

BOOK REVIEW

Panayotov, P.A. (ed), Strahilov, B. (ed) (2019)

Signs on the Road from Therapy to Conversations Led by Clients

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Review by Dr Alasdair J Macdonald (freelance)

The original concept described in this volume was called Simple Therapy. It is now named CoLeC: Conversations Led by Clients. This book is a collection of publications by the editors and others, describing the development of the ideas. Musical terms are added to express the energy felt in each publication. A number of Road Signs are highlighted, which mark major developments in the thinking of the editors. The concepts are described with clarity and brevity. Useful connections to new philosophical ideas are given.

The first Road Sign (*Andante ma non troppo*) occurred when Dr Plamen Panayotov had begun his psychiatry internship in 1984. His trainer focused on the patient's goals and not on their symptoms. Further examples of this orientation were demonstrated by a mental health nurse in 1990.

In Bulgaria it is apparently common that clients of any professional will advise them on how to proceed with their case. In 1993 Dr Panayotov's driving instructor, a truck driver who had lost his job in a recession, advised the use of 'The Ultimate Self-Helper': 'Ask yourself the most useful question that you can think of'. He asked himself 'What resources have you in your current situation?' (*Profundo*). He had a old car and many driving certificates, so he set up a driving school.

In 1994 Panayotov and Macdonald published a paper on the use of medication in mental health practice 'From Compliance to Adherence' (*Vinace*). An updated version is presented here, showing how the use of medication is affected by the language used in the conversation. In 1997 Steve de Shazer suggested 'Use the client as your supervisor, and ask them what we could have done that would be more useful.' This became a Road Sign towards Simple Therapy 'What do you propose that I do differently now, that is more useful for you?' (*Da capo al fine*).

In the European Brief Therapy conference in Lyon in 2008, Simple Therapy was presented for the first time. The text was published as a separate volume, which is reproduced here (*Presto*). Key points include the client as leader while the therapist follows. The sequence Thinking-Questioning-Answering-Doing-Reviewing (Th-Qu-An-Do-Re) is presented as the mode of thought used by many people in everyday life.

The next paper moves towards comparing the Miracle Question of solution-focused brief therapy in Milwaukee, the Best Hopes question used by BRIEF in London and the Opening Question used in Simple Therapy (*Grave*). It comments on the difficulties and benefits of being a simple therapist, while reducing the role of the therapist to a minimum. The following (2014) chapter (*Infinito*) gives examples of Simple Therapy in action with the emphasis on reducing the therapist's input. The therapist is redefined as a 'Conversation Conductor' or ConCon.

The importance of asking oneself good questions is revisited in ‘My Steps to Success: the Good Questions Diary’ (*Spirituoso ma non troppo*). This was intended as an educational tool for teenagers but has also been used in personal crises. It is currently being updated.

The next Road Sign in 2017 (*Larghetto*) was an encounter with a disturbed and angry man in the street, who became calm and thoughtful after a brief description of Simple Therapy. This provoked the thought that perhaps therapists will change their ways only if their clients demand it. Subsequent reflection identified that we have ‘Firsthand Knowledge’ of ourselves and only ‘Secondhand Knowledge’ of others. (This distinction is difficult in English but several other languages have separate words for these concepts.) So therapy is based on the client’s firsthand knowledge of what is helpful to them and therapy becomes assisted self-help.

The next chapter revisits the comparison between the Miracle Question, the Best Hopes question, and the (Simple Therapy) Mind-Activating Question (*Presto*). It makes the point that all three questions seek what the client wants, but on different time-scales: in future days, in future hours or in the coming minutes and seconds.

The Skeleton Key to Assisted Change (*Puntato*) is presented as the maximum involvement of the client in the conversation. The editors point out that clients choose when to seek help, what kind of help they want and where to look for it. Thus all clients have already carried out some pre-session activities. Simple Therapy suggests Questioning for Useful Questions (QuQu): the Mind-Activating Question (MAQ), the Time-Orientation Questions (TOQ), Multiple-choice Questioning (therapist drawing questions from a list) (MuQ) and Delayed-Answers Questioning (DAQ). The conclusion is that this is no longer named ‘therapy’ but is better known as CoLeC: Conversations Led by Clients.

Alexey Mikhalsky in Russia independently developed therapeutic work along similar lines to Simple Therapy. In 2019, he and Plamen Panayotov published ‘It will never be the same again’ in the Journal of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (*Andante ma non troppo*). It describes the QuQu tools in brief and emphasises the value of clients’ self-questioning. QuQu responses are expressed in the client’s own language, which suits them. The answers arrive at the right time. As clients practise self-questioning, they become more skilled at such thinking.

Finally, the book includes the material from a previously published flipchart of Simple Therapy questions, intended for use as a desk-reminder of the questions (*Da capo al fine*).

In conclusion, the editors point out the good news that Simple Therapy is popular with clients and often rapid in its effects. As bad news, they suggest that many therapists will regret the loss of their complex therapeutic models and pre-established theories (*Immeasurabile*).

The book makes reference to many authorities from within and outside the field of solution-focused therapy. A few typographical errors are found, which do not affect the sense of the text.

The reviewer

Dr Alasdair J Macdonald became a consultant psychiatrist in 1980 after a training in the United Kingdom which included child and family psychiatry, mental handicap and specific training in group and family therapy. He was a founder member of the Society for Companion Animal Studies. Activities included developing a day hospital, a hostel for former inpatients and an assessment service for the elderly. He continued to pursue these interests after returning to Scotland in 1984. After completing a bioenergetic psychoanalysis he moved to work in low secure care in the north of England. At the same time he joined the Board of the European

Brief Therapy Association, on which he served until 2011. He was a founder member of the UK Association for Solution-Focused Practice in 2001. After taking early retirement in 2001 he pursued a number of interests within university practice including locum work and as an international researcher and trainer. He has presented workshops in some 20 countries around the world.