# Readers Matter: Reading Practices and the Future of Solution-Focused Thought and Practice

Gale Miller
Marquette University

Abstract

This paper examines three orientations to reading texts about solution-focused thought and practice: the rumor, paradigm, and instrumental orientations. I analyze these orientations as interpretive communities that shape readers' interpretations of texts. Readers participate in constructing the future of the solution-focused world by choosing to tell others about the texts they like and dislike and by using ideas found in some texts in their professional practices. I also address questions about whether there is a best reading orientation for solution-focused readers, why solution-focused thinkers and practitioners should pay attention to how they interpret texts, and how readers influence authors and editors. Finally, I discuss how readers (as workers) might enhance their professional skills by reflecting on how they read journal articles and other texts.

*Keywords*: interpretive communities, rumor reading, paradigm reading, instrumental reading, constructing the future, reading as work, solution-focused

The publication of the first issue of a journal is exciting. It shows that the journal creators' work was worthwhile. It is an outlet for the ideas of aspiring authors and source of stimulation to readers. Just as significant are the responsibilities that accompany the publication of a new journal. Respected journals require editors who are committed to being fair and inviting to diverse points-of-view, while also insisting that only high quality manuscripts are published. Authors sustain journals by submitting thoughtful manuscripts. Finally, there are readers. We hear much less about their contributions. This inattention marginalizes readers and casts them as passive consumers of predefined texts. I counter this view here by depicting readers as meaning-makers who interpret texts from multiple perspectives. Equally important, readers act on the meanings they create by telling others about texts that they like and dislike, and by altering their professional practices to incorporate authors' ideas. Readers participate in building the future by keeping some texts alive and ignoring others.

## Is There a Text in This Class?

A point of departure is a story told by Stanley Fish (1980) about a student who asked a professor on the first day of class, "Is there a text in this class?" The professor replied, "Yes, it's the *Norton Anthology of Literature*." "No, no," the student said, "I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?" (p. 305). This example highlights two of the choices that we make in reading texts. We may treat them as conveying independent meanings or as matters of personal opinion. In the first case, the text gives us no choices in interpreting it and, in the second case, we are free to construct it however we wish. The first case defines the text's meaning as fully stable and the second as fully unstable.

Fish (1980) uses this example to describe a third position. Specifically, while readers construct the meaning of texts, their constructions are influenced by social context. This reminds me of the different experiences that I have had in reading what appear to be the same texts for different purposes, such as first reading a text in doing research and then in teaching a class. These are very different activities involving different standards for deciding what parts

of a text are relevant. I read in a third way when I evaluate a manuscript for publication or to write a review of a published book. Here, my focus is not on the particular needs of a research project or class, but on the general significance of the text for the people who are likely to read it.

In none of these reading contexts is my orientation to the text random. I generally know in advance what I am looking for in the text, although I sometimes change my orientation as I read. Fish (1989) treats such reading patterns as aspects of readers' interpretive communities. Interpretive communities are socially shared orientations to texts that we enter into when we read texts in particular ways. Different interpretive communities may be associated with different professional groups. Consider, for example, the differing reading standpoints of solution-focused and psychodynamic practitioners. Further, a single professional group may be associated with several different interpretive communities. One part of becoming a member of a professional group involves learning to read within its various interpretive communities, and to choose from these interpretive communities in reading different texts for different reasons.

Let's return to the student's question about the existence of a text in her class. Her question expresses her knowledge of two major reading orientations in literary criticism. They are basic to literary debates that are only partly understood by persons not participating in this field. Further, the question was asked on the first day of class when professors are expected to state the goals and rules of their classes. Fish's reputation as a teacher is also relevant. The professor heard the student's question as evidence that she had taken a course from Fish who was famous for asking his students to grapple with questions about "what is a text?" Her question signaled that she was "one of Fish's victims" (Fish, 1980, p. 314).

Reading is a complex activity. It is a form of interaction that links readers with authors and others participating in related interpretive communities. Reading involves applying one's knowledge about interpretive communities as much as acquiring knowledge from the text being read. Readers construct conditions for learning by orienting to texts in different ways. Texts can only teach us what we are prepared to learn. This is why it is useful to read texts from the standpoint of different interpretive communities.

I apply these ideas to texts about solution-focused thought and practice in the rest of the paper. First, I describe three interpretive communities: rumor, paradigm, and instrumental readings. These reading orientations represent three different pathways into the future of solution-focused thought and practice. The descriptions are intended to capture the assumptions, logic, and implications of each of the interpretive communities. I stress the coherence of the orientations and de-emphasize the unique contingencies associated with actual reading contexts. I discuss the implications of my approach in the final two sections.

## Rumor Readings

Steve de Shazer and I portrayed solution-focused therapy as a rumor in describing our understanding of the intellectual status of solution-focused thought and practice in the late 1990s (Miller & de Shazer, 1998). We chose this language to emphasize the ambiguous meanings associated with solution-focused therapy, and the range of interpretations of it voiced by people across the therapy world. One of our purposes was to highlight the lack of a privileged position on what this form of therapy was and should be. Instead, we saw the field as consisting of multiple narrative versions of a solution-focused rumor.

> While the names of the major characters usually remain stable, the plots and contexts that organize the action may vary from one storytelling episode to the next. Perhaps this is why so many people have questions about the intellectual contexts and political implications of solution-focused therapy. (Miller & de Shazer, 1998, p. 364)

The solution-focused world has changed greatly since our article was published. Solution-focused work is done in a variety of fields that were just beginning then. It is taught on every continent today, and represented by several professional associations and journals. But these developments have not produced agreed upon answers to the questions that Steve and I were asking. Different versions of the solution-focused rumor continue to circulate in conversations at workshops and conferences, on the internet, and over drinks. They are signaled when people talk about particular approaches to solution-focused practice such as the Milwaukee, BRIEF, Bruges, or NIK approaches—to mention only a few.

Further, some practitioners describe solution-focused practice as compatible with some other approaches to change, whereas others object to such "eclecticism." Also, some thinkers emphasize the connections between solution-focused thought and intellectual currents of the past and present. Others insist that the only ideas that matter are those directly related to their interactions with clients. Finally, some people claim that there is a single unifying solution-focused perspective that integrates these orientations and sets them apart from non-solution-focused

approaches. But this claim is itself contestable. Have you ever observed a meeting concerned with identifying the unifying principles of solution-focused thought and practice?

The rumor orientation is one way to deal with these differences. It is distinguished by readers' openness to new ideas and practices. While readers may eventually judge some claims to be more useful than others, all claims are welcomed at the outset. The logic of the rumor orientation is similar to that of a marketplace. Diverse ideas compete for readers' acceptance with some being rejected as others live on to compete with new claims. The promise of this orientation is that only the most useful ideas and practices will survive because readers (like solution-focused clients) are consumers who know what works in their lives.

Of course, this promise is not always realized in actual markets and especially in rumor markets. Readers and authors have a different relationship than solution-focused practitioners and their clients. Solution-focused practice mostly involves asking questions that are intended to help clients clarify and achieve their desires. Hence, the important answers to practitioners' questions come from clients. Authors, on the other hand, answer their own questions. They are advocates for their ideas and practices. Even articles that appear to only report objective findings are rhetorical texts designed to persuade readers to accept the author's findings and conclusions.

There is also a bias toward drama and novelty in the rumor marketplace. Listening to and spreading rumors can be fun. They offer new and different possibilities for our lives, new worries, and sometimes new hopes. They give us something different to talk about whether we embrace or reject them. Old reliable rumors are sometimes discarded because everyone has heard them many times. This is how rumors work. When was the last time that you were intrigued by a new technique even though the author offered little or no evidence that it would make you a more effective practitioner? The rumor orientation teaches us that practitioners adopt new techniques for multiple reasons, including a desire to make their work more interesting. This is both a strength and weakness of the rumor orientation.

These aspects of the rumor orientation have implications for the future development of solution-focused thought and practice. It invites change and is a strategy for keeping the field current with new developments in society. But it also involves risks, most notably the risk that solution-focused thought and practice will change in ways that disconnect it from its past. Ideas and practices that once made the solution-focused approach distinctive need not be privileged in the rumor orientation. This is one reason why some readers choose the paradigm orientation.

## Paradigm Readings

I use the term *paradigm* much as Thomas Kuhn (1970) does in his analysis of how scientific communities emerge and change. Kuhn argues that scientific fields develop through recurring periods of stability (normal science) and revolutions. Normal science consists of times when scientists agree on what needs to be done to develop their fields and how it should be done. Their agreements constitute their paradigms. Scientific revolutions are less frequent. They are times when seemingly settled issues are questioned and eventually overturned by new assumptions about the world, research questions and methods, and analytic perspectives. Because new paradigms are largely undeveloped, scientific revolutions are followed by periods of normal science that develop the implications of the new orientations.

Kuhn's (1970) analysis points to the close connection between stability and change in science. Revolutionary changes initiate periods of slow and incremental change. Similarly, periods of normal science may create conditions fostering radical change. The latter source of change is related to scientists' responses to anomalies—unanticipated and currently unexplainable findings. Rather than questioning their paradigm, scientists assume that subsequent research within the paradigm will lead to credible explanations of the anomalies. Thus, the scientists set the anomalies aside for the time being. Sometimes scientists do eventually explain their prior unexplained findings and continue doing normal science. But longstanding anomalies can also stimulate new forms of scientific imagination and perhaps scientific revolutions.

Readers construct solution-focused thought and practice as a paradigm by treating some ideas and practices as fundamental. This reading orientation is evident when readers ask whether a text is "truly" solution-focused. Further, as Kuhn notes, scientific paradigms include explicit and implicit aspects. Thus, a text can be judged solution-focused if it is consistent with the "spirit" of the paradigm. This is one reason why paradigm readers sometimes classify interactions as solution-focused even though they do not include the miracle question, scaling questions, or perhaps compliments. While readers subscribing to different paradigms may disagree about what is fundamental to the solution-focused tradition, these issues are settled for those who read within the same paradigm.

An important distinction between paradigm and rumor readings is their treatment of unanticipated claims. Rumor readers welcome such claims and consider their potential usefulness. Once assessed as not solution-focused, paradigm readers set unanticipated ideas and practices aside. They are not relevant in the present, although they might become relevant if someone can show how they fit with the reader's paradigm. I suspect that this is one reason why proponents of new ideas spend so much time explaining how their proposals are solution-focused. Indeed, these explanations may take precedence over providing empirical evidence that the new practices are more effective than old ones.

Paradigm readings form a distinctive context for constructing the future of solution-focused thought and practice. The future is built by elaborating on the fundamental elements of the solution-focused tradition. This reading orientation is often attractive to teachers, trainers, and others who wish to facilitate discussions about solution-focused thought and practice, while retaining the ability to declare some ideas and practices out of bounds. The paradigm orientation is also useful in seeking professional recognition from governments, insurance companies, and other institutional entities. The paradigm reading is a framework for answering outsiders' questions about "what is it," "how does it work," and "why is it effective?"

There are also risks associated with the paradigm orientation. A major risk involves paradigm readers' avoidance of anomalies. This practice speaks to the considerable faith that these readers invest in their paradigms. Their faith sustains their work, but it may also blind them to issues that others can see. Indeed, paradigm readers' unquestioning commitment to their paradigms may lead them to conclude that there are no important issues left to be resolved; they only need to hone their techniques. This is one example of what John C. Harrison (1994) calls *paradigm paralysis*. It occurs when scientists and other professionals lose their capacity for curiosity and imagination—capacities that are accentuated in the rumor orientation.

I see two additional risks to this reading orientation. The first is how faith in a paradigm may expand to include personal identity. Thus, challenges to the solution-focused paradigm must be rejected because they unsettle readers' senses of self. The second issue involves the practical commitments that solution-focused practitioners, teachers, and trainers often make to their paradigms. Challenges to one's paradigm may be experienced as threats to one's status in the solution-focused world or may have undesired implications for solution-focused practitioners' work. Whatever their sources, paradigm readers' resistance to change may hasten radical changes that render existing paradigms irrelevant. Radical change is initiated by people (especially students and other newcomers) who do not share paradigm readers' faith in or personal identification with existing paradigms. These change agents may share rumor readers' openness to new ideas. Radical change may also be initiated by instrumental readers.

## Instrumental Readings

Instrumental reading emphasizes readers' interest in finding answers to practical questions. The questions may focus on working with a particular client, distinctive client groups, or particular kinds of problems. Teachers and trainers read instrumentally by searching for suggestions about how to explain or illustrate solution-focused ideas and practices. Supervisors do so in seeking guidance in evaluating and mentoring others. Researchers become instrumental readers by treating texts as potential resources in operationalizing concepts, formulating questions that fit with solution-focused thought and practice, and in writing literature reviews that justify their research interests. The instrumental orientation resonates with the solution-focused emphasis on finding workable solutions to clients' problems. Instrumental readers assume a client-like position in text-reader relationships by casting themselves as experts on the questions that texts must address. The instrumental orientation also directs attention to the diverse institutional contexts in which solution-focused work is done. The same text may be assessed differently by readers working in different institutional contexts.

Instrumental readers are similar to rumor readers in being willing to entertain multiple definitions of solution-focused thought and practice. These readers differ, however, in the extent of their flexibility. The bias toward novelty and drama in the rumor orientation is constrained by instrumental readers' focus on addressing current practical issues. Instrumental reading is also a way of avoiding paradigm paralysis. Paradigm readers risk intellectual paralysis in insisting that there is only one proper construction of the solution-focused tradition. Instrumental readers, on the other hand, may sometimes embrace contradictory versions of the solution-focused tradition in seeking workable answers to their changing practical concerns.

The differences that distinguish the instrumental orientation from the rumor and paradigm orientations make instrumental reading attractive to many solution-focused practitioners. But readers should also consider two unintended consequences of the instrumental orientation. First, practitioners working in different institutional settings may develop unrelated definitions of solution-focused thought and practice. Ideas and practices that once linked diverse practitioners may be displaced by specialized understandings and ways of working. Perhaps more troubling is how the seeming success of past specialization may become a justification for more division of the solution-focused world in the future. This is one way that multiple versions of the solution-focused tradition are replaced by multiple solution-focused traditions.

The second unintended consequence involves how non-solution-focused institutional officials influence instrumental readers' interpretations of texts. These officials include administrators of agencies that employ or refer clients to solution-focused practitioners, governmental officials, and representatives of insurance companies who hold practitioners accountable to policies that are unrelated to solution-focused thought and practice. Have you ever noticed how many of the problems that solution-focused practitioners talk about are related to the actions of powerful

people who are not clients or members of the solution-focused world? It is important to consider how the future of solution-focused thought and practice might be shaped by people having little concern for solution-focused ideas.

**Reading the Future**

This paper began by asserting that the meaning of texts is neither intrinsic to them nor a matter of individual opinion. The alternative focused on how we read from the standpoint of interpretive communities. I then described three major interpretive communities in the solution-focused world. I can imagine at least three skeptical questions about my argument. Are you going to claim that there is a best way for solution-focused professionals to read? Why should anyone other than an addled sociologist care about these issues? Why so much emphasis on readers, don't authors and editors matter? I discuss these issues in the rest of this section.

The first question intrigues me. For example, I have asked myself if there is an ethical reading orientation. But all reading orientations are contexts for deciding what is ethical reading. There is also the criterion of political correctness, which I define as those aspects of solution-focused thought and practice that readers treat as essential. Each of the reading orientations discussed here emphasizes different solution-focused themes. How do I decide which themes are essential? Finally, I have asked myself if one of the pathways into the future represented by the rumor, paradigm, and instrumental orientations is most promising. My conclusion: I don't know. For me, there is no best orientation to reading texts about solution-focused thought and practice.

The lessons that I draw from my argument point in a different direction. The lessons also address the latter two questions asked above. I begin with a conversation that I had with an attorney representing the university where I used to work. He referred to the university's written documents as memorializations of understandings that university members agreed should be preserved and honored in the future. As an attorney, he also knew that the meaning of memorials change over time and may become debatable issues in the future. This is the unstable aspect of memorialized texts. But they are also stable. So long as texts are preserved, they remain available as resources that members might use in the future.

It matters which texts solution-focused readers choose to memorialize. Published texts live on to potentially assist but also to potentially haunt members of the solution-focused world. They are building blocks that members use in constructing the future. This is an important reason why solution-focused thinkers and practitioners should care about how they and others read texts. They share a personal stake in their texts that is not necessarily shared with the addled sociologists who also read their texts. The future may appear to just happen, but appearances can be deceiving. The future is made through the decisions of people in the present and past. This is a ubiquitous message in solution-focused consultations with clients, and one that is relevant to solution-focused thinkers' and practitioners' choices about reading.

Every reading orientation has implications for how solution-focused thought and practice are preserved. I have noted how the rumor, paradigm, and instrumental orientations can be used to construct futures that are disconnected from the present and the past. This possibility is related to rumor readers' bias for novelty and drama, paradigm readers' neglect of anomalies, and instrumental readers' potentially excessive focus on solving immediate problems. But these futures are not inevitable. Rumor readers do not embrace every new idea that they encounter, paradigm readers sometimes recognize that changing practical conditions requires that they modify their paradigms, and instrumental readers may reject otherwise workable solutions because they do not fit with shared understandings of proper solution-focused practice.

Every reading orientation is connected to several possible futures. Which futures actually emerge will be shaped in the interactive arena that links writing, reading, and publishing within the solution-focused world. The arena is interactive because authors, editors, and readers influence each other in ways that are only partly visible to the participants in the interaction. The process turns on authors' and editors' interest in writing and publishing texts that readers will embrace. Authors and editors try to persuade readers of the merit of ideas that readers have not yet recognized to be relevant. We can call this the proactive approach to writing and editing. It involves helping readers to see the future in new ways. This is the part of the reader-text relationship that is usually stressed in formal analyses of texts. So viewed, the future is a product of the genius of those who write and publish texts.

I have known a number of outstanding authors and editors, but I cannot say that I have ever known a genius. For me, the word *genius* directs attention away from appreciating how outstanding authors' and editors' proactive efforts are tied to their reactive abilities. Authors and editors react by observing and listening to the people for whom they write and publish. It is noteworthy that texts that are classified as fiction are usually based on authors' reflections on their own lives or research on others' experiences. The line dividing imagination from fact in fictional texts is not always clear. Similarly, texts that offer new insights about solution-focused thought and practice are seldom the exclusive product of authors' and editors' brilliance.

I suggest that authors and editors who make a difference are especially sensitive to what readers are prepared to learn. Here, I think about a paper that Steve de Shazer and I wrote about emotions in solution-focused brief therapy

(Miller & de Shazer, 2000). Steve returned from a trip to Europe and announced that we needed to write the paper because of the many questions that he had gotten in his recent workshops. Who should get credit for the paper? The paper was a product of an extended interaction involving potential readers and the authors. All parties made important contributions, although only the authors got their names on the published article. This example illustrates how readers instruct authors and editors in ways that may not be recognized by readers. Questions asked during workshops, ideas tossed about in casual conversations, and descriptions of the changing circumstances of solution-focused practitioners' work may stimulate new texts. Similar to small changes in clients' lives, otherwise unremarkable actions by readers may initiate new texts that may shape the future.

## Conclusion: Reading As Work

Perhaps you are beginning to feel the weight of the load that I have placed on your shoulders. Hence, I remind you that reading is a collective activity—many other readers will assist you in constructing the future. I should also note that the title of this section is not intended to make you anxious. I do not use the word *work* to mean drudgery. My purpose is to highlight that both reading and work involve using knowledge and skills to get something done. Both produce value. Reading and work can be opportunities for people to assert their personal agency in and on the world. Both have intended and unintended consequences.

Similar to other kinds of work, readers' knowledge and skills can be enhanced by experience. This seemingly obvious claim is deceptive in its complexity. Cheryl Mattingly and Maureen Hayes Fleming (1994) explain some of its complexity in discussing the distinctive orientations of highly skilled occupational therapists. They state that the length of a professional practice does not explain accomplished therapists' exceptional skill since many less competent practitioners have as many years of experience. Rather, highly skilled occupational therapists are distinguished by their continuing reflection on their professional experiences. Reflection matters because much of professional practice involves applying tacit knowledge to particular situations. Tacit knowledge is invisible to unreflective practitioners because they have no language for describing it, making it meaningful, or preserving it for the future. Reflection, on the other hand, preserves tacit knowledge by turning day-to-day events into meaningful experiences that may be described and recorded.

> Experience involves intending to do something, doing it, and reflecting on that experience. Tacit knowledge then is acquired through doing but made useful through reflection. (Mattingly & Fleming, 1994, p. 30)

The rumor, paradigm, instrumental and other reading orientations chosen by solution-focused thinkers and practitioners are contexts for making their tacit knowledge visible. Further, because reading is something that readers do, their reading experiences might be enhanced by reflecting on the tacit knowledge associated with different ways of reading. Suppose you organized a workshop designed to assist solution-focused practitioners in reflecting on their reading practices. What would be the major themes of the workshop, what exercises might you ask participants to do and what would tell you that the workshop was useful for participants?

I am not certain about how to answer these questions. But there is value in asking oneself: "What did I do that helped to make that text relevant to me? What was I prepared to learn and not learn from that text? How else might I have read it? Is my typical orientation to reading overly predictable, specialized, or unappreciative of other points-of-view? Whose interests are served by my usual ways of reading texts? How do my reading practices connect me to some parts of the solution-focused world and make other parts less accessible?" These questions ask readers to reflect on their reading practices, and may be springboards for expanding readers' professional horizons. This is the spirit in which I offer this paper.

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