
SCALES AND SCALING

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A recent article in the NewYorkTimes includes a critique of scales as traditionally used in psychological studies. I was struck by how limited the critique was and how SFBT use of scales is in many ways a mirror image of how it they are used in traditional psychology.

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Asked to rate the intensity of his depression on a scale from 1 to 10, Richard selects a 6. John, given the same rating scale, also picks a 6. But does he feel the same degree of depression as Richard? Many researchers (in psychology) assume the answer is yes, that, in effect a 6 is a 6 is a 6. But in fact, Linda Bartoshuk said in her critique, nobody really knows, since depression, like many internal experiences, is subjective (New York Times, 2 Jan 2001, p. D1).

The most that might be said about the 6 in each case is that the rating is closer to 10 than 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, or 0 would have been and not as close to 10 as 7, 8, or 9 would have been. In each case the 6 can be seen as if representing some sort of internal state or experience. But the difficulty here is not — or not just — that the depression or the rating of the depression is “subjective.” A more interesting problem here for anyone who thinks that a 6 is a 6 is that this rating must be given to someone. That is, John’s 6 is a response to a question asked him by another person (a researcher). At minimum this means that at least a scaling question came before and, of course, something usually will follow John’s response — even if the response to the 6 is silence. Most often such a scaling question will not be the first thing the researcher says and therefore whatever that was talked about before the scaling question influences in some way John’s answer. If, for instance, they have been talking about how down John feels for 20 minutes, then the researcher needs to take this into account. Furthermore, the scaling question is asked within a specific context, i.e., a

context in which it makes sense for the researcher to ask the scaling question and it makes sense for John to answer it. In all likelihood this context is a research project on “depression” which, of course, will probably in some way influence John’s answer.

When looked at in this way, John’s 6 can be seen as the product of the context, his interactions with the researcher including whatever might have been going on between them before the scaling question, John’s expectations about what might follow his saying 6, the form and structure of the scaling question itself, and — perhaps only minimally — his internal experience.

Scaling in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy turns all this on its head. In many ways, scales in SFBT are a mirror-image of those in traditional psychology. That is, in SFBT a client’s response is seen as of course being the product of the context, his interactions with the therapist including whatever might have been going on between them before the scaling question, the client’s expectations about what might follow his saying 6, the form and structure of the scaling question itself, and — perhaps only minimally — his internal experience.

That is, when a client is asked a scaling question in SFBT the therapist, aware of the context, usually tries to time things so that the client’s response will be as close to 10 as possible. Thus a progress scale will be used only after progress has already been talked about: “So, with 10 standing for how things are on the day after the miracle and 0 standing for how things were at the time you called to arrange this appointment, where are things now between 0 and 10?”

Typically, in a first session, the client will respond with a 3. The assumption is that this 3 is a product of the context including the prior conversation about the day after the miracle and times when things were sort of like that. Further, the assumption is that the client’s answer would have been lower had the scaling question been asked prior to the discussion in response to the miracle question.

While this 3 may have something to do with the client’s internal experience, that is not seen as the important point. Rather, what is seen as important here is that the client sees that things are already getting better; between the initial telephone call and this particular point in the first session, things have gone from 0 to 3 and the client is aware of this change. Of course this rating is “subjective”; how could it be anything else. Of course this 3 is different from any other 3 given by any other client in response to the “same” scaling question. [Actually, the “same” scaling question is never the “same” because the context is different. With a different client, what was talked about before asking the scaling question

is bound to have been different and thus the question cannot be the same question.]

Based on a lot of experience, if 0 in the question were to be set as "when things were at their worst," then the client's response is likely to be lower than 3.

Furthermore, using this 0 the therapist (and client) stand of good chance of

hiding or obscuring the frequent changes that occur between the phone call and

the first session. This 0 (when things were at their worst) might be several years

prior to the session and the current situation might not seem "better" whereas if

the 0 is arbitrarily placed at the phone call then things might be comparatively

better. [Remember, it's not a question of "bad - >good." Rather it is a question

of things being seen as "better." "Better" and "good" are different language

games and things can easily be "better" without their being "good."]

When the next client also says that things are at 3 there is no reason to

assume that his 3 is in any way the "same 3" as the first client's. Obviously, the

second client's response to the miracle question will have been different and

therefore his 3 stands in relation to that particular 10. Likewise, if the second

client's response is 4 this does not mean that things are "better for him" than

they were for the first client. All it means is that the second client sees himself

as closer to the goal (ie, having things be like his picture of the day after the

miracle) than client I did.