


CONCEPTUAL ARTICLES

# Daruma Dolls and Solution Focused Practice

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In this paper I wish to offer a very simple model of a way of being a therapist as well as a person that Daruma dolls represent. From that I wish investigate and defend the thesis that solution focused practice, especially Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), has developed a narrow focus which is not consistent with the model offered by Daruma dolls. A broader focus is possible by taking in a consideration of some of Wittgenstein's philosophy, which will still be seen as solution-focused. I offer examples from my own publications, and readers can no doubt offer their own.

### Daruma Dolls

Once a year, towards Matariki (the winter equinox in June here in Aoteroa/New Zealand), I begin searching for little gifts for family, friends, colleagues, and a few selected clients. This year I sent some Daruma dolls. Daruma dolls originated in 18th century Japan, and are of that genre known as [roly-poly toys](#) that have the characteristic of being weighted in the bottom, so when you knock them down they bounce back up again. Obviously this symbolizes resilience or perseverance. They also have the unique feature of having one eye absent; which you are meant to paint in once you have achieved your goal, or overcome the problem that knocked you down. I then print the following legend on tissue paper (consulting Mr Google for how to print on tissue paper).

### INTO EVERY LIFE COMES A LITTLE ZEN

#### Daruma Doll Paper Weight

*The Daruma doll is modelled after Bodhidharma, the founder of the Zen tradition of Buddhism and is a symbol of perseverance or resilience; as it is weighted in the bottom, so when you knock it down it comes up again. Similarly, the tantien (which is situated a little below the navel in men or lower in women) is focused upon in tai chi or qigong; to be centred there is to have resilience also. Because of this Bodhidharma is accredited as the father of many martial arts.*

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A Daruma doll

*The doll has one eye blank, representing a problem. Once overcome and back on track, the other eye is painted in. The doll is thought to have originated in 18<sup>th</sup> century Japan.*

*Little is known of Bodhidharma, the “bearded barbarian” except that he is accredited with bringing the Chan sect to China from Northern India in the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century (and was later to make its way down the Korean peninsula to become Zen when it entered Japan about the 12<sup>th</sup> century). Dominant amongst the legends about him is the practice of meditation, which this sect is most well-known for. One of the few stories has Bodhidharma visiting Emperor Wu around 520AD. Emperor Wu had built many Buddhist temples, given them financial support and had many people schooled as Buddhist priests and nuns. “What merit is there in this?” asked the Emperor. Bodhidharma replied “none whatsoever”. Perplexed and somewhat taken back he asked the monk who he was to tell him such. Bodhidharma replied “I know not”. This story perhaps reflects the direct realization that you haven’t a mind, (or self) or a mind that you can know or grasp (Zen call this the mind of no mind); and when Bodhidharma successors ((or the largely legendary 6<sup>th</sup> or last patriarch, Huineng)) thought that this was well enough known in China, they hung up the phone. That is to say, Chan is the only religion that has attempted to deliberately put itself out of business, by closing monasteries. Many people attribute the flowering of the late Tang and Song dynasties (a period of immense cultural and artistic production) to this spreading widely.*

*In zen there is a saying that to talk of zen is to have the stink of zen.*

*I print it on tissue paper as I want this not to last, as to do so it would have the “stink of zen”. Then I wrap it around the doll and give them out.*

### **The process of SFBT**

Zen was very central to the development of SFBT, with Insoo Kim Berg’s Korean heritage being prominent.<sup>1</sup> She was fond of the saying “leave no footprints”, that she once told me was from Zen. Actually when Chan

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<sup>1</sup> SFBT is not alone in having a Zen influence. The marvellous Jay Haley was introduced to the foremost popularizer of Zen, Alan Watts by Gregory Bateson in the 1950s, and used Zen to make sense of Milton Erickson’s techniques, which gave birth to family therapy (Richeport-Haley & Carlson, 2010).

Buddhism came to China in the 5<sup>th</sup> century it met Taoism and a rich dialogue ensued. This saying stems from *Tao te Ching* aphorism 17 which says that the best leaders or teachers are hardly known, and is similar to aphorism 60 which says “governing a country is like cooking a small fish, too much poking spoils it”. Most solution focused therapists I know prefer to work with the client’s preferred future, which is often elicited via the “miracle question”, and then scale progress from that point on. They are reluctant to offer ideas of their own, as to do so would leave a footprint. They are fond of referring to Steve de Shazer who said that “politics is something that you do in your private life not in your role as a therapist” (E. George, 2019).

However, our ‘siblings’ in the social constructionist movement, with which SFBT holds some allegiance (Chang & Nylund, 2013; Chang & Phillips, 1993), disagree.<sup>2</sup> Imelda McCarthy (1995) echoes a well-known feminist chant when she writes, “The personal is always political in clinical work with those who are marginalized in society” (p. 163). When you deliberately ignore the social context of the dilemmas of a client, you are, as McCarthy (1995) says, “privatizing dilemmas”, and removing “a focus from the larger social contexts which are important in any systemic understanding of the generation of problems” (p. 162). Nevertheless, some SFBT therapists claim we don’t need to know what caused the problem, or even what the problem is. They say to budding solution-focused therapists “have trust in the process” (Iveson, 2021). Although they may check in with the client from time to time to ensure that the “process” makes sense to them (E. George, 2022); the “process” itself is hardly a product of an “interactional” process that de Shazer alluded to many years ago (1985).

De Shazer was writing about the “interactional” just as second-order cybernetics (or cybernetics of cybernetics) was making its way into social constructionism (Umpleby, 2016). This is when the field moved from a God-like position outside the universe to a participant observer inside the universe, which most social constructionist therapists learnt largely through the likes of Anderson and Goolishian’s (1992) “not knowing” approach, where even the process or the method of therapy emerged, ideally, from the conversation. This is quite easy if you take what Goethe called a “delicate empiricism” approach, which requires you to make yourself at one with the client (or family) and allow yourself to be moved by them (Drury, 2006). John Shotter (2005) called this “witness-knowledge” (to be contrasted with “aboutness knowledge”).

The Norwegian psychiatrist Tom Andersen (2012) was famous for bringing the observing team in social constructionist therapy out from behind the one-way mirror and into the room, where they reflected *with* the family; he was bent on getting rid of any hierarchy. All these writers express

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<sup>2</sup> Actually SFBT as practiced today is closer to person-centred approaches, which has its roots in Carl Rogers (Fitzgerald & Leudar, 2010). In person-centred approaches the “client is the expert” is highlighted; only the logic of the person and their worldview is made central to practice. As Bøe et al. (2024) lament and make clear, in this approach the world is “lost from sight” (p. 537).

an intentional shift towards dissolving the expert position of the therapist such that they have no power over the client(s). Those of us familiar with enactivism understand that often when we are using language (and we don't distinguish between verbal and nonverbal) we are using it as a sense organ; we are sensing out how things are in the client(s) world (Drury & Tudor, 2024). We do this by paying attention to our feelings, and not just our cognitions, when in dialogue with our clients. Andersen was a big influence on White and Epston's (1989/1990) development of Narrative Therapy, but at the same time shared a critique with Karl Tomm (1993), saying they were different, in that he (Andersen) placed more emphasis on lived experience than stories.

He wasn't alone in having some reservations about narrative therapy. As Imelda McCarthy once said of narrative therapy "I love the whole thrust of this way of working, but one of the things that I see occurring is that when students begin to externalize, it is possible for them to concentrate only on the larger societal discourses and miss some of the intricacies at the more local level" (2001, p. 178). Steve de Shazer also criticized narrative therapy because it appears to be very traditional in that it reifies problems; and its solutions resemble Alcoholics Anonymous in that it recruits 'soldiers' into (apparently life-long) battles (Chang & Phillips, 1993). In response to these criticisms Johnella Bird (2000) developed what she calls "relational externalizing", which is more nuanced than White and Epston's, in that it asks clients to examine the relationship they have with the problem, instead of only opposing or defeating the problem. She sees the use of "defeating" as a masculine discourse, which is quite limiting. With Bird's relational externalizing it is possible that problems can truly be deconstructed rather than, as de Shazer says of narrative therapy, "destrukion", a "destruction of a construction *from the outside*" (Chang & Phillips, 1993, p. 116). As we'll see, this is closer to Wittgenstein's sense of "deconstruction" (although he never used that word).

### **An Immanent Universe**

As I have reported before in this journal (Drury, 2022), this dilemma of being unable to stand outside the universe, or take a God-like position, has been considered by other sciences and philosophies. Baruch Spinoza (in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) was perhaps the first in the Early Enlightenment period to philosophize on immanence; that the universe does not have a transcendental realm but is composed of a single substance which is immanent (as opposed to transcendent).<sup>3</sup> As you might imagine this was a heretical idea at the time, because it was saying there is no God or heaven; and he was challenging theologians to find another basis for ethics. In fin-de-siècle Vienna (around the turn of the twentieth century), where Wittgenstein grew up, they were

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3 There are earlier philosophers such as Democritus and Epicurus that proposed an immanent viewpoint.

discussing Spinoza, along with the work of (18<sup>th</sup> century) Arthur Schopenhauer, who had introduced Europe to Buddhism (which of course does not have a transcendent God) (Janik, 1973). They discussed the “delicate empiricism” as developed by Goethe who understood us as “participant observers” who had evolved with the world; so that our understanding was intuitive. Besides the coffee houses, the Wittgenstein mansion (his father was immensely wealthy) hosted the cream of Viennese society where these ideas were discussed. Musical genius Gustav Mahler was a frequent visitor, entertaining them with not only his music but also his knowledge of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (of “God is dead” fame). Fin-de-siècle Vienna spawned much that was “startling new” that “spread far beyond the boundaries of Imperial Austria and indeed of Europe” (Kann, 1981, p. 169).

From Wittgenstein we get the idea that “*problems are dissolved in the actual sense of the word – like sugar in water*” (2005, p. 183). He described how to dissolve problems:

*“The way to solve the problem you see in life is to live in a way that will make what is problematic disappear./ The fact that life is problematic shows that the shape of your life does not fit into life’s mould. So you must change the way you live and, once your life does fit into the mould, what is problematic will disappear”* 1980, p. 27).

This, I contend, is Wittgenstein’s take on deconstructionism.

This is a broader focus than the current popular focus of SFBT on developing the preferred future. This dissolving sugar in water analogy stems from Wittgenstein’s apophatic theology, a legacy of fin-de-siècle Vienna (Frona, 2010; Mitralaxis, 2015). Apophatic theology has been likened to sculpture; it removes to reveal a “spiritual” dimension. This was a popular solution to the challenge Spinoza gave the clergy. This passage from Wittgenstein (1922/1961) perhaps captures this: “*The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?)*” (6.521)

I think an even simpler account of apophasis is provided by Forrest Carter in his book *The Education of Little Tree*, where the word ‘understanding’ is used as a noun. In Carter’s account when Cherokee Indians achieve this they are said to be enlightened, like some Buddhist and Hindu accounts of finding oneness with the all.<sup>4</sup> As the Wittgensteinian philosopher Peter Hacker (2009) makes clear, understanding is different than knowing, and when we understand we emulate Wittgenstein (1953/2009) in saying “now I can go on!” (§151). And if you do, you can paint the other eye in on the daruma doll.

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<sup>4</sup> The book has had quite a controversial history, being pulled by Oprah Winfrey from her list of recommended titles after it was revealed that Carter had been in the Ku Klux Klan and a speech writer for George Wallace.

Quantum physics also wrestled with the problem of not standing outside the universe throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neils Bohr provided painstaking detailed descriptions of his method, for when he set his experimental apparatus up one way light was shown to be waves; but if the apparatus was set differently light was particles. It was not possible to observe light as particles and waves at the same time. Barad (2007), who developed her ideas from the quantum physics of Bohr, and the philosophy of Deleuze, argued that Deleuze is correct when he said we needed to overcome any illusions of being independent beings. We are a part of the world, but not apart from it.<sup>5</sup> So when Bohr sets up his apparatus one way, he is actually creating the reality (e.g., waves) he gets; reality doesn't exist beyond his apparatus. But Heisenberg and most other physicists were interpreting any uncertainty as due to reality being just out of reach; they were still stuck in the 'linguistic turn'. Because of Bohr's interpretation of quantum physics Barad suggests the universe is best understood by meeting it halfway, because whatever we do we are creating it.

### **The Body Therapies and Daruma Dolls**

Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen were key figures in the development of body psychotherapy (Coffman, 2023).<sup>6</sup> Simplistically, they proposed that the musculature of the body can be divided into long muscles for action, and short muscles for posture. However due to traumas and stress we are now using some of our long muscles for posture, with the ensuing result that some of the short muscles were atrophying. Reich, who was a student of Freud, coined the concept "character armour" (Coffman, 2023, p. 14) to suggest that some long muscles are permanently tensed, and Lowen developed bioenergetics as a way of analysing and relieving emotional tensions. As the "gut" or lower pelvis is the centre of instinct for Lowen, by being "grounded" there we regain a sense of stability and presence (Lowen, 2005). This is very similar the Chinese concept of *tantien*; the body's centre of gravity and reservoir of vital energy (*qi*), which forms the basis of the martial arts. Bodhidharma is closely associated with the Shaolin Temple where the martial arts were developed. Thus to heal, and not just cure someone, is to return them to wholeness.<sup>7</sup>

### **Some examples from my clinic**

1. In 1992 Michael Durrant helped me pen a paper about the treatment of a teen, nearly a decade earlier, who had been diagnosed by her doctor as having anorexia nervosa (Drury, 1992b). This young woman wanted to be a model

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<sup>5</sup> This is Bodhidharma's 'mind of no-mind'.

<sup>6</sup> Interesting fact: Reich's books were burnt by the US FDA!

<sup>7</sup> This the thesis of the psychiatrist, "the druid of Harley St", Eric Graham Howe's book *Cure or Heal?*

and took great pride in her dieting. With “a mixture of humour, incredulity, and matter-of-factness” (p. 29) I told her that weight was relatively unimportant to being a model, and what “really counted in that game was one’s figure”. She had no idea of what her figure was, or what an ideal figure was, which became her homework, and the focus of subsequent sessions. A psychiatrist “helped” by threatening her with hospitalization, behaviour modification, and telling her she wouldn’t see Christmas, which is not so unusual in such cases<sup>8</sup>. However, she later admitted that although she managed to refuse him, she renewed her efforts to achieve an ideal figure. A few months later her figure had filled out, much to her pride, and it was time for us to part. She moved overseas to live with her mother. Seven years later I received a phone call from her, to say that she was now married, doing well in her career as a model, and she had just made the centrefold of *Playboy* magazine. The switch from the scales to the tape measure dissolved the problem, and the change was then fuelled by the bogeyman (disguised as a psychiatrist).

2. Also in 1992 I presented a case at the New Zealand National Eating Disorders Conference of a young woman I first met in intensive care of the local hospital about nine years earlier (Drury, 1992a). “Eve” said that she immediately felt comfortable with me because I talked philosophy and history, unlike her previous encounters with psychologists and staff at previous hospitals where her parents had placed her. As “Eve” spoke of ‘anorexia’ in the third person we thought we could take a traditional narrative approach, which “Eve” agreed to. However it was non-traditional in that the staff split into two teams; a ‘Pro-life team’ led by the doctors and nurses, and an ‘Anti-anorexia team’ led by me and my co-therapist. The ‘Pro-life team’ were responsible for physical monitoring her whilst in the ICU, and then when she was transferred to the psychiatric ward. They engaged in no moral discussions with her, or us. However, they could read the file. Their task was to put themselves out of business as quickly, but safely, as possible. Those of us in the ‘Anti-anorexia team’ frequently wrote letters to her after our conversations with her. She had a brief set-back when she got married a couple of years later, but she hardly became an active feminist despite our narrative therapy discourse of the time.

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<sup>8</sup> Especially if you work in the public health system where some psychiatrists feel they can intervene in any case.

It wasn't until recently that I began to see this as solution focused as I studied Deleuze (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991/1994). One of the ideas that is central to his philosophy is that concepts are invented devices for presenting what is unrepresentable in thought (Gane, 2009). Concepts have a pedagogy, in that they are not fixed but are mobile and transient. They inject a certain stability on the flux of the world but can never do justice to the complexity of the world. "All concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991/1994, p. 16). They are relational in that they link up with other concepts. Once they have served their purpose we can "hang up the phone". For example, "abstinence" can be accepted by many being treated for alcohol and drug problems if it is only for a fixed time (Sanders, 2014). From an embodied mind perspective, we "grab hold tightly, and let go lightly." And so the 'Pro-life team' dissolved when they were no longer needed. And "Eve" said of feminism, "I don't think it is my thing, but they certainly have my support" (Drury, 1992a, p. 22).

3. I was employed as a *kaumātua hinengaro* (a New Zealand Māori psychologist) in a Māori mental health unit attached to a general hospital. Whilst there I realised that Paraire Huata's *pōwhiri poutama* model of therapy had never been formally written up in any academic publication, which I proceeded to do (Drury, 2007). The rationale here is that the anthropologist Victor Turner's (following Arnold van Gennep) work on the ritual process could serve as a model for the change process in psychotherapy. That is to say, therapy could be viewed as a ritual process as people transitioned from one social position to another. The best known ritual in *Māoritanga* (Māori culture) is the *pōwhiri*, which is enacted most commonly as a welcome on a *marae* (meeting ground). The *pōwhiri* is the process where a person transitions from being an outsider to an insider of that group. The *poutama* are the steps in that ritual, and are frequently depicted as a stairway in the weaved panels in the *whare* (house). Most New Zealanders and visitors to New Zealand have taken part in a *pōwhiri* at some time or another. As we employed a number of people who had little formal education but had grown up in rural New Zealand with Māori as their first language, it made sense to me this could take the mystique out of psychotherapy by allowing them to see it as a process they were already very familiar with. In some cases, it allowed some of these staff to obtain better results than university

educated staff who had learnt Māori as a second language and had not enjoyed a lifetime of powhiris. Thus, I see this as a solution focused resolution of an industrial dilemma.

### **Real world problems**

Many of those who are advocating that solution-focused practitioners should confine themselves to focusing only on clients 'preferred futures' are not working in government or publicly run health or social services. Most leaving university enter these, which if mental health, means you will be playing at least second-fiddle to doctors. Also, in mental health there will be mental health nurses whose careers have taken them into being the policy writers for the organisation; and depending on the managers you will be expected to follow these policies, which usually have the distinct 'medical model' focus. Add to this mix the guild and licensing board's petty politics, the latter of which the critical psychologist Ian Parker once said are at risk of becoming "a machine that incarnates the kind of unhealthy practice it pretends to set itself against" (Haney, 2012, cover), and you have the environment in which a large number of practitioners at least begin. And those of us with a familial tradition of socialism will remain in (unless driven out).

Not only that, but clinics and agencies find themselves in a neoliberal world with its identity politics at the top of the cliff pushing most clients our way (Wrenn, 2014). In conversations with me some solution-focused practitioners claim that under equality of opportunity (which they fail to recognise as a myth), individuals are responsible for their own successes and failures. History does not matter. But under neoliberalism identity is measured through financial success; and those who haven't are labelled "losers", "trailer trash", etc (D. George, 2006). Unlike the "winners" who find a collective identity in the likes of the country-club, the "losers" find their collective identity in non-economic groups. It appears to be the case that the greater the disparity is between the "haves" and "have nots", the greater the allegiance or loyalty is to these non-economic groups (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). However, as Wrenn (2014) concludes the increasing alienation of such groups serves the neoliberal agenda, because neoliberalism is based on the idea that, to paraphrase Margaret Thatcher, "there is no such thing as society, just individual men and women." We need a new understanding of our collective identity if we are to get beyond our neoliberal identities. I am attracted to the idea that this may reside in Deleuze's view or the New Materialism (Albertini et al., 2025; Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/1984). Be that as it may, I believe the task of solution-focused practitioners is to be mindful of the political context of our clients, and not to relish the falling bodies being driven over the cliff.

## Conclusion

The daruma dolls offer us a simple model for a way of being. One batch I ordered had very flat bottoms, and did not bounce up again when knocked over. Some therapists look the part but... This paper has offered an argument, with some diverse examples, of political agendas having a place in solution-focused practice.

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