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Structured Methods and Striking Moments: Using Question Sequences in "Living" Ways

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This article draws together two seemingly incompatible practices in social constructionist therapies: the use of structured questioning methods (associated with solution-focused and narrative therapies) and the poetic elaboration of "striking moments" (associated with conversational therapies). To what extent can we value and utilize both styles of practice? Beginning with practitioners' concerns about the use of structured question sequences, I explore possibilities for re-situating these methods in different conceptual and metaphorical frames, selectively drawing on ideas from the philosophy of striking moments. The aim is not to reduce one therapeutic style to another, but to encourage the teaching and practice of structured methods in more creative, improvisational and "living" ways.

The broad umbrella of social constructionist theory covers a number of distinctive therapeutic "styles" (Omer, 1996). Arguably, the three most influential of these are the *solution-focused* style, developed from the work of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Berg, the *narrative* style, pioneered by Michael White and David Epston, and the *conversational* style, associated chiefly with the collaborative approaches of Harlene Anderson, Harry Goolishian, and Tom Andersen (Lowe, 2004). While practitioners typically differ on the extent to which these styles are theoretically compatible, one practical point of comparison seems uncontestable. Both the solution-focused and narrative styles are distinguished by their use of structured methods of inquiry, in the form of clearly identifiable sequences of questions. For better or worse, solution-focused and narrative therapies have become identified with trademark sets of questions (the miracle question, scaling questions, externalizing questions, re-authoring questions, etc.). By contrast, there appear to be no equivalent structured methods in the conversational therapies. Though therapists in this style clearly use techniques aimed at enhancing the dialogical process (Guilfoyle, 2003), these have not been systematized in the same way. This article begins with a discussion of contemporary concerns over the use of structured methods and explores the potential for ideas more typically associated with the conversational style to be incorporated into their practice. I use the terms "structured methods" and "striking moments" as a form of thematic counterpoint, evoking the contrasts between styles.

STRUCTURED METHODS: NOW AND THEN

In recent years, practitioners identified with the solution-focused and narrative styles have expressed concerns about the over-identification of these approaches with structured questioning techniques. In urging solution-focused therapists to look "beyond technique", Lipchik (2002) emphasized the centrality of the client-therapist relationship, and the

importance of building cooperation through the careful monitoring of the "emotional climate" of the session. This includes attention to client process as well as content, and to the therapist's internal processes including thoughts, feelings and bodily reactions. In their "recreation" of brief therapy, Walter and Peller (2000) describe major changes to their approach since the publication of their well-known "manual" of solution-focused therapy (Walter & Peller, 1992). Whereas the earlier work focused on the use of sequences of questions to achieve a shift from a problem frame to a solution frame, their later approach focuses more on the creative aspects of conversing. Reacting against the use of questioning techniques to propel clients towards change, their work now presents questions as "tools for listening" (e.g. for allowing therapists to listen for client desires and preferences). While their approach is still directional, they now see their conversations as being more like improvised jazz sessions, where therapists bring might their favorite questions, but the resulting event is largely spontaneous. They also emphasize the relational aspect by offering the metaphor of the "conversation as author", insisting that questions are only used "when the conversation provides the opportunity" (p. 76).

Basing her work in the narrative style, Bird (2000) also reflected concerns about the structured use of questioning techniques. She warned against forms of static and binary thinking where questions are used to shift client experiences from one kind to another (e.g. once we find a unique outcome, we can then shift to a solution). She also pointed to the central importance of listening for all that reverberates in the room, including "messages conveyed by the body, by feelings, expressions, thoughts, visions, dreams, the imagination, smells and … what is said, partially said and not said" (p. 29). Bird used evocative expressions such as "talk that sings" and "language for the in-between" to move beyond binary thinking and to emphasize a relational paradigm "where one human spirit meets with another's human spirit" (p. 30). She also emphasized the realm of the intuitive, the putting into language of that which sits between and beyond words.

Taken collectively, these contemporary views offer strikingly different ways of talking about the practice of the solution-focused and narrative styles. Rather than continuing to focus on the trademark sets of questions, they challenge therapists to engage with a broader range of phenomena: bodily, intuitive, emotional, relational, internal, expressive – the intangible currents and dynamics that influence the use of our familiar methods. Implicit in these authors' comments is a concern with the ways in which structured methods have typically been practiced and taught, and a desire to expand the horizon of inquiry.

To develop a useful point of contrast, it is instructive to revisit an earlier publication by Lipchik reflecting the climate of the late 1980s when the influence of questioning techniques was at its height. Discussing the methods used in the solution-focused style Lipchik (1988) described these as "purposeful sequences" that need to be developed "to their fullest" in order to produce the widest range of possibilities. It was useful for therapists "to ask every possible question to complete a sequence to be sure the client's frame is expanded to its present limit" (p. 107). Lipchik also introduced a number

of metaphors to convey this process. The sequences are variously depicted as being analogous to building blocks of solutions, to inflating a balloon in the client's mind (each question acts as an extra breath) and to the construction of paragraphs (the sequences develop in the way that a paragraph expands on a topic sentence).

These kinds of descriptions capture what has proved most appealing and problematic about the use of structured methods. On one hand, they provide clear direction and a sense of purpose. They are definable and teachable, and, for new therapists, especially, provide the sense of structure that can allay anxiety. However, they can easily become overly restrictive, prescriptive and formularized. In an attempt to wring every possible variation from a pre-conceived sequence, practitioners may doggedly pursue lines of inquiry that are of more interest to themselves than to their clients. Also, the building block, balloon and paragraph analogies imply that the line of inquiry should be literally and logically sequential, with each successive question following immediately, and building incrementally, upon the previous one. This conveys an impression that all questions are of equal value (as links in a chain), with no particular attention paid to the resonance of an individual question for a client. The clear implication is that the power and efficacy of these sequences will be dissipated if they are not pursued in these meticulous and rigorous ways.

By contrast, the more recent work of Lipchik, Walter and Peller, and Bird can be seen as a deliberate attempt to move away from these kinds of descriptions, and to bring to the foreground what has usually been relegated to the background. The dilemma for practitioners and teachers of the solution-focused and narrative styles becomes how to maintain the potential value of our structured methods – the rich story development that can be new and empowering for clients – while ensuring that we think beyond technique and draw upon a broader range of relational experiences. At issue is not the theoretical rationale for using structured methods, but the ways in which the methods have often been presented as discrete sets or sequences of questions. If we no longer wish to think in terms of building blocks, balloons, or paragraphs, what alternatives are available?

My suggestion is that it is useful to begin at a broad theoretical level and revise our understanding of social constructionism. To this end I draw upon on the recent work of John Shotter and his colleagues, and on the related therapeutic work of Tom Andersen, who is usually identified with the conversational style of therapy. This discussion introduces the theme of "striking moments" which is used to suggest ways of re-situating structured methods within alternative conceptual and metaphorical frames.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: DEAD OR ALIVE?

Many, if not most, practitioners who use structured methods would probably locate their work in social constructionist assumptions. These typically include assumptions about multiple rather than singular realities, the formative role of language in shaping or mediating experience, the importance of social and relational contexts in the negotiation of meaning, and the influence of historical and cultural factors in producing our taken-for-granted ideas about knowledge itself.

However, although these assumptions may still seem radical to some, Shotter and Lannamann (2002) argued that current versions of social constructionism are not radical enough, but remain imprisoned within the mind/body, subject/object dichotomies that characterize modern thought. These versions continue to suggest a view of self-contained disembodied minds willfully creating pictures of an external world. The very term "construction" often carries the connotation of being a purely cognitive or linguistic activity, and one that is mechanical in the sense of assembling a structure piece by piece from separate elements of reality. Furthermore, social constructionism is often implicitly presented as a separate "thing-like" system of knowledge that we consciously use as a tool in particular contexts and for our own purposes.

To Shotter and Lannamann, this version remains locked in a world of dead, mechanically structured, and calculational activities. Crucially it neglects the nature of the "living, embodied, reciprocal spontaneity that constitutes social interaction" (p. 579). In their view, social construction, although occasionally done willfully…

> …is much more often something that happens to us in the course of becoming an "us"…Construction is an inseparable part of the already existing shimmering dynamic of the ceaseless flow of relational activity within which we are inextricably embedded. When this spontaneous activity is left out, social constructionist inquiry is reduced to a vocabulary for naming the residues or outcomes of social interaction. (p. 580)

Instead, they argued for a responsive, embodied and participatory version of social constructionism that highlights the mutually determining flows of activity that act as precursors to our spoken words. Meaning does not result from a meeting of individual minds, but arises within the "shimmering dynamic" of inter-bodily movements, and dialogically structured encounters. Meanings, therefore, are joint productions and collective outcomes of an indivisible kind that cannot simply be analyzed back into the contributions made by each individual participant. Therefore, rather than attempting to master the uses of social construction as a tool in our dealings with others, it is more appropriate to seek a *participatory understanding*, a sense of knowing from within our reciprocal embodied experience. This allows us to remain responsive to, and act in accord with, the momentary demands of our shared circumstances (Katz, Shotter & Seikkula, 2004).

I have found this distinction between "dead, mechanical, calculational" and "responsive, embodied, participatory" versions of social constructionism to be a useful starting point in re-considering our depiction of structured methods. When we practice our question sequences with a preconceived agenda of expanding them to their fullest, we can sometimes forget that we are an "us". Rather than working from a participatory understanding, we can seek to demonstrate mastery of our "thing-like" sets of questions. We may become preoccupied with the residues of social construction (the content of clients' answers and our own questions) rather than the relational precursors to these. The ineffective use of structured methods often results in mechanical or "dead"

conversational routines that have lost their capacity to engage or move participants. No one is hearing anything vitally new, and there is no element of surprise or discovery.

STRIKING MOMENTS

The vocabulary of structured methods tends to be one of directionality and step-wise movement as particular themes are developed and enriched. By contrast, the vocabulary of striking moments involves what Shotter and Katz (1998) called a "language of momentary doings" (p. 89). Here the emphasis is on remaining present and engaged, responding utterance by utterance as the conversation unfolds, and avoiding the imposition of theoretical schemes or hypotheses. The therapist's activities remain internally responsive rather than externally driven.

Shotter and Katz (1998) have used Tom Andersen's therapeutic work to exemplify this stance, describing the careful attention he pays to listening and looking for striking moments that are "living", "poetic" and "arresting". These occur when speakers or listeners are visibly touched or when something seems to hang suspended or arrested in the gaps between utterances. When striking moments are identified, they show how Andersen, slows the conversation and asks questions that invite further exploration and elaboration of the resonance of these moments. As Katz and Shotter (1996) put it, each *arresting* moment also provides a *resting* moment for reflection and further articulation, that allows clients to "gesture" toward the uniqueness of their lives. Typical questions might be, " If you looked into that word (e.g. loneliness, terror or fear) what might you see?"; or "If your tears (laughter, closed fists, trembling knees, deep breaths, etc.) could speak in that important moment, what would the words be?" (Andersen, 1993). No attempt is made to "story" these striking moments in any systematic way as, for example, practitioners in the other styles will typically attempt to develop "exceptions" or "unique outcomes" into narratives of personal agency, resourcefulness, or hope.

Andersen has introduced several other concepts that are central to my themes. He has drawn attention to the importance of therapists monitoring their "inner conversation", including attention to their own bodily reactions (Andersen, 1993, 1995). He has also developed a distinction between four kinds of knowing: the more familiar forms of rational knowing and technical knowing (understanding of theories and how to use techniques derived from them), and what he calls "relational knowing" and "bodily knowing" (cited in Smith, 2004). The latter terms refer to our sense of how to relate to another at a particular moment, and our bodily-felt sense that a particular moment may be significant. Andersen has suggested that these two forms of knowing are more important during the actual flow of a conversation.

Drawing together some of these themes, Katz and Shotter (2004) have proposed a "conversational-poetic" stance that encourages a therapist to remain attuned to the conversation's striking moments and continually changing requirements, as if the conversation itself ("as a kind of agent in its own right") calls us to respond in a certain way. Only if we meet people in this mutually responsive manner – where our utterances are voiced only in response to the utterances of others and not in response to externally

derived theories or hypotheses – can we gain access to the “contours” of a person’s inner life and what really matters to them. Ironically, they suggest, this way of relating to others is quite familiar to us in everyday life. However, it tends to be absent from social theory which tends to favor rational knowing and technical knowing. The emphasis on striking moments serves to shift our attention from product to process, from the content of already spoken words to the moment-by-moment “orchestration” of living speech (Shotter, 2003a). This stance encourages a move beyond “mind-talk” towards a new sensibility and body oriented vocabulary (Katz et al., 2004).

A LANGUAGE FOR THE IN-BETWEEN

Can we combine the directionality of structured methods with the priority of attending to striking moments? The range of concepts I have outlined – a responsive, embodied, participatory version of social constructionism, a conversational-poetic stance, and the privileging of relational and bodily knowing – offer suggestive possibilities. However, these complementary practices tend to be presented as mutually exclusive, often in the form of a tension between collaboration and hierarchy. The conversational style, we are told, simply follows the conversation, while the narrative and solution-focused styles often attempt to lead it. The conversational style strives to be remain dialogical while the solution-focused and narrative styles may become monological (e.g. when therapists attempt to “story” clients’ lives according to a planned agenda). However, these static dichotomies also seem extreme and misplaced in the fluidity of practice. Returning to the expression used by Bird (2000), perhaps we need a “language for the in-between”, that will highlight the potential for using structured methods in ways that are informed by striking moments, so that our practice can aspire to be both directional and collaborative.

Structured question sequences are usually introduced as forms of rational and technical knowing. New therapists often begin by studying the outer conversation of renowned practitioners or trainers, copying their questions and speech patterns via books, videos, observation, or role-play. However, as Smith (2004), suggested, what if new therapists were encouraged to hold this rational/technical knowing *lightly*, so that relational and bodily knowing could come to the fore? How could we present structured methods in ways that prioritize these processes from the beginning? My aim in this section is to offer some concepts and distinctions that I have found helpful in attempting to use structured methods in living ways. Two case examples are used to illustrate these.

Speaking in Order to Listen

Earlier, I referred to the suggestion of Walter and Peller (2000) that we think of questions as tools of listening. In similar vein, Hoffman (2002) discussed a distinction between listening in order to speak, and speaking in order to listen. When we draw upon hypothetical sequences of questions, we can easily fall into the habit of listening in order to speak, in the sense of listening for opportunities to ask the next question in the sequence. We may listen just enough to cue our next question and then cease attending to what the client is saying.

Case Example: Beth
Beth (39) has struggled for many years with debilitating panic attacks. As these seem overwhelming and unpredictable, I am curious about how she will know in her own terms when things are better. I begin a solution-focused sequence in an attempt to build a sense of evolving purpose and possibility. I ask Beth to reflect on what would be a clear sign to her that things were improving:

Beth: I'd be able to go shopping with my husband in a strange store without having to check out where the nearest medical facilities are first.

Therapist: How would that make a difference for you? (*a typical follow up in this sequence*)

Beth: I wouldn't feel so helpless. I wouldn't be clinging onto his arm for dear life…*(pause)*

(*as I hear these words, I immediately think of a typical "well-formed goal" question: what would you be doing instead? I begin to rehearse the wording of this question in my inner conversation and tune out to the end of Beth's sentence which continues…*
…and he wouldn't have to cling on to me any more. (*Beth's voice goes very quiet and her expression turns sad as she almost whispers these final words. But I do not attend to this as I have already begun to ask, "What would you be doing instead?")*

Beth's change of bodily demeanor and tone may have signaled a "striking moment" that was missed as I was listening in order to speak, rather than speaking in order to listen. Elaboration of this moment may have taken the conversation in a more significant direction.

Talking With Versus Talking About

Shotter and Lannamann (2002) have coined the terms "withness- talk" and "aboutness-talk" to contrast instances of engagement within relationships where talk is "with" others and responsive to the immediate circumstances of the conversation, with instances where talk is "about" situations, engaged with from afar, and conducted in terms of generalized representations, categories and abstractions. In therapy contexts, when our use of structured methods begins to falter, there is often a preponderance of aboutness-talk.

Case Example: Wayne, Bill, and Sheila
I am talking to Wayne aged 14 about his struggles with "peer pressure" at school. His parents, Bill and Sheila, are also in the session. Having engaged Wayne in an externalizing conversation about the ways in which peer pressure has been restricting his life, I have discovered some potential turning points in the story. I begin to think about a narrative style re-authoring sequence, involving an attempt to build themes of agency, values and commitments. How did he accomplish these changes? What might this achievement say about the kind of person he really is, and about his values and hopes for his future?

Though Wayne responds to my questions, he seems to be merely going through the motions, reciting answers as if he were in school. Perhaps, he suggests, the change means that he is "learning to be more responsible", and to "think for himself". Perhaps it means that he now wants to "become his own person". Though he is talking to me, I sense that he is not talking *with* me: He often averts his eyes, giving the impression that I could be interchangeable with any adult authority figure in his life. He is talking *about* the situation from afar, using stock phrases of the kind that he may believe adults expect him to use (becoming more responsible, thinking for himself, becoming his own person, etc.).

In my peripheral vision, I notice a tear forming in Sheila's eye, and shift the focus of my curiosity. I ask what was going through her mind as the tear formed. She replies that she is experiencing a great feeling of sadness and loss: "He doesn't think we're worth sharing his life with anymore. He enjoys keeping us in the dark, so we can never work him out. He does this to his family and his teachers, and now I've seen him do it to you. *Why does he think so little of us? What have we done?"*

Responding to Sheila's distress, Bill discloses some important events that have recently occurred, in particular, a major decline in the family's financial situation due to his "financial mismanagement". They have had to rent a smaller house and Wayne now shares a room with his brother. They also had to take Wayne out of the more expensive high school he had been attending. It seems that Wayne has also been "kept in the dark" about what actually happened. Bill admits that his own acute embarrassment prevented him from going into details and he has always avoided talking about it.

A change in the conversation occurs when Bill voluntarily makes a formal apology to his wife and son for the reduced lifestyle he has brought about "through my own stupidity". The "taking of responsibility" becomes a major theme and facilitates a return to some of the questions I had attempted to use earlier. I become curious about how Bill was able to put embarrassment and shame aside and take responsibility in our conversation. This leads to a discussion about reconnecting with his visions, commitments, and values in relation to himself and the family. Sheila and Wayne begin to join in the conversation and this time, the evolving question sequence remains "alive" as people respond to each other in an immediate way about what they are hearing for the first time. We are talking both with *and* about each other.

Becoming an "Us"

When learning to use structured methods there can be a tendency to simply take them off the shelf and apply them in similar ways to each case. To develop a participatory understanding, a knowing from within the conversation, we need to attend to the ways in which we are becoming an "us". As Walter and Peller (2000) suggested, we can think of the conversation itself as being the author, and providing the opportunity for questions to be asked. Moment by moment, each conversation exerts an invisible but felt influence, a "real presence" (Shotter, 2003b) that calls us to respond in certain ways. As Shotter acknowledged, these kinds of concepts risk being dismissed as primitive or mystical

forms of thinking. Yet they also offer a way of encouraging us to slow the momentum of our work, to focus on the "ordinary" activities of spontaneous responsiveness, and to move beyond mastery by positioning ourselves as serving the conversation as much as using the conversation. By asking ourselves, what do *we* seem to need at this moment?, or what does *our* conversation require? (rather than what should I ask next?), we may help to call forth relational and bodily knowing.

Case Example: Wayne, Bill, and Sheila
In the conversation with Wayne, Bill and Sheila, I attempted to use a question sequence too soon, before this group of individuals had become an "us". We were still acting from individual agendas and expectations rather than responding to the "needs" of the conversation. I was acting from previous experiences with adolescents and peer pressure, and Wayne was acting from previous experiences of being interviewed by professionals. Structured questions were introduced before the conversation provided the opportunity. What the conversation actually "required" was a living connection with what was important to people. This connection came through the observation and elaboration of a striking moment itself. This, in turn, provided an opportunity to introduce structured questions for "us" to consider.

Inner Conversation

By focusing on questions and responses in outer conversation, we can neglect the rich resource of our inner conversation. One aspect of inner conversation can be depicted as an ongoing dialogue between our rational/technical knowing and our relational/bodily knowing. By monitoring this inner dialogue we become more aware of times when rational/technical knowing dominates and can attempt to give greater voice to the other side. We can encourage questions such as, what is it I am sensing right now?; should I remain quiet or find or find a way to talk about my inner reactions?; what seems most important for my client at this moment and what do I sense that they would like me to do? (Smith, 2004). These questions are frequently crucial to the continuing life of the conversation and often require us to suspend our pursuit of question sequences. We can also become more attuned to our own bodily reactions. For example, when a conversation becomes tense, in what part of our body do we feel this first? Andersen (1995) indicates that he feels it first behind the lower part of his breastbone, whereas others might feel it first behind the eyes, in the forehead, in the lower back or the stomach. These bodily and relational responses are arresting moments that can become resting moments for reflection. They invite us to slow our process (including bodily processes such as breathing) and turn to a language of momentary doings rather than a language of thematic direction and change.

Case Example: Wayne
In struggling to engage Wayne in a question sequence, I literally go into my head, feeling tension behind my eyes as I try too hard to think of a question that might "do the trick". However, I sense the importance of this bodily form of knowing. If the tension behind my eyes could speak, what would the words be? They might suggest that I need to slow my thoughts and breathing, and give my questions a rest while I dwell with Wayne

rather than attempting to engage him in an overt way. What do I sense that he would like me to say or do at this moment? What would be acceptable to him? I may reflect on a more "constructive understanding" of Wayne's position (Lowe 2004). Perhaps because of his previous experiences, Wayne is understandably ambivalent about sharing important things with a professional. What could I do to help this conversation be different for him? Perhaps I could talk with him about something completely different from the problem. Perhaps I could redirect my focus to other family members and provide the space for him to opt out or adopt a reflecting position. A change in my inner conversation facilitates new possibilities through a more creative balance between my different ways of knowing.

Poetry and Prose

A conversational-poetic stance or "social poetics" (Katz & Shotter, 1996; Shotter & Katz, 1998) can be contrasted with structured methods that proceed in more directional ways. The elaboration of striking moments occurs "poetically" through associations of images, rhythms, and themes, rather than through narrative progression. When using structured methods, we need to think beyond prose paragraphs and be more ready to respond to striking moments, wherever they may lead. To keep our question sequences alive, we may need to shift between poetry and prose, depending on what the conversation "calls for". Rich story development can occur in a single poetic moment without the need for incremental accumulation of details.

Case Example: Beth

Returning to the conversation with Beth, we are now engaged in a discussion focused on what she is wanting for the next phase of her life. She wants a life that is not defined by panic attacks and dependence on her husband, but is struggling with the confidence to even believe this may be possible. I return to my original questions. What might be some signs to her that her confidence was increasing?

She says that a clear sign might be that she would have a panic attack and not care so much. Perhaps this would happen when she was with a friend in a store. What might be a further sign? She says that a difficult step would be for this to happen when she was with her husband. Noticing her pensive look, I invite elaboration. Beth says she has just had the realization that the panic attacks are nowhere near as bad when she is with friends as when she is with her husband. Of course she has always known this, but has never bothered to reflect on it before. As she begins to elaborate, her voice becomes tremulous as she suddenly gives vent to her utter resentment at being dependent on him. The intensity of her own reaction surprises her and she reflects that, irrespective of the severity of the attacks, her marriage, in some fundamental way, may be over. Staying with these reflections seems more important than the prosaic pursuit of further signs of change. Exploring the unanticipated resonance of a single question takes precedence over the completion of a sequence.

Paths of Inquiry

Rather than thinking of structured methods as purposeful sequences that are progressively developed to completion, I now think of them as being more leisurely paths of inquiry, along which we invite clients to accompany us. We invite clients to journey with us in

certain thematic directions. However, the paths are both leisurely and provisional in the sense that we do not have to move at a given speed, or feel obliged to reach a specific destination by a given time. We can stop, slow down, reflect, look at the view, change direction, wander aimlessly, or resume our journey at a later time. What happens between us and around us remains as important as where we are going. This kind of metaphor may help us to use our structured methods in ways that are no less purposeful, but rather less sequential.

CONCLUSIONS

My aim has been to explore the potential for the language of striking moments to contribute to the creative and improvisational use of structured methods. By holding our rational and technical knowledge more lightly, and bringing our relational and bodily knowledge to the fore, we may learn to trust our intuition and sense how to "go on" at crucial moments in our conversations. This may help to re-acquaint us with the everyday ways in which we intuitively connect with people, when freed from the constraints of professional performance. Of course, it might be argued, skilled practitioners of the solution-focused and narrative styles, have probably always used these less tangible forms of knowledge. However, this has not been emphasized in the professional literature. I have tried to suggest ways of rectifying this situation, ranging from a broader re-thinking of social constructionism, to specific forms of reflection and changes of metaphor.

It is important to note that I am not advocating a general integration of the three therapeutic styles. There are clear differences as well as similarities between them (Lowe, 2004; Omer, 1996), though a contribution to this discussion is beyond the scope of the present article. Instead, its contribution is more pragmatic, involving the use of selective concepts from the conversational style to re-situate structured methods as living conversational processes rather than "thing-like" sets of questions. My contention is that this change of perspective does not compromise the respective theoretical foundations of the solution-focused and narrative styles, but may assist their realization in a more collaborative and creative practice. Returning to the theme of living conversations, Katz and Shotter (1996) pointed to the importance of keeping language young and still forming, so that our clients' words can continue to strike us "as if for the first time" (p. 930). By remaining attuned to such striking, poetic and arresting moments, my suggestion is that, we may likewise call upon our familiar structured methods, as if for the first time.

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