practice more deeply and noticed when I designed a task or offered a suggestion, that it felt therapist rather than client led. The excerpt below, from my reflexive journal, represents what I noticed when I prescribed clients with a task compared to the differences noted with what clients' were showing, for example:

*Initially, at the end of client interviews, I felt I was being too prescriptive and not congruent enough in the client-therapist collaborative process. I was even unsure about leaving the room assuming clients would find this a little strange. However, I noticed these as preconceived ideas to client experiences and that when I did not leave the room, I was continually attending to clients' needs. I noticed my delivery of the message more therapist than client lead and felt I was missing vital clues to what clients' were saying about solutions to their problems. Occasions where I had left the room, the client seemed more insightful and reflective about what to do and how to go about things. Occasions where I had not left the room made my suggestive tasks seem quite prescriptive, therapist lead and with the client sitting waiting for some kind of instruction, rather than us both collaborating over a solution.*

Reflecting on what I thought allowed me to recognise important aspects of clients' reflections and note, particularly what clients were doing with the break time. What stood out was how insightful and reflective clients were during the break. After noticing this I decided to always leave the room and experimented with a client break prompt (Sharry et al., 2001). I recorded my thoughts and changes made to the summation process as follows:

*After I addressed my observations and predispositions as my own rather than my clients, I gained more confidence in my practice, I began leaving the room as suggested in the literature and collated the information gathered from the interview while listening for their ideas so I could translate it back to clients as 'their feedback message'.*

I adapted how I incorporated the client's information into the summation message and focused on clients' suggestions for a task. Duncan & Miller (2000) as cited in Sharry et al., (2001) and Trepper et al., (2010) highlighted the importance of supporting clients' ideas towards change and how tasks, generated and implemented by the client, are more likely to occur. This is because client chosen tasks are familiar and based on individual knowledge and capabilities. Doing this made sense to me because it acknowledged and incorporated clients' own resources. During data analysis I further observed what clients were doing and recorded my observations with analytic memos. These were specific reflections on the data collected. Initially I noticed the types of tasks clients had chosen and that they were monitoring how these helped. The excerpt below is an analytic memo showing my observations and how I had noticed clients' task preferences:

*I did not expect client participants to comment on their view of tasks they set and did in between sessions. I certainly did not expect them to view tasks like homework or think more about how they helped. This may have been due to my previous tasks suggestions being cognitive, whereas clients actually set more behavioural tasks, which I did not expect to emerge also.*

I noticed two key features from my analysis of this interview data. Firstly, clients' chose behavioural tasks they knew would help, and had thought about how these would help them. Second, I noticed my previous focus on task suggestions was based around suggesting cognitive tasks. Cognitive tasks are based on noticing or observing and still offer clients something valuable to do in between sessions, however, these clients preferred behavioural tasks. I considered the literature and how powerful tasks are which emanate from clients and learned that the types of tasks chosen are based on a client's own needs and capabilities. Observing clients' perspectives and what they were saying but more importantly, what they were doing in the research prompted a major shift in my practice. When I worked with other clients I used the client-break prompt before providing them also with a summation message.

What I had learned about my practice from clients' perspectives was recorded in my reflexive journal as follows:

*There is no real point or relevance to a client if I provide a message, albeit thoughtful and creative or fabulously wrapped if it means I am dismissing the client's strengths and resources. What works, what the client notices and what the client knows will work with what they bring to therapy, are at the core or 'heart' of the solution-focused approach. Taking the expert position has become more unnatural to me than when I first started as my recent experiences and continuous developing knowledge, with fervent conviction, is noticing it is all about what the client knows they are capable of, and what is within their world reach. I see a small snapshot of a client's life whereas they live and exist in it.*

Recording my personal thoughts allowed me to recognise the power and value I had noticed for using the client's voice about the use of their resources over mine. The research helped with learning about the benefits of client chosen tasks over therapist suggestions and allowed me to observe the relevance of these for clients to achieve progress.

This theme demonstrates my reflexive process and awareness by identifying what was happening in the research which prompted a change in my practice. Recording my thoughts at each stage of the research process allowed me to recognise the trust I had developed with clients and how this emerged, by empowering the use of their own ideas for change. I was able to understand also why my allegiance to the Solution-focused brief principles had become stronger and what prompted me to transfer my learning and approach of this technique to others I worked with. Experimenting with the summation message and client-break prompt helped to recognise how client-centred and client-focused I am in my counselling work, and was a positive outcome of both a collaborative and constructionist approach. It was empowering to realize the value of eliciting, supporting and enabling clients to recognise their own strengths and choose client chosen tasks over my own task suggestions.

In this chapter, I have used clients' voices to demonstrate how the break time was used, allowing clients to reflect on their own resources and construct their own tasks. I have highlighted how clients' task suggestions were interwoven into the summation message and how this encouraged them to notice and use their own constructions for a solution. Reflecting on their personal summation messages helped them to notice their constructions were their own. The most important findings that emerged from clients' excerpts show how the break time enabled them to formulate tasks they thought might work or knew would help. Clients' perceived the summation messages were helpful and constructive because they allowed them to experience clarity in their thinking. The sense made from their messages was relevant to their personal knowledge on resources and reflections throughout the entire therapy process. Finally, the most important findings that emerged from my reflexive excerpts show how powerful and important clients' perspectives are for creating change when researching one's counselling practice.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### DISCUSSION

In this research project, clients highlighted their summation messages were supportive and helpful to the therapeutic process. The findings from the research generated four major feedback themes from clients' about the messages experienced in Solution-focused brief counselling. The summation message specifically enabled clients to experience a constructive approach and helped them develop more clarity in their thinking. It was encouraging to see clients develop a deeper awareness of themselves by reflecting on things they were either doing or could do to help themselves.

It was not surprising to discover that thinking time provided clients with space for the "process of reflection" (MacDonald, 2007) and helped clients to recognise their own agency. The findings of this current project strengthen the suggestions made by Sharry et al., (2001) that using a client-break prompt encourages clients to come up with their own ideas during 'the break'. It allows clients to reflect on their resources and supports the development of their own tasks for client change.

The reflecting process showed clients were not only able to connect to their resources immediately at the end of the session, but were able to recognise which ones to use to help themselves. The use of the client-break prompt enabled clients to use their resources and allowed them to decide which tasks to assign (Sharry et al., 2001). Research supporting the position of 'collaborator to client choices' shows it helps when clients are the overall decider of the tasks, as there is more conviction and greater likelihood of success, Hubble, Duncan & Miller (1999) and Duncan & Miller (2000) as cited in Sharry et al., (2001). Also noted by Trepper et al., (2010) were the increased range of positives with tasks assigned by clients themselves.

I have noted also, as did Trepper et al., (2010) how the design of these are based on clients' internal knowledge about what works and what is achievable within their capabilities. The finding on clients' descriptions of task progression challenges the views discussed by Kluger and DeNisi (1998) stating that feedback interventions, combined with goal setting, show more attention is paid to task achievement rather than to the self. Instead of the attention being focused on an individual's internal processes, they discuss that the focus is directly on the task and achieving it. In contrast to their views, clients in this research responded equally to task achievement and to their internal process. Clients highlighted this in their comments about how they experienced more clarity in their thinking which shows a significant amount of focused attention was given also to the self and not just to the task for achieving the goal.

Another aspect that this research supports, is literature on the recency effect by Ebbinghaus, as cited in Huber & Durant (2014). This effect predicts that clients will recall the items first that were in fact, given last. Considering the last thing clients heard in their summation message was a reinforcing of their own resources it was not surprising to find when asked about the summation message from the last session that they recalled the last thing heard. More importantly was the finding that, what they had recalled heavily focused on what clients had constructed.

Allowing client voices to be heard in this research has strengthened the view that clients are able to identify specifically, outside of therapy, their progress and what has helped them from receiving the summation message. The evidence showed how client chosen tasks allowed them to focus on other potential resources which in turn, enabled them to recognise how or what to change so they could continue with progress. The client-break was particularly important for prompting their awareness on resources, however promoting these throughout the summation message was an equally, important aspect.

The findings support the literature on the summation message and encouraging clients to be aware of their own resources. The Solution-focused literature states clients uniquely bring resources to counselling, and can contribute a great deal to the success of achieving their goals by knowing their own lives best (De Jong & Berg, 2013a). In this research I have been able to demonstrate this through client comments on re-discovering their resources and confidence to use them. Clients not only developed recognition of their resources, but were also able to identify other resources developing. Furthermore, they demonstrated that when encouraged to help themselves they experienced self-mastery (agency) (MacDonald, 2007).

Clients in this project discussed how they developed more confidence because they recognised they had resources which were elicited during the session. Client comments show how feedback serves to inform an individual's internal processes by amplifying their resources as they discover them. This is in line with the comments of Butler & Winne, (1995) who posited that the construction of new knowledge results in monitoring the cognitive processes which leads to the desired state. I found in this project that the more clients noticed how using their resources were helpful, the closer they got to their solution and developed more confidence in their own abilities. This was referred to as confidence or knowing, and developed out of trusting themselves, noticing their internal processes and acknowledging the depth of their internal resources (Lipchik, 2011).

Throughout much of the literature reviewed on clients' perspectives in counselling, a great deal of client change is consistently attributed to the therapeutic relationship (Duncan & Miller, 2008; Lee, 1997; Elliot & Williams, 2003; Metcalf & Thomas, 1994; Manthei, 2005; Asay & Lambert, 1999). In this research, clients showed that they appreciated a constructive and supportive approach because it empowered them to explore their resources and construct their own solutions. A successful outcome, in this case, aligns with the principles of the solution-focused model in which clients are encouraged to co-construct their goals and ways of

achieving these through a supportive relationship with the counsellor. The summation message allowed them to feel supported while focusing on themselves. The benefit of a strong working alliance is the affect this has on the impact of the summation message. Gershefski et al., (1996) as cited in Paulson et al., (1999) discussed how feedback contributes to positive and helpful outcomes in counselling. In this project, clients attributed insight and self-exploration as helpful aspects of the summation message. It was not surprising to discover as part of this research, that clients felt supported by someone who trusted them, expressed confidence in their ability, and promoted the use of their own resources. This enabled them to confidently help themselves. It was, however, very empowering as a therapist to engage in the solution-building process with clients and watch them create tasks from reflecting on their own resources.

Observing their achievements allowed me to develop a stronger allegiance to the principles of the solution-focused model and benefits in using a constructionist approach to counselling. This was also a positive result of engaging in researcher reflexivity while researching my own practice. Engaging in reflexivity prompted conversations with myself about my practice, clients and what I noticed when analysing data. Recording my personal thoughts identified why I changed my practice and how clients' perspectives had impacted my knowledge. The findings on the strength of the reflexive process are supported with research by Etherington, (2004) stating that reflexivity encourages researchers to engage in conversations which make explicit their thinking about the choices made while navigating the research process. Reflexivity allowed me to engage in these throughout the entire research process, exploring not only how I felt about my approach but where I was in my practice as a result of the research (Bager-Charleson, 2014).

### *Implications*

This research project helped me recognise and understand just how helpful summation messages are to clients' counselling experiences especially when the message is in line with client goals. Exploring this technique with clients highlighted how any summation messages delivered to them are worthwhile because it helps them develop more personal insight on progress, on their thinking processes and movements towards the goal. However, summation messages delivered in solution-focused brief counselling are particularly beneficial to clients' thinking when the messages given are considered alongside their goals as the two are not separable processes. Furthermore, asking clients for their perspective of the summation message, in subsequent sessions, helps encourage their internal processes towards the goal. It is possible that just the asking is therapeutically helpful. This was highlighted by Manthei, (2005) who noted that inquiring about clients' perspectives allows them to gain more control and meaning in their experiences.

I had not expected to find just how deeply clients identified with their internal responses from the summation messages given. I now believe that this finding has important implications for both my practice, and the practice of other counsellors. I discovered that although clients answered my query about their perception of the summation message by describing tasks, this was not detrimental to them or the relationship. While I was asking about perceptions, rather than task achievement, it is possible that this finding brings into question the warning headed by Turner & Hopwood (1994), that asking about tasks may invoke a negative response. Therapists can consider from this research the benefits associated with asking clients about the summation message. My suggestion is that these inquiries do not necessarily invoke a negative response as they are valuable. They enable discussion about progress, obstacles and what is important to the client and refraining from such inquiries may be excluding vital information for therapists on their clients' perceptions.

### *Recommendations / Limitations*

This research project has left me with more questions than when I first started. I was particularly interested in whether the summation messages given to clients helped them experience more meaning towards their solution. Because of time constraints, this was only touched upon during this research. I am aware that I have only gained the perceptions on this technique from a small group of clients. It would be beneficial to give this technique the attention it deserves and explore the perspectives of other client populations and with a greater range of issues.

The use of the client-break prompt, in my view, epitomizes client-centred practices of this technique (Sharry et al., 2001) because it allows clients to recognise the depth and importance of their own task suggestions. Supporting the development of these and encouraging client reflections, sits in principle at the core of the Solution-focused approach. I do recommend however, using the original term given to this technique and referring to it as the 'feedback technique but adding also the term 'feedback break'. I use this term with clients because I found in the Solution-focused literature too many terms assigned to both parts of this technique e.g. client-break and summation message. I believe reverting back to the original term provides clarity to both clients and others learning about this technique while highlighting the intention of the technique and ensuing behaviour. This term would fit appropriately with collaborative approaches which also invite clients to share their reflections after the break. Whether prompting clients before the break, staying in the room or pausing for a moment, naming what it is we are actually doing highlights that we will have a 'feedback break'.

## *Conclusion*

This research generated a small snap shot of clients' perspectives on the summation message alongside their experiences in Solution focused brief counselling. Researching within the interpretive paradigm provided an appropriate framework in which to explore and gather their perspectives, while a thematic approach allowed me to generate rich themes from client descriptions, found in the data. The counselling setting provided a relevant context to develop more understanding on clients' perceptions and answer the main research question. Presenting documentation on my analysis of these themes will hopefully allow other practitioners to find useful information on the perspectives of feedback. Furthermore, I hope clients' rich perspectives will add to the growing body of literature on the Solution-focused brief therapy model and help raise the awareness on the benefits of clients' perspectives over therapist perceptions. It has been empowering to my practice and personal knowledge to see the impetus for this research come to fruition and learn from clients' perspectives what is helpful about the Solution-focused brief therapy feedback technique. I can only hope other students or practitioners working with this model feel inspired to inquire about feedback with their clients. Doing so could enable them to develop more effective feedback messages to best help the clients they work with.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A:

### UC Ethics Approval



HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen  
Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

Ref: HEC 2014/64

18 August 2014

Tracylee Mulqueen  
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Tracylee

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal "Clients experiences of the summation message in solution focused brief therapy" has been considered and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 8 August 2014.

Best wishes for your project.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. MacDonald'.

Lindsey MacDonald  
*Chair*  
*University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee*

## Appendix B: Client Consent Form

Telephone: 022- 3758 315

Email: [tlm65@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tlm65@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)



### *“Clients’ Experiences” of the Summation Message in Solution-Focused Brief Counselling*

#### Consent Form for Counselling Research Participants

I have been given a full explanation of the project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand what will be required of me if I agree to take part in this research project.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any stage of the project whilst still continuing with counselling. Withdraw of participation will also include any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.

I understand that any information or opinion I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published and reported results will protect my anonymity and not identify me. I also understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC library.

I understand that all data collected for this study will be kept in password protected electronic form and secure facilities at the University of Canterbury and will be destroyed after five years.

I understand I am invited to receive a summary of findings from this research and can do so by expressing my interest below.

I understand I can contact the researcher TracyLee Mulqueen on 022- 3758 315 or email [tlm65@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tlm65@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) and/or her University of Canterbury supervisors: Judi Miller 03-3642-987 ext.6546 [judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz) or Shanee Barraclough 03-3642-987 ext. 3839 [shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz)

I understand if I have any complaints about the study I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag, 4800, Christchurch, [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

By signing this I agree to participate in this research project.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Please tick if you would like to receive a summary of the findings from this research Yes

No

If 'Yes' please indicate how you would like to be contacted to receive this:

Email\_\_\_\_\_ or

Address\_\_\_\_\_

Please return this completed consent form to TracyLee or the office by September 30<sup>th</sup> 2014

## Appendix C: Client Information Sheet



Telephone: 022- 3758 315

Email: [tlm65@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tlm65@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)

### ***“Clients’ Experiences” of the Summation Message in Solution-Focused Brief Counselling***

#### Information for Research Counselling Participants

I am currently undertaking a Master’s in Counselling with the University of Canterbury. This year, as part of my study towards the degree, I am conducting research for a thesis. This research will focus on my professional practice relating to a feedback technique in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy which is called the ‘Summation Message.’ The summation message involves having a small break at the end of the counselling session before providing any final feedback and/or suggestions to clients. The intention in doing this research is to look at how I, as a professional counsellor, deliver this summation message and how you, as the client, make sense of the summation message received as part of the counselling session.

I would like to invite you to participate in my counselling study. If you agree to participate you will be asked to do the following:

- ✚ Firstly, to give informed consent on being a counselling research participant by signing a consent sheet outlining what is required of you in being a participant of this study.
- ✚ To allow three of your counselling sessions to be recorded and transcribed for analysis, and checked for sense by you at your next session (if you or I so wish).
- ✚ To answer some questions at the beginning of each session with a focus on the summation message you received from your last session.
- ✚ Finally, to fill out a Session Rating Scale Sheet. This allows you as the client, to rate four specific aspects of the therapeutic relationship, for example: how you felt, whether you felt understood, how much of the session was about you and your focus, what you wanted to talk about, and whether the therapist felt like a good fit. You rate this on a continuum (scale) from left to right equally 1-10.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do wish to participate in this study you have the right to withdrawal at any time without penalty. This means that you may continue with counselling without any consequence to the care offered as part of your counselling. If you wish to withdrawal I will do my best to remove any information relating to you in this research

providing it is practically achievable. I will take care to ensure the confidentiality of all data gathered as part of this study. I will also take care to protect your anonymity in publication on the findings from this research by changing names, age and any identifying information.

All data collected will be securely stored in password protected facilities and locked in storage at the University of Canterbury for five years following the study. The results of this research may be used to gain practice-based evidence to strengthening my professional counselling practice and hopefully your experiences as my client, as well as other future counselling clients. The results of this study may also be used in the future to co-author studies on Solution-Focused Counselling for a journal article with either of my University of Canterbury supervisors. As a research participant in this study if you wish to, you will be welcome to receive a summary of the findings from this study and have an opportunity to indicate these wishes on the informed consent sheet.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me on the number provided above (top left of page) or feel free to contact my University of Canterbury supervisors: Judi Miller 03-3642-987 ext.6546 [judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz) or Shanee Barraclough 03-3642-987 ext.3839 [shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz) If you have any complaints about the study you may wish to contact the Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag, 4800, Christchurch, [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

If you agree to participate in my counselling research then please complete the attached consent form and return it in the envelope provided by August 30<sup>th</sup> 2014.

*TRACYLEE MULQUEEN*

## Appendix D: Research Recruitment Flyer

# Volunteers Needed!



### *For Client Experiences on the Feedback Received in Solution-Focused Brief Counselling*

I'm TracyLee and currently counselling here at ....., while studying towards my Master's in Counselling with the University of Canterbury. I am interested in researching how counselling clients make sense of the feedback received in a Solution-Focused Brief counselling sessions. Research participants are invited NOW. Participation is voluntary!

#### **What would happen if I took part in the study?**

If you decide to take part in the search study, you would:

- Need to read the information and consent sheet
- Be prepared to attend up to three counselling sessions and answer questions about the previous counselling session's feedback
- Allow up to three counselling sessions to be recorded for analysis for the research.

Counselling Clients who wish to take part may get to learn more about themselves and their experiences in counselling while helping the counsellor to learn more about their practice.

*Thank you for your time for reading and/or considering being part of my research project.*

Please note: **Approval for this research has been granted manager of the agency.**

To be part of this research project and for more information please contact: TracyLee: 022- 375-8315 or email: [tlm65@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tlm65@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)

## Appendix E: Theme 6

### Theme 6: *Feedback helps Carry Through To the Solution*

Client perspectives on receiving the summation message were heightened as a result of their involvement in this research and focusing on the technique. As part of this research I asked clients what it was like providing their perspectives as a research participant. McCloud (1999), states how inquiring into clients' perspectives as research participants, is an important and valuable part of the research and clients' processes. What was noted generally from clients' responses is that the added focus on the summation message prompted a deeper awareness on the messages received. It was touched upon that these messages helped to carry the client through to achieving their solution. The minimal findings emphasized the summation process is particularly important for clients however, further development may discover much stronger effects, helping clients experience more meaning toward their solution. Because of time constraints this theme was only touched upon and needed more time and data to substantially develop.

## **Appendix F: Unstructured Interview Questions**

How did you go with the feedback from our last session?

How did you feel about the feedback from last session? Do you remember?

Was the feedback helpful? I'd like your perspective on it.

Was the feedback, helpful in anyway? If so, in what way?

Did it [the feedback from last session] help?

How do you make sense of it?" [The feedback]

### **Client-break questions:**

How did you go [reflecting during the break]

How did you get on?