

**Theoretical Orientation Paper**

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### **Introduction**

My theoretical orientation has been influenced by my background, my personality, and my career goals. After self-reflection, I have identified Solution-Focused Therapy (SFT), also known as Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), as the theory that aligns with who I am and how I would like to conduct my career. In the following paper, I will support this choice. First, I will describe my personal identity, my background, and my personality. Next, I will create an in-depth description of my theoretical orientation, focusing on SFT. Then, I will explain how I plan to implement these principles into my future career as a Sports and Performance Psychology (SPP) consultant and Certified Mental Performance Consultant (CMPC). I feel confident that SFT will align and resonate with my goals while I grow into an effective SPP consultant. Throughout this paper, the terms SFT and SFBT will be used interchangeably.

### **Section 1: Who am I?**

My name is Kathryn Maunahina Carlson. I grew up in Southern California in the United States. I grew up in a home filled with conservative teachings, strong family history, and occasionally dysfunctional attitudes towards others of different cultures. As I grew, I developed personality traits such as empathy, open mindedness, critical thinking, and friendliness. My personality and my experiences have shaped my life philosophy and my theoretical orientation.

My culture and family background are diverse and unique. My father is Native Hawaiian and Japanese, and my mother is half-Mexican. My father's family celebrates our background through teaching traditions to each new generation. Our pride in our ancestors has been a driving force. Despite rejecting realities of systemic racism, my grandparents and parents taught that we must work harder than others because we are minorities. But they hoped that we could share our

culture by being exceptionally accomplished and hard workers. This orientation of hard work has helped shape my determination and ambition. I have strived for achievement by establishing goals and following through with them.

My mother's family was different. My grandfather faced such harsh discrimination that he refused to teach his daughters and grandchildren about his culture. He felt ashamed of his background and hoped that we would escape the same embarrassment if we assimilated into American culture. My mother accepted this reasoning and never taught our heritage to her children. The contrast between my parents' view of cultural background caused contention within our family. My parents separated when I was seven and that intensified the contrast between the two approaches. When we would come home from a family trip to Hawai'i, we would have to hide the songs, dances, and language that we learned. My mother spoke ill of Hawaiian and Japanese cultures. My siblings and I have felt this effect in the way that we have chosen to celebrate those parts of our background. Personally, I had a hard time accepting my cultural background until I was an adult. Once I did, I felt more whole as a person. I am learning from my ancestors and trying to pass traditions of cultural acceptance to my children. This contrasting experience showed me an example of how self-reflection can help me identify personality traits. Developing a habit of self-reflection has helped me find my strengths and use them in pursuit of my goals.

My childhood experience greatly influenced my life philosophy. I am the youngest child of my family. When my parents separated, my mother worked long hours to support me and my siblings. This situation decreased the influence of my parents on me and increased influence from my siblings, neighbors, and friends. Consequently, I started learning ideas and morals that were different from those held by my immediate family. For example, my conservative, religious

parents are strongly against marriage equality for the LGBTQ+ community. Growing up, I spent a considerable amount of time with friends and parents who were part of this marginalized community. As I learned more about this group, my perspective veered from my parent's opinion. This conflict urged me to keep asking questions about beliefs, values, and morals. Developing critical thinking skills with an open mind enabled me to learn new things from many sources.

My parents and family also raised me in a strong religious household. This value system taught me the importance of honesty, hard work, self-improvement, forgiveness, and many other worthwhile principles. As I got older, I felt some conflict between these core values and some of the cultural traditions within this religious community. Sometimes, people gossiped, complained about, and judged others. These faults can be found in any community and are not unique. I have learned that I can be dedicated to the principles of a church and still disagree with some of the social aspects of the community. This feeling of displacement within a group has inspired me to become an accepting and supportive person.

In recent years, I have been lucky enough to have a job where I feel supported, trusted, and accepted. Because these are core values for me, I thrive when I am in these types of situations. I work for a youth sport organization in Las Vegas, Nevada, where I coach swimming. The coaching staff and the board of directors have helped me grow in skill and confidence. My husband and I have also intentionally created a home where we support our core values. We teach our children about honesty, acceptance, caring for others, and hard work. My husband has had the largest influence on my personality. He has supported me when I had goals, ambitions, and failures. Together, we have created habits of curiosity, growth, and learning. My personality and life philosophy has been shaped through the experiences from my background, culture, and

choices. These values and traits have influenced my theoretical orientation and professional goals.

## **Section 2: Personal Model of Counseling**

As a consultant, I am drawn to client-centered theories. I prefer methods that show progress within a short time. I also like theories that empower clients with the tools to face their challenges without my constant help. I believe that consultants should empower clients with skills and tools for success. The best coaches and consultants teach principles and allow the clients to act independently. Because of these principles, I am more drawn to Solution-Focused Therapy (SFT), also known as Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT).

### **Core Tenets of SFT**

Solution-focused therapy's foundational beliefs are positive and optimistic: "People are healthy. People are competent. People are capable of constructing solutions that improve their lives" (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Clients are considered the experts of their experiences, and they steer sessions toward their goals. These key principles reflect my personality: positive, optimistic, trusting, and goal oriented.

SFT suggests that positive change occurs with collaboration, goal setting, and exception finding. Collaboration is key because dialogue between individuals creates an environment in which the client constructs an understanding of the problem. "All procedures and techniques used in SFBT are geared toward enabling the co-construction of new meanings or views of reality within the therapeutic dialogue. This is characterized by individuals (e.g., athletes) speaking about their situation in different and novel ways" (Maechel et al., 2022). Collaboration supports the core tenet of SFT, which is that each client is the expert of their lived experience. Reinforcing this belief can help the client after intervention because it builds confidence and

resilience, which can prevent the client from becoming stuck in the future. Goal setting is a common mental skill used by SPP consultants to provide direction and increase motivation. “The use of goal setting and reinforcement can help skilled athletes maintain motivation” (Williams & Krane, 2021). Exception finding is the process of helping the client find “occasions, incidents, or stages where solutions exist” (Høigaard & Johnson, 2004). These three pillars should always be part of an SFT approach because they empower the client with skills that can prevent regression and other struggles after intervention ends.

SFT interventions often start with a CMPC asking athletes about their strengths and goals. The introductory conversation typically uses the following structure: “(a) description of the problem, (b) development of well-formulated goals, (c) exploration for expectation, and (d) end of session feedback” (Høigaard & Johnson, 2004). When an athlete describes the problem, a consultant must be future-focused by considering how the athlete may find solutions to this problem. A consultant helps the athlete identify goals through methods like motivational interviews or asking the *Miracle Question*. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a “person-centered, directive approach that enhances intrinsic motivation to change by helping clients explore and resolve ambivalence” (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). MI creates an environment where the athlete establishes values, strengths, and goals. The *Miracle Question* asks, “If by a miracle, you found yourself free from your problems overnight, how would things be different?” Prochaska & Norcross (2018) suggest that “the miracle of therapy is to help clients transform their imagined reality into specific attainable goals.” According to SFT, well-formulated goals are positive, process-oriented, present-minded, practical, specific, autonomy supportive, and structured in the client’s language. This approach appeals to athletes who often strive to improve through psychological skills training.

Exception finding is a consciousness-raising process in which a consultant helps clients become “more conscious of the exception to their problems” (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). For example, if an athlete feels sick before a competition, a consultant might ask, “When was a time when you didn’t feel sick before a game?” After listening to answers, consultants could find patterns that include pre-competition rituals, positive self-talk, and interactions with teammates. Searching for these exceptions to the problems enables the client and consultant to find helpful solutions.

This approach differs from other theories, such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), which analyzes and challenges negative thought patterns and behaviors. CBT and related theories search for answers in a client’s past, while SFT believes that the answers to healing are found in the present and future. SFT’s primary focus is “finding solutions to a problem and empowering the athlete instead of spending time and effort on finding the possible causes of a problem” (Høigaard & Johnson, 2004). Athletes and performers often face high pressure situations. They rely on their training to perform at a moment’s notice. Therefore, they may respond better to an intervention that teaches them how to be present-minded.

### **My Personal Model of Counseling**

In my personal and professional life, SFT resonates with me due to its core principles, applications, and strengths, which align with my goals as an SPP consultant. As a coach and professional, I have intuitively used a solutions-based approach because it helps athletes find ownership in their goals, keeps them focused on the present, and empowers them to make future choices.

However, I understand that I will use influences from other theories due to my personal beliefs and personality. For example, I felt drawn to person-centered theories because I have a

talent for connecting with others. Rogers, the founder of person-centered therapy, stated that “the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapy are contained within the therapeutic relationship” (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Those conditions include relationship, vulnerability, genuineness, unconditional positive regard, accurate empathy, and perception of genuineness. In my own therapeutic journey, I understand the importance of the client-therapist relationship. But I had a difficult time finding practical applications for SPP consultants. These characteristics are valuable in working relationships, but I feel unsure about structuring every consultant-client relationship around them.

In contrast, I have a complicated view of cognitive-behavior therapies (CBT). CBT has many evidence-based techniques and has proven effective in many environments for a wide range of clients and athletes. While I understand the many useful applications for SPPs, I have a difficult time with some of the core tenets of CBT. One of the key principles of CBT is that our negative feelings are not the results of experiences. Instead, they stem from our emotional reactions to the events. In many ways, irrational thoughts and behaviors can be explained this way. But I dislike the rigidity of this sentiment because it breeds alienation instead of connection. “Alienation includes the inability of many people to experience the strong emotions that are part of being human” (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Our emotions, whether irrational or not, can help us create positive change.

Overall, SFT best aligns with my personality, personal beliefs, and professional needs. I plan to continue to learn more and adjust my understanding while I grow as a Sport and Performance Psychology consultant.

### **Section 3: Professional Integration**

SPP consultants and CMPCs often work with many clients on a regular basis. Based on my experience as a coach, personality, and goals, I plan to work with athletes and youth sport organizations during my career. Although I have experience and training in other areas of performance, I enjoy the community and challenge of working with youth athletes, coaches, and parents. Using an SFT approach can present many benefits and challenges. Knowing the limitations and advantages of this approach will help consultants understand where adjustments should and could be made.

### **Challenges**

This approach can create two serious challenges for consultants. First, consultants can terminate intervention too early. SFT is designed to be a shorter form of intervention than other approaches. The brief nature of this theory can present a challenge for new and growing consultants. While the goal of SFT is to help athletes *start* behaviors leading to solutions, a consultant should determine if an athlete is proficient enough to be independent. This challenge should be addressed with evidence-based intervention plans that teach, empower, and support the athlete's needs and abilities. SFT emphasizes the benefits of small and sustainable changes because the goals must be attainable within a short amount of time.

The second challenge is when consultants are tempted to gloss over underlying issues for athletes. Professionals should seek to understand the underlying causes of a client's struggles. Ignoring them can risk superficial improvements. Some criticisms have expressed "brief therapy strengthens the repressions, but leaves all the processes that have led to the formation of the symptoms unaltered" (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Using principles from other theoretical orientations can help SFT professionals address these challenges. A psychoanalytic approach can also fulfill the need to address underlying issues rather than repressing them. Psychoanalysis

seeks to bring unconscious thoughts, feelings, and experiences into the conscious. A professional can help the client confront, interpret, and work through deeply rooted issues. Consultants must operate from a sport and performance perspective. If the underlying issues drift outside of competency, the consultant should refer the client to another professional.

### **Benefits**

An SFT approach aligns and mirrors many athletic programs and progressions. If integrated well, the approach can feel natural to athletes through the four steps of intervention. First, description of the problem is similar to assessments and benchmark testing in athletic programs. Quality coaches and trainers will identify weaknesses or problems that prevent athletes from progress. For example, a swimming assessment may show an athlete with some technical faults when swimming backstroke. Similar to SFT, all parties use solution-focused speech which is positive and optimistic. Coaches and trainers identify a problem without labeling or judgement. As a consultant, this would also be an appropriate time to conduct assessments. Next, results from testing can lead to well-formulated goals. To support autonomy, athletes should identify important weaknesses from the tests and assessments. Regarding goals, Høigaard & Johnson (2004) said, “the goals must be experienced as important and meaningful, and should be worded in the athlete’s own words.” This step can be applied to performance-specific situations and mental skills training. Exploring for exceptions occurs in many sports. During skill sessions, training, and performances, athletes often demonstrate desirable skills. Coaches and athletes work together to enlarge the importance of these moments. This increases self-efficacy and motivation. Many coaches initiate feedback from athletes at the end of sessions, performances, and seasons. This short conversation can help the coaches and athletes reflect on the experiences and decide how to move forward. In an SFT approach, consultants also use this

opportunity at the end of sessions for feedback. Since SFT's process closely resembles many athletic programs, this approach is an appropriate extension of many sport organizations.

A solution-focused approach can apply to athletes in diverse sports and organizations. SFT is also inherently helpful for athletes in team sports because one of its core tenets is collaboration. SFT uses dialogue and collaboration to observe, interact, and influence within social environments like sports teams. "All procedures and techniques used in SFBT are geared toward enabling the co-construction of new meanings or views of reality within the therapeutic dialogue" (Maechel et al., 2022). SFT also helps athletes in individual sports because individuals can set specific goals. A distance runner can develop well-formulated goals regarding his performance and may differ from his teammates. However, his performance and goals may not directly impact his teammates. Therefore, he has more freedom to choose meaningful goals.

### **Practical Integration of SFT**

Integrating SFT into a consultant's career will differ each person. However, the approach will follow the solution-focused structure and rely on the core tenets of collaboration and goal setting. The structure and core tenets can be applied to the assessment process, developing an intervention plan, and deciding when to terminate services.

Using SFT in the assessment process will help establish the client-consultant relationship, identify weaknesses, and guide the sessions towards meaningful goals. Picking the correct assessment for the client can help the athlete feel supported. All assessments should be applicable to athletic performance, invite collaboration with the consultant, and efficiently identify weaknesses. For these reasons, I believe that my assessments could include Motivational Interviews (MI). MI is derived from a Person-Centered Therapy technique. The conversation is client-led and utilizes open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries. "MI

primarily facilitates the building of an interpersonal relationship between practitioner and client and aims to resolve ambivalence toward behavioral change” (Mack et al., 2021). The interview can also provide an opportunity for the consultant to ask the athlete the *miracle question*. Another useful assessment would be the Test of Performance Strategies (TOPS). TOPS is an assessment “based upon psychological processes thought to underlie successful athletic performance as delineated by contemporary theory” (Thomas et al., 1999). TOPS is a self-assessed questionnaire that measures an athlete’s answers in the following categories: goal setting, emotional control, automaticity, relaxation, self-talk, imagery, attention control, positive thinking, and activation. The results will help the athlete choose which goals would be most important and helpful for the subsequent intervention plan.

After assessments and motivational interviews, the client collaborates and designs well-formulated goals. In SFT, well-formulated goals are *important, realistic and small, and concrete, specific, and measurable*. These guidelines align with a popular goal setting framework called SMART goals. SMART goals are *specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound*. Using this framework would be a helpful tool for this stage in an SFT approach because it is simple, well-known, and effective. Williams & Krane (2021) explain, “goal setting is one of the most used techniques in applied sport psychology. It has been shown to influence the performance of athletes of varied age and ability levels and has also been linked to positive changes in important psychological states, such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation.” As a consultant, my job requires that I have practical goal setting tools for clients like general worksheets, educational materials, or sport-specific goal setting sheets. For example, at the beginning of every cross-country season, an SPP consultant could bring a goal worksheet for the

team. With help from the coaches, the worksheet could include imperative information like competition dates, expectations, and team goals.

After completing assessments and goal setting, intervention techniques would include creating action plans that help the athlete take small steps toward progress. These steps can be supported through the mental skills training. For example, through assessments and interviews, a basketball player has decided to increase her skill in three-point shooting. She feels that this is an important part of her athletic performance and could be holding her back from receiving more playing time. She has used the SMART goal framework to formulate this goal. To support this process with an SFT approach, I could help this player by reminding her of times when she successfully shot three-point baskets. Finding these exceptions can help the player visualize success during practice and competition. I can also support this player through providing needed mental skills training found from the TOPS assessment results. Positive self-talk, imagery, and automaticity routines can help this player practice this crucial skill.

Integrating a solution-focused approach into my daily interactions will require effective systems. Using evidence-based tools like assessments and intervention plans will help my clients make positive changes.

### **Conclusion**

I have chosen to build my theoretical orientation around Solution-Focused Therapy (SFT). My cultural background, upbringing, and adult life has inspired a love for learning. I look for solutions in my personal and professional life through self-reflection and goal setting. SFT reflects my personal values and my professional philosophy because it has a foundational belief of positivity and optimism. SFT also utilizes similar systems to many athletic programs. Therefore, consultants with an SFT approach may work well with many coaches and athletes.

Integrating SFT into assessments and intervention can support the effective nature of established frameworks for mental skills training.

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